LADY WILLIAM

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III

London:
MACMILLAN AND CO.
AND NEW YORK
1893

CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,
CRYSTAL PALACE PRESS.

LADY WILLIAM

I

JIM was hurrying home to the Rectory full of the plans that had been settled between him and his new friend, full of the unusual excitement of something to do which was novel at least, and might be amusing, and was voluntary, exacted from him by no one. It was the loveliest spring night, the first of May, but full of a softness which is little to be depended upon at that season, the stars shining sweetly in a sky which was fresh and luminous, with nothing of the sparkle of frost in it, but a prophecy, almost a realisation, of summer. The village was quiet, as it usually was at that hour; the window of the "Blue Boar" still shining with light, for it was not yet the closing hour: but all except the *habitués* of that respectable place, where general drinking was not encouraged, had left. Jim did not feel the drawing to-night

of those invisible links which drew him to the "Blue Boar," and he was hurrying along towards home, when he encountered a wrapped-up figure which paused as he approached, but which he did not at first recognise. Indeed, to tell the truth, he thought for a moment with a quick movement of anger, that it was one of his own belongings, mother or sister, who had taken the liberty of coming out thus, veiled and covered up, to look for him, which was a thing that the young man in his greatness of superiority would not very readily have forgiven. But it was not anything so innocent as poor Mrs. Plowden with her shawl over her head, strolling forth, as she would have explained, because it was such a beautiful night, just to breathe the air; not anything nearly so innocent. The dark figure stopped as Jim came up, and with a little cough to call his attention, said: "Is this Mr. Jim?"

"Oh!" he said, coming to a sudden pause, "Mrs. Brown!" but not with any delight in his tone.

"I fear," said Mrs. Brown, "there is not much pleasure in seeing me in that exclamation; but then, of course, you can't see

me, which takes from it all the uncomplimentary meaning. And where are you coming from at this hour — some of your smart parties?"

"You know as well as I do," he said, aggrieved, "that there are no smart parties here."

"What do you call Mrs. FitzStephen's ball?" she said, with her laugh of mockery. "I have heard that it was very smart—the young ladies' dresses beautiful, and diamonds upon some of the old ones. I call that very smart. Unfortunately, I hear, there were no Royal Highnesses—unless it was yourself, Mr. Jim."

"How fond you are of laughing at people!" said Jim.

"I — the most innocent woman in the world! I will be very civil, now, if you will walk as far as my house with me. I don't mind the road up to the Hall, but here in the village, where a tipsy man might run up against me——"

"Oh, I don't think you need be afraid," said Jim; but he could not refuse so small a request, though he did not like it—neither the interruption nor the fact, indeed, of escorting the schoolmistress, who was ex-

ceedingly amusing, and knew how to make herself agreeable in her own place; but here, outside, where he might be recognised by any one! Jim was half disgusted with himself for this feeling, yet felt it all the same, and turned back with a little reluctance, which he concealed, indeed, but which, from his companion's quick eyes, was not altogether to be concealed.

"You have been somewhere to-night where you ought to have been," said Mrs. Brown. "One soon gets to know the ways of young men. Sometimes you are not proud of the place in which you have been spending your evening, but to-night it's different. You are going home in a hurry to tell them all about it before they go to bed. What a pity that I should have met you just to-night!"

"It can never be a pity that I should have met you," said Jim, a little sulkily, "if I can be of any use."

"Poor boy," she said, with a half laugh, and then she added: "I have been among naughty people to-night, who have been putting naughty schemes in my head. Tell me what nice, good society you have been having, to put it out of my mind."

"Where are those naughty people to be found?" said Jim.

"Ah, you would rather know that than tell me your news! But they are not naughty people of your kind; they wouldn't amuse you at all. There is no fun in their naughtiness, but rather the reverse: envy and malice and all uncharitableness, not the folly that pleases you poor boys. Poor boys! for the one often leads to the other, don't you know, when you outgrow the fun and yet love the naughtiness, and get out of the way of all that's good——"

"You are in a very serious humour to-night."

"No," she said, "not more than usual. I'm a very serious woman, though you may not have found it out. You have not found it out, have you?" she said, with a sudden laugh, apparently overcome by the absurdity of the situation, which, however, Jim did not feel at all. He saw no fun in it: all that he was afraid of was that with her laugh, though it was very soft, she might attract the observation of some one whom they met.

"No," he said, "I—I haven't thought about the subject, I never tried to——"

"Understand, did you?" she said quickly;

"took me as you found me? Of course you did. And you were quite right. Don't be afraid that any one will find you with me. In the first place, there is nobody to be seen, and in the second place——"

"I am not at all afraid of any one seeing me. I am not responsible to any one. I hope I am of an age to choose my own friends."

"Well spoken, Mr. Jim, and very manly of you; and I am glad you would stand by me like that, as one of your own friends. Now, there is something I would like you to do for me. It is a great secret, and you must tell nobody of the request I am going to make."

"Well," he said, with a laugh, "I hope I don't want much cautioning on that subject. The moment one is told that a matter is private, it is sacred—at least, to a man."

"Ah! you think more sacred to a man than a woman, Mr. Jim? I don't agree with you; but still, I'm glad that it's your view. If you should find out—— You know of all that is going on in the family, don't you?"

"In the family," cried Jim, astonished; "in what family?"

"You may well be surprised. What

should I have to do with your respectable family?" cried Mrs. Brown, laughing again. It was not like other people's laughter; it was a thin little sound, which, if it conveyed mockery of other people, seemed in some indescribable way to mock herself too. "But yet," she added, "it is really your respectable family I mean. If your aunt should be hard pressed by those people, and felt as if she might be crushed altogether—now, mind what I say—felt as if she might be crushed altogether——"

"Do you mean my aunt Emily, Lady William? Why, who in the name of wonder wants to crush her altogether? You have got some joke in your mind that I don't understand."

"Felt," repeated Mrs. Brown with emphasis, "as if she might be crushed altogether. I will make you say it after me to impress it on your memory, if you don't mind. Felt as if she might be crushed altogether—you understand?"

"I understand the words: but what they mean, or what you mean——"

"That is quite enough, so long as you know the words. Keep them fast, and in such a case let me know; not until you see

there is very grave trouble, mind—not if you hear that she sees her way out of it."

"You are speaking Hebrew, I think," said Jim.

"No, I am speaking English. You will see, even if they don't tell you, by your people's looks, or you will get it out of one of your sisters. Mind! if you find that they are all in the dumps, and she feels herself beaten—you'll see it in their looks—let me know. If I should not be here I will let you know where I am."

"Are you going away?" said Jim.

She did not make him any immediate answer, but turned round upon him, in the light of a lamp which they were approaching, putting back her veil a little, with a mischievous look. "Should you be very sorry? No, I'm afraid you would not be very sorry," she said.

"Yes, I should," said Jim, with an impetuosity which alarmed him next moment, as he suddenly realised that somebody passing (but there was no one passing), or somebody unseen at a door or window, might hear what he said. "I should be very sorry indeed to think I should not see you any more," he added, in a lower tone.

"But that dreadful fate need not come, even if I were to leave Watcham," she said, in her mocking tone. "We met before I came here, which is the origin of all our acquaintance, and we may meet after I leave here. The world is a wide place. I shall let you know, somehow, where I am: and in the case I have so impressed upon you——"

"The case in which Aunt Emily (of all people in the world!) should find herself crushed altogether."

"You are a good scholar. You have learned your lesson. In that case you will take care—but only when there is no other hope—to let me know. Now I'll release you, Mr. Jim. I won't exact that you should come to my very door. No harm can happen to me between this and my door."

"It is the only part of the way where anything could happen," said Jim. "It's the middle of the town."

"A wonderful town, and a wonderful middle," she said, laughing. "No, nothing will happen. Good night, and I am more obliged to you than I can say."

Jim stood irresolute, and watched her

as she drew down her veil over her face, and hurried along to the door of the school-house. He was, on the whole, well pleased to get rid of her, but he did not like the idea of being thus dismissed at the moment it occurred to her to do so—a sensation which roused his pride and kept him, accordingly, standing where she left him until he saw that she had reached her own door. She turned round there and made a slight gesture of farewell, or dismissal. It was just at that moment that the *convives* at the "Blue Boar" began to stream out, with a little noise of voices and feet, the last jokes of the little convivial club. Jim turned and hurried homeward, not without an uncomfortable feeling that his return would correspond unpleasingly with the dispersion of that assembly. But yet it was not his fault.

His mother was in the drawing-room still, waiting for him, or at least pretending not to wait for him, but to be very busy with something she had to do. And Jim had by this time remembered again the great news he had been carrying home so eagerly when he met Mrs. Brown. Though Jim detested the "parish" in the official sense of the word, he was not without a natural

feeling for his own side; and it pleased him almost as much as if he had been a Rector's son of the more orthodox description to find that the new curate, with his immense commotion as of a new broom, found it necessary after all to have recourse to the old rulers and their ways for help. He had, I need not say, not the faintest idea of the curate's benevolent intentions towards himself; but Mr. Osborne had been a little superior in the morning—it was his nature to be a little superior—and his final appeal for help to Jim, who of all the Rectory family was the only one whom nobody else would have thought of appealing to, was a triumph which Jim could not but be sensible of. His mother looked up at him from her sewing with those curves about her eyes which he had grown accustomed to, and did not at this present moment take any notice of, notwithstanding the keen inspection of him which she made instantly, an inspection so keen that it seemed to cut below the surface and see what never can be seen. Jim was more or less aware of this inspection when he had anything to conceal, but on this occasion, having nothing to conceal, it did not occur to him. "Have the girls gone to

bed?" he said, in a disappointed tone. He had brought in with him no heavy odour of tobacco or other scent inharmonious with the place, but a whole atmosphere of fresh air cool and pure, to which the haste of his arrival gave an impetus, and which seemed to fill and refresh the whole room, which was half dark, with only Mrs. Plowden's solitary lamp shining on the round table. "They've gone upstairs," she said, rising to meet him with that sudden sweetness of relief which fills an anxious heart when its anxiety is found unnecessary. "Do you want them? Shall I call them? Oh, Jim, they will be too happy to come."

"I'll call them myself," he said, then paused—"unless it will disturb my father! He looked a little worried at dinner."

"It is like you to think of your father." Mrs. Plowden could not but caress her son's shoulder as she passed him. "You can always see farther than any one — with your heart, my dear. Yes, he was worried. But never mind that; I'll call the girls."

They came at the call like two birds flitting noiselessly down the staircase, and came into the room with a faint rustle as of wings.

"Jim has something he wants to tell

you," the mother said, and there went a quick glance round the three like an electrical flash; oh! of such ease, joy, consolation to themselves; of such admiration, enthusiasm for him! That there should be nothing to lament over, nothing to find fault with, meant whole litanies of honour and praise to Jim.

He told them his story with a pleasure which found an immediate echo and reflection from his mother and Emmy. Florence, of whose sympathy he had felt most sure, had turned a little away.

"He seemed struck all of a heap," said Jim, not pausing to choose his language, "when he heard we'd had those sort of things before. He thinks he's the first to do everything; and when I told him it was the respectable folks that came and the Fitz-Stephens and so forth, and the old women—Mrs. Lloyd and the rest——"

"Jim," cried Florence, seizing his arm, "it was ungenerous to mention Mrs. Lloyd."

"Why?" cried Jim, opening his eyes; and Florry made no reply. "Well," he continued, "Osborne was taken all aback, as I tell you. He says it is the men he wants to catch—the fellows down by the river, that sort. When I told him he might as soon

look for the Prince of Wales, I never saw a man so broken down. He said, 'How are we to catch hold of 'em, Plowden? What are we to do to fetch 'em? Come down with me,' he said. 'You must have known some of them from boys. Come down, you and me together, and let's see what we can do.' I said to myself, 'Oho, my fine fellow! for all so grand as you think yourself, you can't get on without the oldest inhabitant after all."

"But, Jim, you'll help him," cried Emmy; "so will I, I am sure, with all my heart. We have always wanted to get hold of them; and you could do something, Jim, if you were working with him."

"Oh, yes, I shall help him," said Jim in a magisterial way, "fast enough. He isn't a bad sort of fellow when you know him. I said I'd go down with him when the fellows were at home in the evening whenever he liked. Of course, as he said, I know them all; half of them I've licked or they've licked me. He has sense to see the advantage of that, and, of course, now he's asked me I'll do whatever I can for him; and see if I don't have them up to hear all the tootle-te-tooting and you girls singing and all the rest."

"If your father approves, Jim," said Mrs.

Plowden. "We cannot make quite sure that your father approves."

"Oh, papa will approve," cried Emmy. "I am sure he really knows how much good there is in Mr. Osborne. He only does not like his little—— Well, I don't like to call it conceit."

"Excellent opinion of himself; but that's so common with young men," said the Rector's wife.

And Florence—Florence who was the lively one, who on any ordinary occasion would have been in the heat of the discussion, talking now in the tones of Mr. Osborne, now like old Mrs. Lloyd, now like all the "fellows" at Riverside—Florence said nothing at all! That is, nothing to speak of—nothing for her. She kept her face away from the light, and threw in a monosyllable now and then; and when Mr. Osborne's conceit was spoken of, threw up her head with an indignation which happily nobody perceived. To think they should discuss him so, who was doing all this, giving up his pride in his superior management, for their sake—appealing to Jim! It seemed to Florry that the force of noble self-abnegation could not further go.

II

THE Rector, when he came home upon that day, when Jim's alliance with Mr. Osborne began, did not show any such pleasure in the circumstances as his wife expected. He mumbled and coughed, and with a lowering brow said that anything was an excuse that kept the boy from his work, and that if Jim picked up Osborne's fads in addition to his own faults they would make a pretty hash of it altogether. Mrs. Plowden, however, made the less of this that the Rector was evidently in but an indifferent state of temper and spirits generally. "He has been put out about something," his interpreter said to the girls; "something has gone wrong with him in town; he has not got his business done as he wished." But what that business was, his wife was obliged to allow that she did not know. "I can't help thinking," she said, "that it's something about your uncle

Reginald. What else could Emily have come over in such hot haste about? And then your father going up to town in this wild way without giving any reason. I can't imagine what can be the cause unless it was something about Reginald. They are dreadful for sticking to each other, the Plowdens; they would think, perhaps, that I would make a remark, and I am sure that there are plenty of remarks I might make, for if ever there was a man who was utterly unbearable in a house it was Reginald Plowden, and nothing in the world would make me consent to have him here again, nothing! Your father has had something on his mind for some time back. Don't you remember he burst in one day as if he were full of something to tell us, and then stopped short all at once?"

"But that looked as if it was good news, mamma. He had met Mr. Swinford and he was just going to tell us."

"What good news could come to us through Leo Swinford?" cried Mrs. Plowden scornfully: which was to poor Emmy as if somebody had given her a blow in the face. She fell back quite suddenly behind her sister, and attempted no reply.

"It did look at first as if it was something good," Mrs. Plowden allowed; "but when I tried to draw it out of him he only got into a fuss you know, as he does so often, and told me I'd hear it all in good time. I am sure ever since he has had something on his mind; and when he came back from town last night he could have torn us all in pieces. If it is not about Reginald I am sure I can't imagine what it can be."

"It may be something about Aunt Emily, mamma."

"What could there be about Emily? No, she has heard from Reginald, that is what it is, and he has told her he was sending back her money, or something of that sort, and your father has gone up to town to see if it was true. And he has found out, of course, that it was not true, as I could have told him before he went a step on such an errand. And now he can't contain himself for rage and disappointment, and if I'm not mistaken, he has gone over to tell your aunt Emily that she is not to think of it any more."

"He did walk over to the cottage," one of the girls said; and the other added:

"How do you find out things, mamma?

Now I am sure I never should have thought of anything of that kind."

"My dears," said Mrs. Plowden with a certain complaisance, "you never knew Reginald Plowden. And I do. You cannot gather grapes off thorns, or figs off thistles; and if there ever was thorns and thistles in flesh and blood, Reginald Plowden is the man. That your aunt Emily should still expect to get her money back from him, just shows what a thing family affection is; but she might as well expect it to drop down from those lilac-trees."

The girls did not say anything in reply; but Emmy, for her part, thought of quite a different explanation. She believed that Leo Swinford, whose proceedings had been so great an object of interest, and of whom she knew both by her own observation and by common report that he was "always at the cottage," had offered himself and his fortune to Lady William. Proposed to Aunt Emily!—that was how poor Emmy put it. A girl cannot but think such a proposal wholly ridiculous, if not an absolute infatuation. Her respect for her aunt made her still believe and hope that the proposal had been rejected; but this wonderful event

would quite account for the "something on his mind," which it was very clear the Rector had. What he had gone to town about, however, and whether his mission could have any bearing upon this disquieting question, Emmy could not say. Florence was so preoccupied with other matters that upon this, even though it cost her sister so much disquietude, she expressed no opinion at all.

The Rector, as had been perceived, had gone towards the cottage when he went out with care upon his brow. He had not, after all, as the reader will understand, proclaimed the wonderful news about Mab when he went home after his meeting with Lord Will. He reflected to himself that it might be some time before he could set his sister's position quite straight, and that in the meantime the report of Mab's heiress-ship would flash all over the parish, and that any question, any hesitation, any delay on the subject would attract the curiosity and interest of the village folks. Mab an heiress! It would go from one end of the county to the other, and questions as to when she would come into her fortune would come from all sides; very likely that last horror of impertinent gossip which reveals what

everybody leaves behind him to the admiration of the public, would communicate the news in spite of all precautions. Lord John's death intestate and the amount of his fortune would be in all the papers, with a list of the kindred concerned. But at all events, the Rector said to himself, he would say nothing till the matter was more assured. It was not an easy thing to do. He felt it bursting from his lips during the first day when he allowed himself to mention Lord Will simply to relieve his mind, but by main force kept the other communication back. And to say that it was not with the most dreadful difficulty that he kept his mouth shut on those many occasions when it is so natural to let slip to your wife the secret that is in your heart, would be to do Mr. Plowden great injustice. He was not in the habit of keeping things to himself. Even the secrets of the parish, it must be allowed, sometimes slipped — things that ought to have been kept rigorously inviolate. He had not, perhaps, the most exalted opinion of his wife's discretion, and yet she was his other self— a being indivisible, inseparable, with whom he could not be on his guard. But she had shown great discrimination when she

said that the Plowdens stuck to each other. Nothing would have made him confess to his wife that there was any insecurity in the position of his sister. Emily was a thing beyond remark, a creature not to be criticised. He would have nothing said about her—not a word of compassion. There are a great many men who deliver over their sisters and mothers without hesitation to be cut in small pieces by their wives, but here and there occurs an exception. Emily was James Plowden's ideal and the impersonation of the family honour and credit. He could not have a word on that subject, and thus he was strengthened in his resolution to say nothing of Mab's prospects—until, at least, they were established beyond any kind of doubt.

This did not by any means look like the position in which they were now. Mr. Plowden went into the cottage almost with a little secrecy—looking round him before he opened the little garden gate—for the gossips in the parish were quite capable of reporting that there was something odd and unusual in the Rector's constant visits to his sister, and that certainly something must be "up." To be sure it was only his second business visit—but even so much as

that was unlike his usual habits, and he was extremely anxious that no question should be raised on the subject. He found her in the drawing-room, at her usual sewing. Mab was out, which was a thing of which the Rector was glad. She looked up hastily at the sight of him, reading his face, as women do with their eyes, before he had time to say a word.

"You have not succeeded, James?"

"How do you know I have not succeeded?" he asked crossly. "I have not, perhaps, done all that I hoped to do—but Rome was not built in a day. It was absurd to expect that I had only to go up to London—an hour in the train—and walk into old Gepps' parsonage and find him still there."

"You did not find him at all?"

"No, I didn't find him at all. I never expected to find him, considering that he was an older man than my father, and that my father has been dead for sixteen years."

"To be sure," said Lady William faintly.

"I found his name, however, all right, and the place—not quite in the City, as I thought — St. Alban's proprietary chapel, Marylebone."

"Ah!"

"Do you remember the name?"

"No," said Lady William; "I'm afraid I don't remember even the name."

"Well, never mind; Gepps was incumbent then. And a very good place, too, for anything that was to be kept quiet—hidden away in a labyrinth of little streets; not so noticeable as the City, where an old church in the midst of warehouses is often something to see. Lady Somebody or other's proprietary chapel; incumbent, the Rev. T. I. Gepps. No doubt that was the one."

"Was it like my description? But, to be sure, it may have been changed, or restored, or something."

"I can tell nothing about that. It has been changed with a vengeance. Emily, the chapel has been burned down——"

She gave a little scream of annoyance, but more because of the face he had put on, than from any perception in her own mind of the significance of the words.

"A few of the things were saved—the books, I mean—but not all, not all, by any means: and all those between 1860 and 1870 perished."

"What do you say, James?"

She began to awaken to a little consciousness that this concerned her, which she had not at first understood. "The books?" —she took it up but vaguely now—"the books? What — what does that mean, James?"

"It means that of the period of your marriage there is no record at all. Do you understand me, Emily? No record, no certificate possible — nothing. It is as if you had planned it all. A clergyman who is dead; a chapel which is burned down; a registry which is destroyed. That is what it might be made to look by skilful hands— as if you had invented the whole."

She sat half stupefied looking at him, the work still in her hands, her needle in her fingers, looking up at him more astonished than was compatible with speech. "The clergyman dead, the chapel burnt down, the registry destroyed!" She said these words in a kind of half-conscious tone —repeating them after him, yet not knowing what she had said.

"That is about the state of the case; if you had meant to deceive, you couldn't have done better all round."

Lady William looked at him with a

curious half smile, yet wistful wonder in her eyes. "But," she said, "I did not want to deceive." There was a sort of startled amusement in her tone, mingling with something of reality, a question half rising, a faint feeling of the possibility, and that even, perhaps, her brother—— "James," she cried, "you do not imagine that I—I——"

The words failed her; the colour forsook her face, and she sat looking up at him dismayed; her work fallen into her lap, but the needle still in her hand.

"Of course I do not imagine that you—nor, did I doubt that, could I doubt for a moment when there's my father's hand and date upon it. And I suppose that would be evidence in a court of justice," the Rector said, knitting his brows—"I'm rather ignorant on such subjects, and I don't know. But I suppose it would be evidence. I could prove my father's handwriting, and that I found his notebooks, and produce the rest of them, and so forth. But it's touch and go to rely upon a thing so close as that."

"The books destroyed!" she said, repeating the words, "the church burned down, the clergyman dead. Do such things happen? all to overcome a poor woman?

If it was in a book one would say how impossible—how absurd——"

"Emily," said the Rector, "you must forgive me for saying it, but that's just what your whole story is—impossible and absurd. It has been so from the beginning; people have no right to launch themselves on such a career. You had it always in your power not to take the first step. I blame my father almost more than you—he ought not to have allowed you to do it: but I blame you too. For even a girl of nineteen is old enough to know what's possible and what's impossible. You ought not to have allowed yourself to be launched upon such a bad way. After your ridiculous marriage you might have expected everything else that was ridiculous to follow. It is all of a piece. Nobody would believe one word of it from the beginning to the end—if it was, as you say, in a book."

Lady William listened to this tirade with a curious piteous look, almost like a child's; a look that was on the verge of tears and yet had a faint appealing smile in it, an appeal against judgment. Oh what a foolish girl that had been, that girl of nineteen, that ought to have known better! and what a

good thing for her if she had known better; if she had been able by her own good sense and judgment to overcome those about her: the foolish old father, the false friend who led her into the net. Listening to her brother's voice so long, long after the event, and looking back upon the thing that was so impossible, the thing which between them these foolish people had done—she could see very well how preposterous it was, and how it could have been resisted. Mab (all these thoughts flew through her mind while the Rector was speaking) would not have done it. But Mab's mother had done it, and could not even now see what else she could have done among these three people surrounding her, arranging everything for her. And there was a sort of whimsical, ridiculous humour in the idea that all these complications must have followed from that foolish beginning. What could she expect but that the clergyman should die, the church be burned down, and the books destroyed? To the disturbed and disappointed Rector, thoroughly put out, touched in mind and in temper by a *contretemps* so painful and disconcerting, there was nothing whatever ludicrous in the thought. But to her, whose

whole life hung upon it, her child's fortune, her own good name, everything that was worth thinking of in the world, there was an absurdity which had almost made her laugh in the midst of her despair.

"I am very sensible of the folly of it now," she said, commanding her voice, "and I know all the misery that has been involved better than any one can tell me—but it is too late now to think of that. We must think in these dreadful circumstances what is now to be done."

"You see, Emily," said Mr. Plowden, "I never knew the rights of it till the other day. I knew there was something queer and hasty about it, a sort of running away; but you know that till you came back here a widow with your little girl I had heard actually nothing—and, indeed, not very much until you came to the Rectory the other day."

"That is quite true; and I am very sorry, James."

"I don't say it to upbraid you, my dear. My father was much more to blame than you were. I would not like to have any of my daughters exposed to such a temptation, even at their age. And Florence is twenty-three. And you were always a spoiled child, getting

everything your own way." The Rector had gradually worked out his impatience and had gone round the circle to tenderness and indulgence again. He put his hand on her shoulder, and patted it as he might have done a child. "My poor girl," he said, "my poor Emily!" with the voice of one who brings tidings of death, and a face as long as a day without bread, as the French say.

She looked up at him with a gaze of alarm.

"James!" she cried, "do you think it is all over with us? Don't say so, for Heaven's sake! I'll find Artémise if I seek her through all the country; I'll find evidence somehow. Don't condemn us with that dreadful tone."

"Condemn you!" said Mr. Plowden, "never will I condemn you, Emily. Even if you had done something wrong instead of only something very foolish, you may be sure I should have stood by you through thick and thin. No, my poor dear, you shall get no condemnation from me; and Jane, I am sure, has far too much sense and too good a heart——"

Here the Rector's voice broke a little. The idea that his wife would have to be made the judge of his sister, and might

almost, indeed, hold Emily's reputation in her hands, was more than he could bear.

"Jane!" said Lady William, with a ring in her voice as sharp and keen as that of her brother's was lachrymose; but, happily, she had sufficient command of herself not to express the exasperation which this suggestion of being at Jane's mercy caused her. She said, however, with a painful smile, "You are throwing down your arms too soon; I don't intend to be discouraged so easily. Now I know that the fight will be desperate I can rouse myself to it. It is evident that the one thing that is indispensable is to find Artémise."

"Who is Artémise? Some French maid or other?" said the Rector, with a tinge of disdain.

"Artémise is Miss Mansfield, who was with us—a cousin, or some people thought a half-sister, of Mrs. Swinford. Their father was a strange man, more French than English, and that is the reason of their names, and—many other odd things. She is a strange woman, and has a strange history. She was at the Hall, a sort of governess—when—— And she was sent with me that night. And without her I don't think—but

we need not enter into those old stories now. One thing I know is that she is living, and that Leo Swinford has seen her—not very long ago."

"A disreputable witness," said Mr. Plowden, shaking his head, "is not much better than no witness at all."

He was in a despondent mood, and ready to throw discouragement upon every hope.

"I don't know that she is disreputable; and at all events she was present," said Lady William. "That must always tell—in a court of justice, as you say: though God grant that it may never come there."

"I suppose you can lay your hand upon her without any difficulty, through Mr. Swinford," the Rector said, suddenly adopting an indifferent tone, as if with the rest of the business he had nothing to do.

"That is, perhaps, too much to say; but at least she may be found—or I hope so," Lady William replied.

"And now I must go," said Mr. Plowden. "Of course, anything and everything I can do, Emily—when you have tried what is to be accomplished in your own way——" He turned towards the door, and then returned again, with a still more cloudy face.

"My dear sister," he said, in a tone of solemnity and tenderness adapted to the words, "you may have to seek his help for this; but for all our sakes do not, any more than you can help, have young Mr. Swinford here."

Lady William looked up quickly with a half-defiant glance.

"Above all," said the Rector impressively, "while there is any sort of doubt, any sort of cloud, and when every step you take will be remarked—— Don't make me enter into explanations, but, for all our sakes, don't have Mr. Swinford always here."

III

It is almost needless to say that the Rector left his sister in a state of mind in which exasperation healthily and beneficially contended with despair. She might have been crushed altogether by his discovery; but he had managed to mingle with that so many other sentiments that Lady William felt herself no broken-down and miserable woman, but a creature all full of fight and resistance—tingling, indeed, with pain, and scorched with a fire of injury, feeling insulted and outraged to the depths of her being, but all the same full of angry strength and force, determined that nothing as yet was lost, and that sooner than yield herself to the tolerance of her sister-in-law and indulgent interpretations of her friends, who would pity and assure each other that whatever dreadful thing had really happened, poor Emily, a mere child at the time, was

innocent—there was nothing she was not capable of doing. To change from Lady William—in a sort, the head of the little community—to poor Emily, was a thought which fired her blood. For that, as well as for her child, the small motive thrusting in in the immediate present into the foreground—there was nothing she would not do. To find Artémise was a trifle to her roused and indignant soul. If she went out herself on foot with a lanthorn, she said to herself with a vehemence which soon turned into an angry laugh, she would find her. The lanthorn and the search on foot turned it all into stormy ridicule, as the Rector's suggestion that the little, dingy, dark private chapel had been burned and the books destroyed as a natural consequence of her folly in being married there, had done. Lady William felt the laughter burst out in the middle of the bitter pain. For the pain was bitter enough down in the breast from which that stormy humour burst, so sharp that she could not sit still, but went raging about like—as she said to herself—a wild beast, pushing the crowded furniture aside, holding her hands together as if to keep down the anguish by physical torture. A

thumbscrew or a deadly boot to crush her flesh would have been something of a relief to her in the active anguish of her soul. Mab to hear that her mother was—— Oh, no; never that her mother was—— but only that there was a doubt, a horrible peradventure, a failure of proof.

Lady William paused in her movement to and fro and tried to look at it for a moment through Mab's eyes. That is often a very good thing to do, but a difficult. We forget nature when the question is one so all-important as this, what a child will think of its mother. Often we believe in an opinion too favourable, without inquiry, forgetting what a formidable criticism is that which our children make of us from their cradles, learning our habitual ways so much better than we know them ourselves. But there are some ways in which the natural judgment of candid and clear-sighted youth may give any who is unjustly accused comfort. In the light of Mab's eyes (though they were neither bright nor beautiful) Lady William felt for a moment that her trouble melted away. Mab might not see the fun—that she should see fun at such a crisis of her life!—of James's suggestion of the connection

between the burning of the church and the folly of the marriage: but she would be utterly stolid like a block of stone to any idea of shame. No one could cast suspicion upon her mother's honour to Mab. Lady William thought she could see the girl's look of utter disdain on any one who could suggest such a suspicion even by a glance. There was once a lady known to fame who, moved by a hot fit of jealous pain and misery, left the house in which she was being entertained, and walked home alone at night up the long length of Piccadilly. A man who met her, moved, I suppose, by her solitude and the unusual sight, followed, and at last addressed her. When her attention was attracted she turned round upon him, looked at him, and uttering the one word "Idiot!" walked on, as secure as if she had been surrounded by a bodyguard of chivalry. Somehow that incident floated into Lady William's memory. That was what Mab would do. She would think, if she did not say "Idiot!" and pass by, too contemptuous almost to be angry, feeling it unnecessary to answer a word to the depth of imbecility which was capable of such a thought.

Yes; it made her quieter, it calmed her down, it delivered her from that worst and deepest horror, to look at it through Mab's sensible, quiet eyes. But when Lady William remembered that James would tolerate her, and be kind, and that everybody else would say, "Poor Emily!" the intolerableness of the catastrophe caught her once more—and the advantage which even her brother, even James, who loved her in his way, who would spare no trouble for her, had taken of it already. While there was a shade, while there was a shadow of a doubt upon her, she must not admit Leo Swinford "for all our sakes." Women do not habitually swear, or I think Lady William would have used bad words, had she known any, when this intolerable recollection came into her mind, just as, if she had not been bound by the inevitable bonds of education and natural self-control, she might have broken the china or the furniture to relieve herself. A gentlewoman cannot do either of these things, fortunately, or unfortunately, for her, and they are outlets which must sometimes be of use. But the quick movement with which she dashed her hands together when that last thought came into her mind, upset a little table upon

which was a plant, one of Mab's especial nurslings just shaping for flower, as well as various other nicknacks of less importance. The sense of guilt and shame with which she saw what she had done, the compunction with which she stooped over the broken flower-pot, and gathered up the fortunately uninjured plant, and the specially prepared soil in which it had been placed, and which was but dirt to Patty, who came dashing in at the sound of the crash to set matters right—did Lady William as much good as smashing a window or two might have done to a poor woman out of Society. She was very penitent and much ashamed of herself, and horribly amused all the same. To express her rage, her injured feelings, her pride and desperation by breaking a flower-pot, was again where bathos and ridicule came in.

"I'll sweep it all up, my lady," cried Patty, "and there won't be no harm."

"Miss Mab's leaf-mould? No, you shan't do anything of the kind. Find me another flower-pot, and let us gather it all up carefully, and put it back."

"Miss Mab's full of fads," said Patty, under her breath.

But Lady William did not allow herself such freedom of criticism, and she had scarcely gathered up the mould and built it securely round the plant in the new pot before Mab came in. "Oh, are you filling it up with fresh mould, mother? My poor auricula! It will never produce a prize bloom now, and I had such hopes."

"You ungrateful child! when I have gathered up every scrap of your famous mould with my own dirty hands!"

"Poor mother," cried Mab, "that can never bear to dirty her hands! let me see them."

Mab kissed the fingers which Lady William held out, smiling. "After all it is clean dirt, nice mould carefully made, and with everything nice in it both for the colour and the health. Mother, your hands are a little like the auriculas, velvety and soft."

"And brown, and purple," said Lady William, laughing. Who is it that says that if we would not cry we must laugh? Heaven knows how true it is.

"It must have been Patty that did it," said Mab. "That child will never learn to take care. And, oh! the little Dresden shoe is broken that I got off the Christmas

tree, and the silver things all scattered. I wish Patty might get a whipping; it is the only thing that would make her take care."

"Whip me, then, Mab, for it was I. I was vexed and angry——"

"You! angry, mother?"

"It is not a thing that never happens, Mab."

"No," said Mab judicially; "it is not a thing that never happens: but it only happens when you are put out. And I should like to know what had put you out."

"Nothing," said Lady William, with a smile.

"Oh! mother; you may say that to other people—but to me! Of course, I shall find out."

"It was something your uncle James said to me, Mab."

"Oh!" said Mab, satisfied; "I am not surprised if he was in it. He does say such strange things. But he means well enough. Come out then, mother, for a walk. That always does you more good than anything."

"It is too early; it is not noon yet. It is dissipated going away from one's work at this time of the day."

But the conclusion was that the two ladies did go out, and went to the river-side, where Lady William sat down on a bench by the landing-place, while Mab made certain investigations in respect to the boats. It was a fine morning, but not over bright—one of those gray days in the beginning of May, when Nature seems to veil herself capriciously by way of making the after-glory more glorious. The day was gray, with breaks of quiet light, not bright enough to be called sunshine, through the clouds, and all the new foliage tempered and softened in its fresh greenness of spring by the neutral tints that enveloped everything. The river flowed quietly upon its way, stopping for nothing, indifferent whether overhead there was sunshine or clouds, working away at the tall growing reeds on the edge, and sweeping round them, pushing them back out of its way, sapping the camp-shedding on the other side, hollowing out the bank that intruded into the current. The soft, strong flowing carries one's thoughts with it, whatever they may be, and Lady William gradually gave way to that silent coercion, and let her more painful reflections escape her, and the thoughts she could not get rid of swell round and

round her mind like the circles of the stream. The scenery was not remarkable at that point. From the river, indeed, the pretty little landing-place, with its bit of green bank, its marshalled boats, and the old red-and-white houses behind, made a delightful touch of life and colour: but to the spectators on the bank there was nothing exciting to be seen, only the grassy shore opposite, the trees, a brown cow or two coming down to the river, or a passing boat full of travellers, or of merrymakers, as the chance might be. How softening, pacifying, composing it was! Mab's voice talking to the boatman on the river's edge came softly through the harmonious air. Who can think, in the mild calm of such a day, of confusion, or trouble, or shame?

"I am in much luck," said Leo Swinford's voice behind her, "to find you here; you are not usually to be found out in the morning."

"No," said Lady William, telling him the reason with a burst of assumed cheerfulness. "It is possible that all Mab's hopes of her auricula are spoiled by my fault; yet she forgives me," she said. Then suddenly she put forth her hand and gripped

his arm, with a change on her face—"Leo, where is Artémise? Find me Artémise!"

"What is the matter, dear lady?" he said.

"Ah! it is of no importance what is the matter. I will tell you afterwards. It is only this, that I must find Artémise—if I take a lanthorn myself and go out and search for her."

"Ah! you laugh," he said, "and I am relieved. It is Mrs. Mansfield you mean—is she Mansfield now?—I think not, nor can I tell what her name is. Certainly I can find her. I saw her once, as I told you—twice—here in this village, as if she were living here; and then she came to see my mother. I am sure she has been with my mother since; but I have not seen her again."

"With your mother is not the question. Your mother, I fear, Leo, would rather I did not see her. She likes no one to meddle with those she cares for."

"Does she really care for this woman?"

"Can you ask me? They are near relations, and dear friends, and love each other."

"Are you sure of all that?" he said; "from my mother I have never heard——"

"But it is true."

"The last I suppose is true," said Leo reluctantly. "My mother is fond of her—though why——"

Lady William gave him a look, as if there might be two sides to the question; then she said: "It is of the utmost importance to me to see her, Leo—and soon. Will you give me your attention, and remember it is no mere wish—for an old friend."

"An old friend! I cannot conceive that she should ever have been a friend of yours."

"Yet, more than that: I desire to see her more than the dearest friend I have in the world."

"Your bidding shall be done, dear lady: should I go myself and take the lanthorn—as you say. But that will not be necessary. I shall find her, I hope, more easily—or whatever else you are pleased to wish for," he added in a lower tone. "That is too easy. Set me some task that will prove what I can do."

Lady William cast at him a keen look from under her eyelids. She remembered her brother's adjuration, "for all our sakes." "A romantic task," she said, "that would

prove what you could do is quite different. I ask my friend to help me in a way I really want; but no one ever wanted a white cat that would go through a ring—or was it a shawl? I forget."

"I never thought," he said, with an uneasy laugh, "that you would send me off in search of a white cat."

"I might, though," she said, "if the white cat would turn out an enchanted princess and make you happy all your life after—which I hope is what will happen one of these days. And my gracious nephew, Leo, did he leave you as he said?"

Leo replied with another question: "How does Miss Mab like it that she is to be an heiress? I have not seen her to ask her."

"You can see her at once. She is there, you see, with her friends the boatmen; but you must not ask her, please, for she knows nothing of heiress-ship as yet."

"Ah!" he said, "you are afraid to turn her head."

"I am not at all afraid of her head, but I am afraid of other things. Tell me, why did he come here? The Pakenhams are not generous people, and they are not rich, and I should have known nothing of Lord John's

fortune. Was it out of kindness to his cousin, whom he did not know, that he came here?"

"Ah, who can tell?" said Leo. "He thought, perhaps, that you were sure to see it in the papers."

"But even then I should not have known that Mab had any right."

"Who can tell," said Leo again, shaking his head, "what are the motives of these people who are above rule, who do not require to behave like ordinary mortals? He thought, perhaps, yes, of his little cousin—he thought, perhaps, most likely of himself. He might have thought with all that fortune that it might be well if Miss Mab, perhaps, should—what do you call it?—take a fancy to him, and return it all to his pocket, which is not too full. How can you tell what any one's motives are, not to speak of a Lord Will?"

"It is true," said Lady William, with a sigh; "but I suppose my best course now is to wait—to take no steps till I hear from the lawyers."

"Perhaps, instead, your own lawyer——"

"Ah, I have had so little need of one—of course there is a man of business who

used to manage my father's affairs. One does not seem to care," she said, with a faint laugh, "we poor people who have nothing but our poverty—to confide all our affairs even to such a man."

"Ah, but they are not men—they are like priests. There is a seal as of the confessional upon their lips. I should not have thought you, who are so transparent, so open, would have had such a scruple."

This was a little duel, though neither suspected the object of the other. Lady William was eager to find out from Leo what "the family" had intended to do by sending that messenger, and Leo was eager to persuade Lady William to confide in him, to show him what her difficulty was, and how far the broken revelations of his mother's attack upon her were true. But neither ventured to unravel the motive which was foremost in their minds. Both endeavoured to extract the information which the other had no intention of revealing. But to the spectators who were looking on, the two people on the bench, who were in reality thus resisting and eluding each other, had an air of great and tender intimacy as they sat together, each turned towards the other,

pursuing their mutual investigations by the study, not only of what was said, but what was looked, by the betrayals of the eyes as well as of the tongue. Even Mab, returning from her long talk with old George the boatman, was a little struck by the absorbed attention of Leo to her mother, and of her mother to Leo. With what interest they were talking; seeing no one else that was near; paying no attention to anything that passed! Lady William was not wont to lose herself thus in conversation. She had always an eye for what was going on; for the passing boats on the river, or even for the clouds and brightness of the sky—and much more for her little girl who was hanging about anxious to join her, yet daunted a little by this too animated, too eager talk. Mab had heard a stray word here and there on the subject of Leo Swinford and his visits, to which she had paid no attention, but such words will sometimes linger without any desire of hers in a little girl's ear.

IV

"I ASKED old George to go to your fandango, Jim, and he said he would, and take another man or two. He said he'd like to hear the young ladies sing, if they'd sing something as a old man could understand; and he wouldn't mind hearing Mr. Jim if he said somethin' as was funny and would make a man laugh. Lord, you didn't want to cry when you went out for something as pretended to be pleasuring. The old woman can do that fast enough at home. And as for Mr. Osborne, old George said as he draw'd the line at him."

"What a horrid old man!" said Florence.

"No, he's not at all a horrid old man. He is a great friend of mine; but he doesn't like, as he says, and I agree with him, to have some one always a-nagging at him. When one's mother does it, it's horrid: and the curate would be worse. Jim, do

you really like Mr. Osborne that you have grown such friends?"

"Well," said Jim, with much innocence and a touch of complaisance besides, "it's him that looks as if he liked me."

"What excellent grammar, and what still more excellent humility!" cried Florence. Florence was, it must be allowed, a little bitter. Jim's acquaintance with the curate had gone on increasing daily. It had done him a great deal of good — in one way. The doors of the "Blue Boar" were closed to him: he went there no longer. He thought of the vet. and Simpkinson, the landlord, with a sort of horror, asking himself whether it was true that he had actually sought their society. It had been in pure vacancy he knew now, and because there was no other to be had. But yet he had persuaded himself that they were very good fellows, and that to make acquaintance with their ways of thinking was a good thing, and expanded his knowledge of life and the world. He had all the fervour now of a new convert in respect to the superiority of his present surroundings, but still was pleased with the thought that it was Mr. Osborne who had

sought him, and not he who had sought Mr. Osborne. The curate had thus fulfilled towards him all, and more than all, that Florence had ventured to suggest. In making Jim believe that it was pure liking that attracted him, Mr. Osborne had bettered the prayer that had been made to him. Had he done it for her sake?—who could tell? If it was so, it was a transfer complete and thorough, for he had never approached Florence, never spoken to her when he could avoid it, never looked at her since that day. He said "How do you do, Miss Plowden?" as if he had never known more of them than from a chance meeting in the village street, when he met the sisters. Not even his anxiety about his entertainment broke down the barrier he had raised between himself and the girl to whom he had all but offered his heart and life. "What is the matter with Mr. Osborne?" Emmy had asked of her sister, in consternation, for it is needless to say that Florry's sister and constant companion had been well enough aware of the previous state of affairs. Florence had not answered the question, but she had preserved her composure, which was a great

thing, and had thus led her sister to believe that, whatever the matter was, it was a temporary one. Mrs. Plowden, too, had put a similar question, but had herself answered it in the most satisfactory way. "What has become of Mr. Osborne?" she said, and then replied to herself, "I suppose since he sees so much of Jim at his own place, he doesn't think it worth his while to come here. It isn't perhaps very civil to the rest of us; but what does it matter to any of us? and it is quite an advantage to Jim. I am sure he may be as rude to me as he likes; if he is nice to Jim, what do I care?"

This did not perhaps make Florence feel less sore. She could not help feeling that all her own prospects might come to nothing, and so long as it was well for Jim her mother would not care or any one. To tell the truth, Mrs. Plowden was of opinion that the curate's apparent admiration of Florence had been only a cover for his desire to secure the friendship of her son, so wonderfully had her mind changed since the evening when she had bemoaned the use that Mr. Osborne might, but would not, be to Jim, and when Florence had formed the heroic reso-

lution of setting that duty before her lover, if he should ever become her lover. The poor girl had carried out that vow, and had achieved that purpose. She said to herself that she had nothing to regret. It was far more important that he should tide Jim over this dangerous period, that he should restore him to better aims and hopes, than that he should "pay attention," as the gossips said, to herself. Florry said to herself proudly that she wanted no "attentions" from Mr. Osborne. If he had loved her, as she once thought, that would have been a very different matter. But it was apparent enough now that this had never been the case; and what did she want with him and his attentions? He had been angry, furious with her for the suggestion she had made to him. Evidently he was one of the men who think that women should never open their mouths, should see only what they are told to see. But he was a man with a conscience, and even the suggestion of a despised girl had borne fruit. He had been able to put her out of his mind, but not to put the thing she had said out of his mind. So much the better! He had held out a rescuing hand to Jim. He was doing the work of a Christian knight towards

her brother. And as for any little delusion of hers, what did it matter? It was far better so, so long as nobody suspected—as nobody should suspect, did it cost her her life!—the pang that was in poor Florry's heart.

It had been suspected, however—nay, more, divined—by one person, who was one of the group, coming down the street of Watcham together from the practice which had been held in the school-room on the morning of Mr. Osborne's entertainment. Emmy and Florence had gone through their song, with some applause from the other performers, but not a word from the curate, who seemed not to make even a pretence of listening, and whose indifferent aspect was actually rudeness to the two young ladies, his Rector's daughters, who had the greatest call upon his attention. He made himself, on the other hand, very agreeable to the two young London ladies who abode in one of the villas at Riverbank, and whose performance upon the piano was not remarkable. Miss Grey, who was present in her capacity of lay or feminine curate, the official best known and most fully recognised in the parish, could not help but see this; and, indeed, there were plenty

of other people who remarked it, wondering whether Mr. Osborne had quarrelled with the Rectory family, a supposition, however, which was untenable in sight of his intimacy with Jim. Jim's reading had the curate's warmest applause. He referred to Jim on everything, sent him off to arrange matters, consulted him about the programme, and the succession of the performances; in short, conducted himself as if Jim Plowden were his other self and as much the giver of the entertainment as he was. The last thing he did after the practice was over, was to call to Jim that he should expect him at five to look up the fellows at Riverside. In the meantime Mr. Osborne had to entertain the Winwick contingent. But all this was so strange, so marked, so unlike Mr. Osborne's former behaviour that little Miss Grey, between consternation and amusement, did not know what to think. She was an experienced little woman, and she saw very well what was coming when Florence and the curate left her house together, three weeks before. She had expected that very day to have another visit from one or both of them to tell her the great news. And, instead, there was to all appearance a total disruption between them; and

not only so, but Jim—Jim!—received into the curate's heart as closest friend and first favourite apparently, in his sister's place.

Miss Grey felt that there must be an explanation of this, though she could not make it out as yet; and, above all, she was very sure that Mr. Osborne's rudeness to the Plowdens did not come from nothing. There must be a reason for it. Whatever it meant, indifference was certainly the last thing it could mean. And Jim's complaisance in respect to his new friendship with the curate made the whole question still more complicated. "It's him that looks as if he liked me." Looks as if he liked Jim, and looks as if he disliked Florence! But that was more than Miss Grey, with all her knowledge of man, and even of curate-kind, could understand. And the slight sharpness in the tone of Florence threw an additional cloud upon the whole matter. Nobody but must feel that it was good for Jim to be engaged in the curate's schemes instead of talking second-hand politics at the "Blue Boar." But Florence's voice had a sharp tone in it, and in Florence's self there was a sort of thrill of offended dignity, which Miss Grey was quick to see. The girl was wounded,

and not much wonder. Her part of the performance was precisely the one in which Mr. Osborne seemed to take no interest. To be sure, Miss Grey was not aware that since that fated morning Florence and he had not exchanged one word that was not indispensable to the preservation of appearances. And yet she had not refused Mr. Osborne, which would have explained everything—at least, there was no reason to suppose that she had refused him. Had she done so it would somehow have oozed out. Birds of the air carry these matters. It shows upon the aspect of the rejected more surely than does the delight of acceptance. And besides, Florence Plowden had not intended to reject —there was no appearance of that purpose in her. The matter became more and more mysterious the longer Miss Grey thought it over. She could get no light upon this mysterious question.

They were all walking along together—a bevy of young people with Miss Grey in the midst, with a little excitement consequent upon the performances past and the performance to come, making a good deal of cheerful noise in the cheerful road. Two or three were always talking at the same time, and

nobody was listening, though Jim found it possible to hear what Mab was saying to him, and Florence could not help but remark upon every word that concerned Mr. Osborne. The rest were discussing their own share in the performance and what the violinists from Winwick and the rest of the people were going to do. "Fiddlers are thought everything of nowadays," said the pianists, "and yet where would they be without an accompanist?" They thought the same thing of the singers more or less, and the singers, who were aware that they were themselves the most popular part of the entertainment, returned that feeling. As for those who were merely to read, the musical part of the performers had a sort of impartial and indifferent contempt for them, as for people who were merely making a little exhibition of themselves—not rivals at all. Shakespeare or Ingoldsby, the young ladies from Riverbank did not think it mattered a bit which it was. And even Mab asked, more from civility than with interest, what Jim was going to do.

"The 'Ride to Ghent'? We have had the 'Ride to Ghent' so often. If you had wanted a ride, you might have taken that other one from Browning, where the

man thought 'Perhaps the world will end to-night.'"

"Do you think the boatmen would care about that?" said Florence. "Oh, no, you don't know it, Jim. It is a man who is going to have a last ride with a girl who does not care for him. At all events, he thinks this is their last ride. And then perhaps he thinks the world may come to an end."

"I don't see much meaning in that," said Jim. "I suppose there will always be plenty other girls in the world. Browning is always so far-fetched, except——"

"When he isn't," said Mab, laughing. "The 'Ride to Ghent' is not far-fetched."

"But what is it about?" said Jim. "I've been asking Osborne, who did something tremendous in history, in Greats—and he can't tell me. Now, if I could say before I begin, 'This was after a great fight between the—what? the Spanish and the Dutch, or something——"

"You can say," said Mab, "that it was a starving time, and if they didn't hear the good news they would have to give in—after holding out till they were nearly dead: though I can't make out," added that young lady, "if the country was so free as that, and Loris

and the other two could ride a whole day without any one disturbing them, why the town should be starving? But you are not called upon to explain. They would like the 'Pied Piper' still better, you know," she continued reflectively. "It's easier to understand. They want a story, and they want it to go quick, without reflections—like this," said the experienced little woman of the parish, striking her hands together, which startled them all.

"There are nothing but vulgar stories that do that—claptrap things, things that ladies and gentlemen could not listen to," said Emmy Plowden.

"Oh, what does it matter about the ladies and gentlemen? I should not care a bit for them. There is that new Indian man, that writes the stories—a man with a curious name; but, then, they are not *good* stories at all. The soldiers drink and swear, and that would never do. Is it necessary to drink and swear in order to have 'go' in you?" said Mab. "As for your old Ingoldsby, they see it's meant to be fun, and they laugh. But they don't care."

"I fear," said Florence, always with that little sharp tone in her voice, "that Jim will

have to take what he has got, instead of waiting till the right thing comes."

"Is the new schoolmistress going to do something?" said Miss Grey. "I heard a report—— I don't like the looks of that woman, but she is as clever as ever she can be. She could do Lady Macbeth, or—anything she likes. And she knows—quantities of things, far too much for a village schoolmistress. I have seen her somewhere before, I am certain, and she is quite out of her place here. But why doesn't Mr. Osborne get hold of her, and see what she could do? She'd make them attend, I'll warrant you! There wouldn't be much wandering attention if she were there."

"It's a pity," said Jim stiffly, "that she could not hear you, Miss Grey: for she said the ladies would not like it if she appeared."

"She thinks she could throw us all into the shade," said Florence—"we should be jealous of her, I suppose."

"Yes," said Jim, "of course she would; she would throw everybody here into the shade."

He spoke with a little fervour, forgetting, unhappy boy! that he had no right to know anything whatever of Mrs. Brown.

"Jim, how should you know?" said Emmy mildly; and then, to make bad worse, Jim stumbled into an explanation how he had gone to her from Mr. Osborne, and how she had laughed, and "said" something to him, "a piece of poetry," Jim called it, which made his hair stand upright on his head; but after that, she had refused, saying, "No, no; the ladies would not have it, the ladies would not like it."

"As if we should care!" said Florence, with a little sneer. "You can go and tell her if you like, that the ladies have no objection. We are not jealous, are we—of Mrs. Brown?"

This was not poor Florry's natural tone, and the sharpness of it went to one heart at least—that of Miss Grey, who discovered what it meant: and startled the rest, who did not understand any meaning in it at all.

"Don't send Jim," said Mab, "let me go. I'll tell her we should all like her to do—Lady Macbeth or whatever she pleases—and that none of the ladies would mind—not you, Miss Grey, I may tell her—for perhaps she thinks the young ones don't count."

"Don't bother, Mab," said Jim hastily.

"It is too late; even if she were willing we cannot change the programme now."

"Oh, but I am going! I have a fancy for Mrs. Brown," said Mab, waving her hand.

V

MAB left the others separating on every side towards their homes, and ran back to the school-house, from which the children had all dispersed a little while before. She was full of her errand, in which there was a little sense of mischief as well as of pleasure, the one giving piquancy to the other. No doubt it was quite true that the ladies were not jealous of Mrs. Brown. It was to Mab the most amusing thing in the world that anybody should think so. Florence and Emmy, for instance, jealous —of a woman twice as old as they were, if she were the most beautiful and attractive woman in the world! How absurd it was! Youth has confidence in youth, in a manner as astonishing to the rest of the world as is the futility of that confidence in so many cases. And to a girl of seventeen a woman of forty is so entirely out of any sort of

competition with herself that the suggestion is too ridiculous to be taken into the mind at all. Mrs. FitzStephen, perhaps, or Aunt Jane might be jealous of Mrs. Brown, but then they had nothing to do with it: and it was still more absurd to think that these good ladies could have anything in hand that would make it possible for jealousy to come in. All this ran through Mab's cheerful mind as she went back, not noting the half-alarmed, half-displeased look which Jim threw after her, and his hesitating step in advance, as if he would have gone too. It was an exceedingly good joke to Mab, for though, of course, the ladies were not jealous, they would no doubt be much surprised to see Mrs. Brown appear—surprised, and perhaps not quite pleased. It was not that they habitually looked down upon the schoolmistress — even Mab in her short memory knew of some who had been much petted by the gentry in Watcham. There was one girl, who was delicate, and who was as much thought of as if she had been a princess in disguise, all "the best people" uniting to spoil her, Mab thought, who, being more on this young woman's level, saw things with a clear eye. But Mrs.

Brown was not a favourite, though nobody could tell why. She had seen better days, which was nothing against her; but then she had none of that genteel decay about her, which ought to be characteristic of those who had seen better days. She appeared, indeed, to make a joke of it all, rather than to lament her fallen estate. There was always a twinkle in those eyes, which were so bright, so bold, and so all-seeing. Mab had felt, like all the rest, an instinctive revulsion against her. But this had died off in that appreciation of cheerfulness and courage, which was deep in Mab's nature. To be less well off than you used to be, and yet take it, not with a moan, but with a jest, or even a gibe, laughing at yourself, seemed to Mab a much more attractive thing than the melancholy of decayed gentility; but this was not the aspect in which the other ladies regarded it. They would all have been sorry for Mrs. Brown had she taken her humiliation sadly. What they did not understand was the joke she made of it, which, to them, seemed impudence and defiance. Perhaps, Mab thought to herself in the abundance of her thoughts as she ran along, this feeling

on the part of the ladies was what the gentlemen called jealousy. It was not so bad a guess for a little girl.

It may be added here that Lady William had not made acquaintance with the schoolmistress from the fact that Lady William, probably by right of having been herself the Rector's daughter and born to that work, refused determinedly to have anything to do with the parish. She did not keep Mab back from that inevitable work, but she would not herself take any part. District visiting, schools, mothers' or girls' meetings, penny banks, clothing clubs, all the machinery of the parish, Lady William kept religiously apart from them all. She had a recipe for beef tea which was known far and near, the strongest and the most quickly made, everybody knew, that had ever been heard of, and would go to the kitchen and make it herself, if old Anne, who was the sovereign there, was out of the way or out of temper: and puddings came from her house for the sick people which would have tempted an anchorite to eat: and if warm things were wanted for the winter there was no end to the flannel petticoats, the children's frocks, and the knitted comforters and stockings

which Lady William could turn out. But that was all. She said lightly that there were plenty of people to manage the parish, and that it was not her rôle. She took no responsibility, and had not entered the schools since she was Emily Plowden aiding and abetting all manner of little rebellions in a way not at all becoming for the Rector's daughter. This was one reason she gave for taking no supervision of the schools now. "I should always be on the children's side," she said, and thus it happened, which was so strange, that she had never even seen Mrs. Brown.

But Mab knew her very well, and burst into her little house at this hour which was Mrs. Brown's own hour, in which the parish had no right to interfere with her, with an absence of regard which the girl did not realise, and which no doubt was an unthought-of result of the inferior position in which the schoolmistress was, though quite unintentional on the part of the young intruder. She gave the lightest little tap at the door of Mrs. Brown's sitting-room, and burst in without waiting for any reply. Mab was, however, a little taken aback when she found Mrs. Brown seated at a little meal,

which was not only very agreeable to the smell, but extremely dainty in appearance, much more so, Mab felt instinctively, than any table she was herself accustomed to. Perhaps it was the sight of this, so very different from the usual slovenly repast of the schoolmistresses, which brought Mab up suddenly with a little start, and cry: "Oh, I beg your pardon!" which she gave forth in spite of herself.

"Why should you beg my pardon?" said Mrs. Brown. She had what seemed a little silver dish before her — some dainty little twists and loaves of French bread—a cover on her table of exquisite linen, white and fresh. Mab knew how it feels when the table-cloth is not in its first freshness when any one comes, and how frequently that little domestic incident happens; but Mrs. Brown's table-cloth shone like white satin, and was fresh in all its folds. "Why should you beg my pardon?" she said. "Do you think I do not know, Miss Pakenham, that I belong to the parish, body and soul? I must eat, to be sure, in order to live, but I ought to know better than to expect that I am to eat undisturbed."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Mab

again, crimson with shame; "it was so silly of me not to think: but as it is so early——"

"I must take my food when the children do so," said the schoolmistress; "pray sit down. I am not much of a sight when I feed, but still——"

"I hope you don't think I came on purpose to disturb you at your—lunch," said Mab. To the schoolmistress of the old *régime* she would have said dinner. "I came—to ask you if you wouldn't say something—I mean recite something, or act something, at the entertainment to-night. We all think you would do it much better than any one here."

"Do what? How kind of you—almost as if I were on an equality: though perhaps it is because of some one having failed that the schoolmistress may come in? Who has failed, Miss Pakenham, at the eleventh hour? I see, of course, that in these circumstances to apply to a dependent was the only way."

"Mrs. Brown," said Mab, "I have always thought you were a lady; but if you are so ready to think that we are not ladies, I shan't think so any more."

"Well said!" said the schoolmistress,

laying down her fork. "Will you have a little of my ragout? I have taught my little maid to make it, and I think it's very successful. I am fond of good cooking—that is one of the remnants, though, perhaps, at your age you will not think it a very romantic one—of my better days."

"I should have thought," said Mab, "if you were like most of the people who have seen better days, that you would not have cared what you eat."

"Ah, yes!" said Mrs. Brown, "that is very true: but I am not like most of those people. I am not so sure that I regret my better days—or that if I liked I might not have them back."

"Then in the name of wonder," said Mab, "why do you stay here?—don't they often drive you half-mad, those little things that never will learn to spell, and that can't remember anything if you were to say it to them twenty times in an hour? I would not be a schoolmistress a moment longer than I could help it, if it were me."

"Then let us hope it will never be you," said Mrs. Brown. "The little girls are not alone in driving one half-mad, as you say. There are hundreds of things in the world

that would drive you much madder if you knew them as I do."

"I suppose you have known—all kinds of things?" said Mab, looking with curiosity at her companion, whose eyes were full of knowledge too strange for the little girl. Mab had forgotten all about her object in coming, in the interest with which she looked at this curious human creature, who was like an undiscovered country, a world unrealised to her young imagination. She felt like an explorer coasting about in a little skiff to discover unknown headlands and bays of some quaint island far at sea.

"Yes, I have known a good many kinds of things," said Mrs. Brown, "things that would make the hair of the ladies in Watcham stand on end. I have been in a great many places—and, I am sorry to say, in a great many wrong places. I am not, to tell the truth, a sort of a woman for you to associate with, my dear young lady. You ought to draw your petticoats close round you in case they should touch anything of mine."

"I don't understand you," said Mab, greatly startled.

"No; I did not suppose you would. You would be a capital confessor, for that

reason; for I might pour all my sins into an innocent little ear like yours, and you would never understand them. Will you really refuse my ragout? It is very good, I assure you. Then have one of those *pommes au sucre;* I rather pride myself on them."

"They are like apples of gold," said Mab, who was so young that a sweetmeat was a great temptation to her.

"I wish they were in a dish of silver—for your sake; but here is a little Dresden plate, which is quite as pretty. And there is a little pot of cream. This is friendly, now, and gives me pleasure. Your cousin, Mr. Jim——"

"Do you know Jim?" cried Mab, looking up from her apple, which was very good, with great surprise.

"Ah, I have known a great many people," said Mrs. Brown, "your father among others, and old Lord John, who died the other day. You never saw your uncle John? Well, you had no great loss; but his money will do you just as much good as if he had been the greatest hero in the world."

"I do not know what you mean about my uncle John and money. Do you mean to say that you knew my father?"

"Ah!" said Mrs. Brown, "they have not told you—and I don't doubt that was wise enough until all is settled. It was the right thing not to do."

"Did you know my father, Mrs. Brown?"

"My dear, I told you I have known all sorts of people. I knew them all, more or less, in Paris. There was always plenty going on; and I love to be where a great many things are going on. I will tell you how I know your cousin Jim. I am in a very frank humour to-day—in a coming on mood like Rosalind. I had met him in Oxford, when I was not as I am now, at a very gay, noisy party indeed, where I was with some people—whom I would not name in your hearing. I spoke to him here out of prudence, thinking he might say to his father, the Rector, or his mother, the Rectoress—I have seen that woman before, and she is not fit to have charge of your school. So for a selfish motive I made friends with him. It took away his breath at first; but he is a lamb, poor innocent, like yourself, and was very sorry to think I should have so come down in the world."

"Mrs. Brown!" cried Mab. She was put at a dreadful disadvantage by that apple,

which was very good, especially with the little pot of cream poured over it in the most lavish hospitable way. When you have once accepted such a thing, and are in the middle of it with the spoon in your hand, and the sweetness melting in your mouth, it is very difficult to express your consternation, or indignation, or dismay.

"And my opinion is," said the schoolmistress, "that he can be stopped and brought back, if anybody will take the trouble—judiciously—not in the driving and nagging way. I'm glad to see the curate has stepped in, though he is no friend of mine. Well! but you would like to hear a little more of my history. Do you know what a Bohemian is? You must have seen the word in books. Well, then, I was a Bohemian born. We were both so; but the other, who was the great lady, settled, as great ladies do, and had her irregularities about her, in her own kingdom, don't you know; but I went out to seek mine. I never did very much harm, however, or I would not talk to a little girl like you about it. I looked on at other people's fun, and that was fun enough for me. There is always mud about it in the end, and it sticks. I like best to look on——"

Mab had finished her apple by dint of taking large mouthfuls. She had felt that it would be something dreadful, ungrateful, uncivil beyond description to put it down and run away. So, though she was much troubled, she only hurried the more over the consumption of what was on her plate. When it was finished she put down the plate, thankful to have it over, yet feeling that even now she could not be so beggarly as to jump up at once and go away. "I wish," she said, faltering, "please, Mrs. Brown — that you would not tell me any more——"

"Oh, don't be afraid," cried Mrs. Brown, with a laugh; "I shall not bring a blush upon that cheek. I have always been in mischief, but I have not done much harm. I go wherever the whim takes me. I am sometimes in the heart of the *demi-monde*—though you don't know where that is—and sometimes in a great lady's boudoir, and sometimes in a girls' school. You may wonder how I got here; but my certificates were perfectly good, and no one had a word to say against me. The *demi-monde*, you know, either in London or Paris, has no connection with Watcham School."

"Oh, I wish you would not tell me any

more—please don't tell me any more!" cried Mab, rising up (though still deeply sensible that it was too abrupt after the apple), "for," she added, in her trouble, "I don't know at all what you mean."

"But my dear young lady," said Mrs. Brown, "you have neither told me how you liked my apple, nor what you wanted me to do."

"Oh," cried Mab, arrested, and feeling all the weight of that sin against the hospitality she had accepted. Her honest little face grew crimson-red, and her eyes sank for the moment before those bold and keen ones that seemed to read her very soul. "The apple was very nice, thank you," she said, faltering, "I—never tasted any like it: but—mother will be waiting for me for her dinner—I—think I must go."

"Tell me first," said Mrs. Brown, "what you wanted me to do."

Mab had very seldom been silenced or daunted in her life, or kept from saying out what was in her mind. For once she had been overcome—chiefly by the apple and its effects, the sense of familiarity and obligation thus brought into her embarrassed mind—but such an embarrassment could not last,

nor was she cowed except for a moment by Mrs. Brown's personality—potent though it was.

"I wish," she cried, "you had not told me these things. You put a weight upon my mind, for, of course, I cannot tell them to anybody, and I shall have to carry them all about as if they were secrets of mine. It was not just or fair to tell me—when I can't tell them again or free myself from knowing, or forget for a long time what you have said. And as for what we wanted you to do—it was when we thought you were only Mrs. Brown, a lady that was poor, and obliged to put up with the school to get her living. Which did not matter to anybody—but now—now——"

"You are disappointed in me," said Mrs. Brown. "You think I am not a lady, or obliged to get my living—and you think you had better say no more about it. You are quite right, for I should not have done it whatever you had said to me. I have a great curiosity, however, I confess, to know what it was to be."

"Please!" said Mab, "of course I know you are a lady, but it is all different; they thought you might have done—Lady

Macbeth — or something. But all that doesn't matter now."

"Lady Macbeth—or something. What other thing did their wisdom think could go beside Lady Macbeth? No, my dear Miss Pakenham, I will not do Lady Macbeth—or anything. Tell the ladies I make my courtesy down to the ground," she did so as she spoke with the greatest gravity, while Mab followed her every movement fascinated, "for their kindness and for their thought that I was good enough to exhibit myself among them. You know now that I am not good enough. I am not a decayed gentlewoman that has known better days; but don't hesitate on my account to clear your bosom of that perilous stuff. Tell it out, my dear, run home and tell it all to my lady, your mamma."

She stopped short suddenly, but as if she would have said a great deal more. Mab seemed to stop short, too, in the hot tide of her interest as the schoolmistress paused. It was as if some swift career and progress of horse or man had been drawn up and cut short in their midst. Mab's breath, which she had held in the great fever of her interest, burst from her with a kind of gasp.

She seemed to herself to have been stopped short on the edge of some precipice.

"Did you know," she said, hesitating, and thinking over every word, "my—mother —*too*?"

Mrs. Brown apparently did not expect this question. She stared at her for a moment, and then burst into an uneasy laugh and turned away.

"Sarah, Sarah," she cried, clapping her hands, "it is almost time for school; come and clear these things away."

VI

MAB went home from her visit to Mrs. Brown a very different girl from that little person who had run off from the group of her friends to ask the co-operation of the schoolmistress—which had seemed to her a very amusing mission. She had wondered much how it would be taken—with satire or with pleasure. Mrs. Brown's tongue was one which could sting, Mab knew; but a tongue is all the more amusing for that when its sting is not for one's self. Mab rather liked to hear her sending her arrows from right to left. She had thought that probably it was misfortune that caused this, and the sense which people who have seen better days are apt to entertain that it is somehow a wrong to themselves that other people should be prosperous. We are all, unfortunately, too apt to feel so. Blatant prosperity, smiling and smooth, how hard it is for the rest of us not to hate its

superior well-being, even if we do not think that it is something taken from ourselves. But that was a very different thing from the dreadful confidences which Mab had received, and which made of her, even herself, who had certainly nothing to do with Mrs. Brown's sin, a heavy-laden and burdened spirit. Little Mab, who had run down to the school-house as light as a feather—though she was not, as the reader is aware, one of your thread-paper girls—came back from it as if she had carried that pack upon her back which Christian had in the "Pilgrim's Progress." The pack belonged to Christian himself, and he had a right to bear it; but, I repeat, Mab had nothing to do with Mrs. Brown's sins. And I am not at all sure what Mab conceived these sins to be; she knew nothing about them: they were something vaguely terrible, vaguely yet frightfully guilty to her childish sense of purity and rectitude. And yet Mrs. Brown was the schoolmistress, the woman who had all the Watcham girls in her hands; and Mab alone, of all the parish, knew that she was not fit to be trusted with that charge. She walked home with the tread and the air of a woman of fifty, her soft brow lined with prodigious

scores of thought, her spiritual back bent under this burden. Mab knew, while all the parish lay in darkness. And Mab, the Rector's niece, and a district visitor, and Lady Bountiful from her cradle, had a duty to the parish which a person less bound with ties of duty might not have thought of. There was her duty to the parish, and, on the other hand, there was her duty to her penitent; for, though she had not asked to have that high office, still Mab felt that she had been adopted as the confessor of the sinner. Sinner was a better name for her than penitent, for she was not penitent; but yet she had trusted Mab. And what was the person so trusted to do?—betray it to the parish, or to any one in the parish? Oh, no, no! And yet was not that to betray the parish and its trust and confidence in herself? If you can imagine any subject more likely to score with wrinkles a brow of seventeen, such a divination is beyond my powers. Mab thought and thought, turning the question over and over in her mind with more curiosity than if she had been a philosopher in search of a new theory. What it is right to do between two conflicting duties is a question for a moralist more

than a philosopher, if there is, indeed, any difference between the two. It was a tremendous question. She did not see her friend, the General, though he took off his hat and waved it in cordial greeting as she passed his garden hedge; nor Miss Grey, who had run after her, but finally gave up the chase, unable to make Mab hear her call. Lady William was waiting, though not impatiently, for the midday meal, which was the chief repast in the cottage, when Mab reached home: her mother called out to her to make haste, for Anne in the kitchen was apt to lose her temper when her ladies were unpunctual. But Mab was too much confused to make haste. She did not come down for a quarter of an hour, until Anne was half-wild, and Patty in the highest agitation. The dinner had already been sent in which should have pacified Anne, but she was something of an artiste, in feeling at least, and could not bear her dishes to be spoiled. Mab heard her voice from the depths of the kitchen intoning comminations, and saw that Patty had tears in her eyes, though they sent out pretty sparks of satisfaction at sight of the laggard.

"Oh, Miss Mab, the soup's cold," she

ventured to say, even Patty thus raising a protest.

But Lady William was not very severe. "You little sluggish thing," she said. "What have you been doing? Patty and I have been suffering much from Anne. And I fear the soup will be quite cold."

"Oh, that's all the better," said Mab, trying to pluck up a spirit, "for it's a very warm day."

"I am glad you find it so," said Lady William, with a shiver. "May is seldom so hot in England as to make cold soup desirable. And how did the practice go off, and where have you been? for I saw Emmy and Florry go home a long time ago."

"I have been to Mrs. Brown. They wanted her to act something. She is a very funny woman. She was at her lunch, or dinner, or whatever she calls it. She gave me an apple, which she called *Pomme au sucre*, and I never tasted anything so nice."

"Oh, she is like that, is she?" said Lady William; "the woman who has seen better days."

"Yes, mother, she is like that," said Mab; even to say so much as this relieved her

mind a little, though she had no idea what was meant by the question or reply.

"And is she going to—act? To act, did you say?—that will be an odd thing for the schoolmistress to do."

"They thought—she might do Lady Macbeth—or something."

"Or something!" said Lady William, just as Mrs. Brown had done: "that will be still more odd," she added, with a laugh. "And is she going to do it, Mab? I shall see this woman, then, at last."

"No, she is not going to do it, mother. She laughed at the idea. She said, 'Lady Macbeth—or something,' just as you did. She is a very strange woman, but I don't think that you would like her."

"Probably not," said Lady William. "It is, perhaps, unkind to say it, but I am not very fond of the decayed gentlewoman in general. It would serve me right," she said, with half a smile and half a sigh, "to end like that myself."

"But how could that be?" said Mab. It was one of those questions to which there is no answer possible. Nor did she expect an answer. But it brought a little cloud over Lady William's brow. Indeed, it was

all Lady William could do to keep her face tolerably unclouded, and her conversation as cheerful as usual for Mab's sake. And this struggle on her mother's part kept Mab's unusually serious face from being noticed as it otherwise must have been. After that there were no further questions asked about Mrs. Brown, and Mab went out to her gardening and the many other occupations which filled up her time. But whatever she was doing this heavy question hung upon her mind, and she carried with her the burden that was like Christian's, yet which she had not, like him, any right to bear. Her duty to the parish was to denounce the woman who ought not, with her mysterious guiltiness, to have the training of the girls of Watcham. And her duty to her penitent was to keep everything jealously within her own breast which had been confided to her, so to speak, under the seal of confession. Mab had, as was natural, a tremendous sense of her responsibility to both, but how she was to reconcile the two was more than she could think of. She determined at last upon a compromise, which was not indeed half sufficient to meet the case, but which was the only thing she could think of. She herself,

she concluded, would for the future go constantly to the school, and thus neutralise any evil that might be produced by Mrs. Brown. She would go and watch over the girls, and see that their morals were all right, and that nothing was said or done to lead them astray. By dint of thinking it over the whole afternoon, shutting herself up alone to wrestle with it, refraining even from tea in order that her deliberations might be unbroken—this was the middle course to which Mab attained. She could not betray Mrs. Brown. That was out of the question: and it was also dreadful to think of betraying the parish, which, alas! if it knew what Mab knew, would not continue Mrs. Brown in her place for a single day; but if Mab took it upon herself—her little innocent self—to watch over the girls, to be there early and late, guarding them from every allusion, from every lesson that could hurt them—would not that make up for the silence? She would watch the children as nobody else could watch. She would have eyes like the lynx and ears like those who heard the grass growing. This was what Mab determined upon in the anxiety of her soul.

She had persuaded her mother to go to

the entertainment, though it was a dissipation to which Lady William was noways inclined. But Mab, notwithstanding the sad check that had been put upon her by the forenoon's proceedings, was very anxious about the delights of the evening, which were of a kind unusual in Watcham, where there was so very little going on. A concert was of the rarest occurrence. A little comedy had once been known to be played in the large room of the "Blue Boar" by a strolling company, and, as we are aware, there had been a dance at General FitzStephen's. But the occasions that occurred in Watcham of putting on a best cap or a flower in your hair and sallying forth in the evening without your bonnet, to meet other persons under the same beatific conditions, were so very rare that nobody wished to miss the curate's entertainment. There had been very grave and serious questions among the ladies as to the point of costume, some being of opinion that as the entertainment was primarily for the working people, it would be "better taste" on the part of the ladies and gentlemen not to go in evening dress, or at all events to shroud their glories in bonnets on one side, and great-coats on the other. This, however, had been boldly com-

bated by Mrs. Plowden, who maintained that it would be much better for "the poor things" to have the exhilarating spectacle for once in a way of ladies in their evening toilettes, and gentlemen with shirt-fronts that could be seen half a mile off. It would do them good, the Rector's wife said, to see that the best people were ready to mingle with them thus on a sort of equal terms, coming to enjoy themselves just as the boatmen did. And it was absolutely necessary that the young ladies who were to perform should be arrayed and made to look their best; it would have been very hard upon them to step down from the platform amongst a mass of bonnets, and thus be made conspicuous in the assembly even when they had finished their exertions in its behalf. I don't think that Mrs. Plowden had the least difficulty in bringing the others to her opinion, and accordingly the front seats in the schoolroom where the performance was to take place, were peopled by a small, and select, but distinguished audience, which rather overshadowed, it must be allowed, and put out the homely ranks behind, and made the curate gnash his teeth when he saw immediately in front of his presiding chair all the shining shirt-fronts

and frizzed or smooth locks, or lace-covered heads of the familiar little society of Watcham. Poor higher classes! They wanted a little amusement to the full as much, or perhaps more, than the boatmen and their wives from Riverside. And, perhaps, had they been at the back and the others in front, Mr. Osborne would not have minded. As it was, perhaps in this as in greater matters all was for the best —for General FitzStephen's high head prevented the curate from seeing how old George from the landing yawned over the quartette of the violinists from Winwick. Breeding is everything in such cases, for the General was quite as much bored as old George; yet he applauded when it was over (partly in thankfulness for that fact) as if he had never heard anything so beautiful before.

As for Mab, she was able to forget for the moment her interview with Mrs. Brown. Not only was it pleasant to be out in the evening—though only in a white frock high up to the neck, which was in reality a morning dress, but quite enough in Lady William's opinion for such an entertainment; but the excitement of feeling that she had really a part in the performance through the songs of Emmy and Florence, and the recitation of

Jim, enlivened her spirits and raised her courage. The Rectory girls sang two duets, far better in Mab's opinion than all the other performers, and she felt sure that if Florence, whose voice was so much the strongest, had but had the courage to sing alone—! But this was a suggestion that Florence had crushed at once. It was bad enough to stand up there in face of all these people with Emmy to support her: but alone!

"Don't you think it was rather silly of Florry to be so particular," whispered Mab, "when they have all known her—almost since she was born?"

"No. I don't think it was silly," said Miss Grey decisively.

"Oh! but you never think any one silly," said Mab.

"Don't I!" said Miss Grey, with a truculence which left all the swearing roughs of Riverside far behind. "I know who I think silly," said that enraged dove.

Mab's eyes ranged over all the people on the platform in astonishment, to see who could be the object of this outburst.

"Not poor Jim?" she said, faltering.

"Jim is worth a dozen of him," said Miss Grey.

There was only one face that was not friendly and bright. And that was, Mab supposed, because Mr. Osborne was so anxious that everything should go off well. Florence, the duet just over, was standing within three steps of him, with a little group about her congratulating her on her success, and the sound of the applause behind was still riotous in the room. Old George was very audibly exclaiming at the top of his gruff voice: "That's your sort now! that's somethin' as a man can understand;" while some of the Riverside lads, the people Mr. Osborne had been so anxious about, kept on clapping their big rough hands persistently, when everybody else had stopped, not daring to cry encore to the young ladies, but signifying their wishes very clearly in that way. The two girls hesitated and lingered, kept by their friends from retiring while this noisy but timid call went on, which presently was joined in by all the front benches, under the leadership of the General, who was not at all shy, and cried "encore" lustily. Mr. Osborne grew more gloomy than ever, and called imperiously for the next performers. "We must stick to the programme," he cried, "we shall never get done at this rate,"

and the Winwick amateurs came up again with their fiddles, while Emmy and Florry stole away, escaping abashed from their friends, who were discomfited too. It was then that Miss Grey said between her closed teeth, "I know who I think is silly;" as if she would have liked to crush that person in her little hand which (in a very ill-fitting glove) she clenched as she spoke. If he had been a butterfly he would have had no chance in that clenched fist of Miss Grey.

And then Jim came up smiling and delivered his "Ride," and was applauded till the roof rang, chiefly, however, because he was Jim, and there was something about racing horses in what he had read. "That's your sort," old George said again, but more doubtfully; "though I'd like to have known a little more about them horses," he added; and shortly after the entertainment came to an end. There was no doubt it had been a great success. While the common people streamed out, not sorry to be able to stretch their limbs and let loose their opinion, and indemnify themselves for having been silent so long, the audience in the front benches lingered to pay their respects and congratulations, and to assure the curate

that everything had gone off beautifully. "I hope the Riverside people enjoyed it. I am sure *I* did," said General Fitz-Stephen. Mr. Osborne looked at that gallant officer as if he would have liked to knock him down. He could not have shown a more angry and clouded face had the entertainment been a failure. "Oh, yes. I suppose it has done well enough," he said. Mab, who did not know what all this meant, but who was able to perceive that something was wrong, was fixing her wits upon this mystery, and very anxious to know what it meant, when she suddenly heard a little cry from her mother, whose eyes were fixed upon the last stragglers of the crowd going out, and who suddenly broke off in the midst of a conversation, and with every appearance of excitement suddenly rushed out after some one—Mab could not tell whom. Mab rushed after her mother full of astonishment and eager curiosity, but only to find Lady William standing outside looking vaguely round her with an anxious, bewildered look upon her face. "What is it, mother? Who is it?" Mab cried. "Do you want to speak to somebody?" "I am certain," cried Lady William, "I saw her in the crowd. She

turned round for a moment and I saw her face." "Who is it, mother? Who is it, mother?" cried Mab. But Lady William did not make any reply to her. She turned round to another who had rushed after her ("*That* Leo Swinford, of course," Mab said to herself) and put out her hand to him, as if he, and not her child, could help her. "I have seen her, I am sure I have seen her!" she cried—and she repeated in a tone of rising excitement what she had said before—"with a black veil over her head. She turned round as she went out of the door; and there was Artémise. Oh, find her for me; find her, Leo!" Lady William cried.

VII

NEXT morning, however, there came a crisis which drove all thought of anything else for the moment out of Lady William's mind.

It came in the shape of a letter laid upon her innocent breakfast-table, along with the little bunch of correspondence, very small, and very unimportant, which was all that the post generally brought to that peaceable house. Lady William had, of course, a friend or two with whom occasionally she exchanged those utterly unimportant letters which form so large a portion in the lives of some unoccupied women. It would be hard to grudge these poor ladies so innocent a pleasure, but their letters were not exciting enough to make a woman like Lady William, who felt that she had herself a great deal to do, and did not want that gentle stimulant, very impatient for the arrival of the post: and her mild correspondence waited for her

quite contentedly on both sides till she had performed various little morning duties, and was ready to sit down to breakfast. The long blue envelope, however, alarmed her a little whenever she saw it, and yet there was nothing so very alarming in it, for it was a similar envelope, directed in the same writing, as that which brought her the cheque for her quarterly allowance, which, as it happened, was now a little overdue. She lingered, however, over the letter—though it did enclose a cheque, which she took out and laid upon the table—much longer than she was wont to linger over the letters of Messrs. Fox and Round. She read it carefully over, and then she folded it up, put it in its envelope, and poured out the coffee. But before she touched her own cup, returned to the letter; took it once more from its envelope, read it all over again, and put it back once more. Mab had a little letter of her own to read, all about nothing, from a girl of her own age, so that she did not for a minute or so observe these proceedings of her mother. But she very soon did so, and divined not only from them, but from the manner in which Lady William swallowed her coffee and pushed away the

innocent rolls on the table as if they had done her some harm, that all was not as usual. When Lady William spoke, however, it was in a voice elaborately calm.

"Are you going out this morning, Mab?"

"Yes, mother—I am going——" Mab paused a moment. She had got up that morning with her mind full of the weighty determination of last night; but it seemed to her that if she said she was going to the school it might partly betray the secret which was not hers, but which lay so heavy on her soul. "I think," she went on, correcting herself, "I will run over and see how they feel at the Rectory, now it's over, about last night. And I will probably look in at the school," she added, for to have a secret from her mother was dreadful to her, "before I come back."

"If you are going to the Rectory," said Lady William, "tell your uncle James that I should like to see him, Mab."

"Yes, mother;" but Mab could not help glancing aside at the letter with an awakened interest, and wondering what Uncle James, so infrequent a visitor on ordinary occasions, could be wanted for—again.

"You are right, Mab," said her mother, "it is about business and about this letter in particular. And if you can give him my message without anybody else knowing, I shall be all the better pleased."

"Is it about—Uncle Reginald, mother?"

"About Reginald! Oh, no, you may make your mind easy. It is not about Reginald. It is," she said, with a sudden desire for sympathy, "something much more important to you and me; but I cannot tell you now," she added, remembering herself, "you will know of it all in time."

"Is it from Mr. Leo, mother?" said Mab, growing very pale, and towering over the table as she looked at her mother, with severity, yet terror, as if she had suddenly grown a foot in stature. Lady William, altogether engrossed in other thoughts, gave her a look of astonishment which was balm to Mab's soul.

"From Leo!" she said, amazed. "Why should it be from Leo? I told you," she said, with a little impatience, "that it was a letter of importance, which none of his little communications could be. Tell your uncle," she continued, falling into her usual tone, "that I have received a letter on which

I wish to consult him. Remember that I have no secrets," she said, suddenly looking up; "I don't want you to make a mystery; but if you could see him—by himself, to give him my message——"

"Oh, yes, I can do that easily," said Mab, in the relief of her mind. "I want to say something to him about Mrs. Brown."

"I must see this Mrs. Brown," said Lady William, with a smile. "She seems to have a fascination for you, Mab."

At this unexpected and most unintentional carrying of the war into her own country Mab flushed crimson, and cried quickly: "Oh, no, nothing of the sort. I don't even *like* her. She is not like any one else I ever saw."

"I must see her—one of these days," said Lady William vaguely: and then the faint smile died off her face, and she turned to contemplate the long blue letter which lay by her plate. It looked a dangerous thing among the little inoffensive white and gray envelopes. Lady William's letters were chiefly gray, written upon that ugly paper which people, and especially ladies, use out of economy, and which is one of the additional (small) miseries of life.

Mab felt much ashamed of her foolish question as she went out, but hoped her mother had forgotten, or had not attached any meaning to it. It was all the fault of the horrid people who talked—as if there was anything strange in Mr. Swinford's visits. "Where else should he go?" Mab said indignantly to herself. "To the Fitz-Stephens or the Kendalls, who are six times as old as he is? or to the Rectory, where Aunt Jane would talk to him all the time, and the girls never could get in a word? How different mother is! I don't think I have ever seen any one so nice as mother! Well, of course, she is mother, which is a great thing in her favour; but not, perhaps, in the way of society. Emmy and Florry are very fond of Aunt Jane. She is very nice and kind if you are ill, and all that; but I am sure they would rather talk a little themselves sometimes, rather than just listen to her, especially when it is Mr. Leo." This was the result of Mab's unprejudiced observation, and she was much ashamed of herself for having been moved to ask the very inappropriate question which her mother had not paid any attention to, thank heaven. Mab, as good luck would have it, met the

Rector at his own door, and conveyed her message in the most natural way in the world. "Mother would like to see you, Uncle James. Would you go into the cottage as you pass? She has got a letter."

"Oh, she has got a letter?" said the Rector.

Mab longed to say, "Not a letter from Leo Swinford, an important letter, a letter about business," but she restrained her inclination. Probably Uncle James had never thought upon that other subject. She went on quickly to the Rectory, in order to carry out her own programme which she had in a way bound herself to by announcing it to her mother. But she did not find the girls at the Rectory very anxious to talk over the events of the previous night. Mrs. Plowden, indeed, had no objection to discuss it fully; but it was in its connection with Jim that she thought of it most.

"If it had not been for Jim," Mrs. Plowden said, "Mr. Osborne might just have kept all his music and his things to himself. Oh yes, I dare say, the Fitz-Stephens, and Kendalls, and ourselves, and those people from the villas would have come; but, as for the men from Riverside,

they came for Jim, not for him. And did you hear, Mab, what a noise they made with their cheers and their clappings after Jim's piece? They thought that the gem of the whole evening. They came chiefly to hear that. As for Mr. Osborne, with his little speeches and his fiddles from Winwick——"

"Oh, mamma," cried Emmy, "the violins were a great treat. We have not heard any music like that in Watcham for ever so long."

"Well, you may say what you like about fiddles," said the Rector's wife, "but there's always something a little like a village fair in them to me. And the poor people were bored beyond anything. They liked your songs, girls, and wanted to encore them if Mr. Osborne would have allowed it; and they liked that piano bit, with the tunes from the *Pinafore*. They understood that, and so do I, I allow; but what do they care for a classical quartette? I don't myself, and I know more about music than they can be supposed to do. But a fine, stirring thing like Jim's 'Ride to Aix'——"

"It was Mr. Browning's 'Ride to Aix,' mamma."

"As if I did not know that! But, all

the same, it was Jim's ride to me. Don't you think he did it great justice, Mab? I never heard it come off so well. The people were so attentive. That and the duets were certainly the success of the evening; and what it would have been without them I can't tell."

"It would have been much more satisfactory without them, mamma," cried Florry, half turning a shadowed countenance towards her mother. "Mr. Osborne did not want mere amusement for the people—he wanted them to take pledges, and turn from drinking. That was his object, don't you know—and a far better object than hearing two poor little country birds like Emmy and me sing. And I approve of it," said Florence a little loudly, as if she would have liked all the world to hear.

Mrs. Plowden looked at Mab and shrugged her shoulders behind her daughter. "I can't think what has come over Florry," she said. "She has grown so domineering of late—I dare not say a word."

What Mab thought was that poor Florry looked dark, and pale, and out of heart—she seemed to be losing her good looks and her merry ways. It was rare, very rare, when

she put forth any of her old arts of mimicry which the elders laughed yet pretended to frown at, and which all the young ones delighted in; but I will not have it supposed that Mab was so precocious as to divine what was the matter with Florence—for this, to tell the truth, never came into her unconscious thoughts.

The Rector hurried along to see his sister after he had received Mab's message. He was anxious and disturbed about the state of affairs, and very desirous to find some way of setting his poor Emily straight, and making her independent, as she would be gloriously, did this great fortune come to Mab. If, perhaps, he was at the same time not quite sorry that she had been brought to see she was not so able to do everything for herself as she supposed, and had it proved to her in the most effectual way that to have respectable relatives to fall back upon was the greatest blessing a woman could have, it was no more than natural: and certainly above all, his desire was to be able to help her, and "pull her through:" but it would be uphill work he felt, and require all the efforts that he himself could make. His brow was full of care when he went into the room in which she sat

expecting him; not, indeed, looking so serious as he did, but, still, with work enough for all her thoughts.

"Well?" he said, as he drew a chair opposite to her, and sat down on the other side of the table at which she sat at her work. He bent forward across this little table, fixing upon her a look of such solemnity that Lady William's first impulse (though, heaven knows, she was not in a merry mood) was to laugh at his portentous looks, which would have been very inappropriate and improper, and would have shocked Mr. Plowden more than words could say. As she checked herself in this impulse there burst from her instead something which was half a sob and half also a chuckle: but he took it as a sob, which was much the best.

"My dear," he said, "my dear!" putting his hand upon hers, "it can't be so bad as that you should cry about it. We will stick to you, whatever happens. Come, Emily, take heart, take heart!"

"I am not losing heart," she said. "I have expected it, you know. It is a distinct demand for my certificates. And now the moment is come when I must decide what to do."

"Is this the letter?" he said. It was lying on the table between them, and Mr. Plowden took it up and read it over with great care, making little comments of distress with his tongue against his palate, "Tchich, tchuch," as he did so. Lady William went on with her work, raising her eyes to him from time to time as he read. His arrival and his tragic looks had amused her for the moment, but those distressful, inarticulate remarks acted after a while on her imagination and nerves.

"You think it a very bad business, James? How I wish," she said, "that John, who never was a friend of mine, could have lived for ever, or carried his dirty money with him to the grave!"

"I don't think that is a very Christian wish, Emily."

"What, to wish him alive and in enjoyment of all he ever possessed?"

"Oh, well, perhaps that is one way of looking at it," said the Rector, "but, my dear, the noble family to which in fact you belong——"

"And which show their belief in me so nobly," said Lady William, this time permitting herself to laugh.

"The noble family to which you belong," repeated Mr. Plowden with a little irritation, "will be very much benefited by this money. That nice young Lord Will as good as said so: and your own daughter, Emily, if all goes well, and we are able to establish your rights——"

"If!——" she cried, with a flash of her eyes which seemed for the moment to set the room aflame.

"You know what I mean. I at least have no doubt what your rights are: the question now is what is the best thing to do."

"Yes," said Lady William, "we are in front of something definite at last. I have done little but think about it, as you may suppose, ever since you brought me that crushing news: and it seems to me that there are several ways that are open to us: the first——"

"Emily," said the Rector, "by far the best, and first step to take, in my opinion, is to consult Perowne—which we should have done long ago."

"What could Mr. Perowne do? He could not rebuild the chapel and restore the books and bring back poor Mr. Gepps to life

again. He might put my answer into formal words, but that is quite unnecessary. I have not the least inclination to consult Mr. Perowne——"

"Still, he must know how such things are managed better than we can do," murmured the Rector.

"Such things—what things? You speak as if this was a common case."

"No, no, Emily, no, no——"

"When it is, perhaps, such a case as never occurred before," she said. "I can answer these men formally to their questions, but to him I should have to go into the whole matter, explaining everything from the first step to the last. No, I will not ask Mr. Perowne for his opinion," she said. Her countenance, naturally so soft in colour, was suffused with a sudden flush. "Anything but that," she repeated, in almost an angry tone.

It is so difficult to be purely business-like in matters where men and women are concerned. Mr. Perowne, the "man of business" employed by the old Rector of Watcham, the father of Emily Plowden—had taken upon him to admire that young lady, and to make certain overtures which were

not received graciously in the days that were gone. Lady William would rather have died than disclose all the circumstances of her marriage, as well as the possible doubt that might be thrown upon it, to her former lover. It was no figure of speech to say this; she would rather have died. But to her brother it all seemed very foolish, and to show an arrogant confidence in her own judgment which he did not share.

"Well," he said, "of course, it is your own business, and I cannot interfere with you, Emily: but that lawyer should meet lawyer is surely a much better way than that you should think you could encounter Messrs. Fox and Round — who are, of course, experienced in all sorts of villainy—in your own strength."

"It is a mere simple statement of fact that has to be made to them," she said. "I will write and say I have no certificates, but that one person is still alive who was present at my marriage if she can be found: and that my father——"

"For goodness' sake!" cried the Rector. "What, what do you mean—you are going to show your hand at once to these men, and let them see that you have no proof at all?"

"My father's diary is the best of evidence," she said. "The law is not such a bugbear as you make it out to be. There must be some sense and justice in it: my father's word, a clergyman, and a man of honour——"

"They may say it is a got-up thing, and what so easy as for me to write that entry in an old book? I write very like my father."

"What folly, James! You! as little likely to cheat as my father, a clergyman, and a man of honour too!"

"We might say," said the Rector, "for I have been thinking it over too, my dear Emily—that you were married at St. Alban's Proprietary Chapel, Backwood Street, Marylebone, on such a day and year, by the incumbent, the Reverend T. I. Gepps: and leave it to them to get a copy of the register for themselves—if they can," he added grimly. "The books, of course, ought to have been saved, and perhaps some of them may be. It is their business to find all that out."

This specious suggestion staggered Lady William for the moment. "But when they find out that the church is burnt, the book destroyed, and the clergyman dead—which

is a catastrophe almost too complete for the theatre—they may think we have chosen the place on that account, and that we mean fraud and nothing else."

"I," cried the Rector, "meaning fraud—and you! It would be just as easy to suppose that I had forged the entry in my father's diary. I hope we are two honourable people."

Lady William shook her head.

"I hope so too: but I could not send them on such a wild-goose chase, which would certainly harm us in the end, without letting them know the truth."

"Oh, the truth," cried the Rector. "Isn't it all the truth, both one thing and the other? The truth is all very well and can't be altered were you to harp upon it for ever: but what they want and what we want is the proof."

VIII

Leo Swinford had been during all these proceedings haunted with a sense of a visitor about the house, whose comings and goings were kept secret from him. Those who were concerned were much too clever to permit this to be known or suspected by the risks of absolute meeting, by sudden withdrawal into corners, whisking past of clandestine shadows in the dark. It was not that he ever met Mrs. Brown on the stairs or in the hall, or just missed meeting her, as is generally the case under such circumstances. She had, as has been said, an entrance kept for herself, which opened upon the back part of the house, where there was a thick shrubbery, and where it would have been as impossible to find a fugitive in the dark as to find the proverbial needle in a bottle of hay. And Artémise was far too deeply learned in all the lore of evasion to be caught

within the house. Nevertheless, he was well aware that the place was haunted by a personality very, perhaps unjustly, disagreeable to him, and with which he associated all those vague suspicions and troubles which haunt the mind of a child brought up among family secrets and discoveries. He had been accustomed all his life to this uncomfortable sense of some one about who was not seen, who had presumably unacknowledged errands of mischief-making, and whose presence, whose very existence was inimical to family peace. That Leo's thoughts went a great deal too far, and that this curious secret agent and confidante exercised, in fact, no evil influence, but had in many cases held the side of honour and justice, was a fact that Leo was not only quite unaware of, but totally incapable of believing in. It had always been, indeed, a sort of consolation when there was anything equivocal in Mrs. Swinford's proceedings, to be able to think that it was not his mother who was to blame, but that wretched Artémise. Leo's father, so long as he lived, had laid that flattering unction to his soul, and during his lifetime the appearance of Artémise had always been the occasion of

domestic trouble. It was natural that Leo in his youth should have had no such right or reason to object or interfere; and he had not even been of his father's faction in the house until that father was dead, and a natural compunction towards a man not happy in his life nor lamented in his death, awoke his sense of reason, and of right and wrong in this matter. But he had always had an instinctive dislike to Artémise. She had teased and sneered at him as a child, which is a recollection seldom altogether forgotten, and she was his mother's evil genius in life—or so it gave him a certain relief to believe.

The commission given him by Lady William to find this woman, so strange and incomprehensible a commission, and which was not explained in any way, roused all the indefinite feelings of disgust, and a kind of despair which had filled his mind from the moment of her reappearance (after a long interval, in which he had been of opinion that she was permanently shaken off) in the house. He had expressed to his mother so distinctly his objection to her presence, that it was difficult for him to reopen the subject, and still more difficult to suggest, as he was tempted to do, that since Mrs. Swinford

could not live without her, it would be better on the whole that she should come to live in the house than haunt it clandestinely. Difficult, however, as these overtures were, he felt the necessity of making them, as soon as he understood that the finding of Artémise was necessary to his friend. What would not he have done to serve her, to please her? The laugh with which she had turned off his offer of service, the suggestion that such offers belonged to the regions of fairy tales, had scarcely been necessary to show Leo how futile, so far as she was concerned, was his devotion. But this conviction rarely puts an end to devotion, and it must be said that as there is fashion in all things, it was not disagreeable to Leo's fashion of man to entertain a devotion of this kind, however hopeless, for an older woman, whom it was, in the nature of things, impossible that he could ever marry. In the nature of things as seen by her, that is to say, and which he clearly divined. His double breeding as Frenchman and Englishman did him service in this complication of fate. As an Englishman he was aware that such relationships as are possible to a Frenchman's ideal, without apparently injuring it in his standard of

honour, were here as impossible as that the sky should fall: while as Frenchman he was not so determined on that strong step of marriage which seems the foregone conclusion of love in an Englishman's eyes. He was willing to be utterly devoted to this lady of dreams who was not for him, and to ask no more, seeing that more could not be—but that her wishes should be obeyed and her commissions executed at whatever cost, was the thing most certain to his mind.

"Mother," he said, on the first occasion when he had the possibility of an interview, for Mrs. Swinford, after the little controversy over Lord Will, had exercised her usual caprice, appearing only when she pleased at the common table, and "was not well enough" to receive even her own son in her boudoir, "you have, I think, a very frequent visitor."

"I—have very frequent visitors! Where do I find them? I should be glad if you would tell me, Leo."

"I have no desire to be disagreeable, mother—you have Artémise."

"Ah, Artémise! Yes, fate for once has been a little favourable to me. To keep me from dying of England, and your village, and all the exciting circumstances of my life.

I have Artémise—that is occasionally. You know that I am not permitted to have her here."

"Mother!" he said; then subduing himself, "You are very much attached to this woman, who has never done anything but harm, so far as I know."

"Well," said Mrs. Swinford, "and what then? Is it not permitted to me to love as well as to hate? Artémise is the nearest to me in blood of any one in the world."

"You forget your son, it appears."

"My son—ah, that is a different matter. Sons have a way of being in opposition to their mothers. Besides, isn't there a high authority which says that a mother is no relation, so to speak—an accident? It is so in English law."

"English law has little to do with you and me, or any law. Mother, if you prefer this Artémise to every one, why have her pay you visits clandestinely like——"

"Like a lover!" she said, with her tinkling laugh. "Well, say she is my lover and I like it; have it so."

"Such a simile is insulting," he said. "I resent for you that you should even yourself say it."

"Ah, but I do not resent; I like the simile. The thing itself might not be so impossible. But you are a Puritan, Leo, like your father. I have tried to prevent it, but one cannot stop the course of nature. Fortunately, my own constitution is not so."

He rose in impatience, as was generally the result of these conversations, and paced the long dining-room from end to end. Then he returned to where she sat with her back to the fire, which she still insisted on, though it was now May. He stood half behind her, leaning on the mantelpiece. It was better, perhaps, than being face to face.

"What I mean," he said, "is, that if your comfort so depends upon this woman —whom I don't pretend to like, as you know; but that does not matter: if your comfort depends upon her, mother, or if she is some pleasure to you, it would certainly be better to have her here, living with you, than skulking to and fro like a——"

"Lover!" she said again, with a laugh to madden him. Then she turned round upon him, as he stood with his head bent regarding the glow of the fire. "I don't say that you've made your offer an insult,

Leo, which would be the truth—but what is the cause of such a change? You have a motive. Ah! I think I see it!"

He looked up with a more profoundly clouded brow than had ever been seen in Leo before.

"What do you see?" he said.

She laughed again. Any one who has ever listened to the dreadful endless tinkling of an electric bell at a foreign railway station will understand how Mrs. Swinford laughed, and how it affected the nerves of those who listened.

"Ah! I think I see!" she repeated.

Perhaps it was because he was used to these *agaceries* that he bore it so well. What tempests of impatience were in his heart! He did not move. He remained as still as if he had been made in bronze, leaning against the mantelpiece till the laugh ceased. Then he said coldly:

"I have expressed myself willing to give up what may be my own prejudice on your account, mother. I think it would be more dignified, more fit and becoming for you that your visitor did not come by stealth. What motive you credit me with I can't tell. If you do not think fit to adopt my sug-

gestion, so be it; but at least let her come openly, not by stealth."

The tinkling began again with that supreme power of exasperation, and she said amid her laughing, every word coming tinkling out:

"That you may have her at hand and within reach when she is wanted, eh? I divine you, my Leo. What is becoming for the mother who is so little capable of understanding that for herself, is a beautiful pretext—what is convenient for some one else——"

"Who is the person," he said, suddenly lifting his eyes, "to whom it will be so convenient to know where this woman is?" He did not shrink or show any consciousness as he thus carried the war into the enemy's country. Leo, after all, was a man of the world, and his mother's son.

"Ah!" she cried, stopped in her laugh, which was always a gain. "I congratulate you, my son, upon your *aplomb*. But don't you know you take away all grace from your offer, if there were any in it, when you say *this woman*? How dare you speak of your mother's dear friend and relation as *this woman*? It is an affront I will not bear."

"Mother, this is a subterfuge," said Leo indignantly.

"And is not your proposal a subterfuge? Understand that I will manage things in my own way, Leo. Artémise shall come to me how she and I please. She shall stay with me if I wish it, and she consents to it, as would have been the case whatever you had felt on the subject. I am not here, you understand, as your housekeeper," she laughed scornfully, "or your dependent; I am, while I am here, the mistress of the house: and shall invite whom I please. If you think your order to shut her out affected me, any more than your order to admit her does now—I think we have said enough on this subject. You can give me your arm upstairs."

She held out her arm, imperiously rising from the table, and Leo obeyed. They presented a group full of natural grace, as he led her carefully upstairs, subduing his steps to hers. She, wonderful in all her laces and draperies, a *marquise*, a lady of the old *régime*, exacting every sign of devotion; he, not made of velvet or brocade, as her cavalier ought to have been, but in the spare and reserved costume of modern days, with a

manner very grave, very self-controlled, full of care, and attention, and duty. There was nothing in it of that pretty gallantry, so charming from a son to a mother, of which Leo for years of his life had been an example, but a serious care of guidance and protection, which was as different as night from day. They went upstairs thus, she leaning all her weight upon him, he careful above measure to keep her foot from stumbling even upon her own too ample skirts. When he had placed her in her favourite chair, and seen that she had everything she liked near her, he stood gravely by her side.

"Is this your last word, mother?" he said.

"It is quite my last word. Should Artémise come here, I shall expect you to be civil to her. Should she not come, you will be careful to let her alone."

"I must act in that matter according to my own judgment," he said.

He could hear the tinkle of the laugh as he went away. That laugh!—it had been compared to silver bells *dans les temps*. It was not that now, but an electric jar or vibration that got on the nerves. Mrs. Swinford's son did not think of this, or feel

any pity for the woman who had descended thus from the poetic state of compliment and adulation. Sons, perhaps, rarely consider that downfall with any sympathy. And Leo was too angry to make any sentiment possible for the moment. He was all the more angry because of his own undisclosed motive, which his mother had been so quick to discover. Had he been quite single-minded, desiring only his mother's comfort and honour, things might perhaps have gone better; but he was not single-minded. And now the question was, not how to justify his mother, but to discover for Lady William the woman she wanted—to secure her, wherever she was, and whatever might be the motive for which she was sought. He did not very clearly know what that was, nor was he sure as to the previous connection of Artémise with Lady William's history. But his mother's revelations to Lord Will had helped the vague recollections in his own mind, and he divined something of her possible importance — importance most probably (he thought) more fancied than real, for it would be in the nature of a woman to give weight to a personal witness of the marriage, above all papers and records. Importance or not,

however, real or fancied as might be the need of her, it was enough that Lady William wanted her to make Leo's action certain. She must be found, he said to himself, as he went downstairs.

He questioned Morris that evening carelessly: "Do you remember a lady, Morris, who came here one evening in the dusk? A lady—who insisted on disturbing Mrs. Swinford. Don't you remember? And by dint of insisting, was allowed to go in?"

"Remember 'er, sir!" said Morris, with much emphasis. "I should just think I did—as well as I remember my own name."

"She has never," said Leo, carelessly aiming at a ball on the billiard table, "been here again?"

He spoke in so artificially careless a tone to convey no suspicion of any special meaning in the question, that Morris would not have been a man and a butler had he not been put upon the alert.

"Oh, 'asn't she, sir!" said Morris. "I should say, sir, as she's here most days, is that lady; as if the house was her own——"

"I have never seen her," said Leo, with

as natural an expression of surprise as he could put on.

"No more haven't I," said Morris. "Never; and how she gets in and goes out is more nor I can say; but she's favoured, sir, of course, in the 'igher suckles; that we know."

"Morris, my man," said Leo briskly, "you forget yourself, I think. I asked you if a lady, who is a friend of my mother's, had been here again: and you take it upon you to talk of how she comes into the house without attracting your intelligent attention, which was not the question at all."

"I 'umbly beg your pardon, sir," said Morris; and here the conversation stayed. Leo felt that he had done as much as in the meantime it was possible to do. His own faculties alone must arrange the rest. Those faculties, thoroughly awakened and put to the sharpest usage that was in them, were, however, of but little use to Leo for a day or two. There could be no doubt, he felt sure, that Artémise was continually in the house. But it was impossible for him to storm his mother's apartments in search of her, and equally impossible to show himself to a keen-eyed houseful of servants as in waiting to trap

her near his mother's door. The situation was one of the utmost difficulty, and demanded extreme caution, and the only result he attained after twenty-four hours' sustained observation was that it was possible from Mrs. Swinford's rooms to reach, without going near the formal entrance, a servants' door, apparently little used, and which opened at an unfrequented angle of the house, quite apart from the noisy and populous kitchen entrance. He had made up his mind to post himself in the shrubbery close to this door at the hour of dinner, when his mother would imagine him to be occupied with his meal. She had sent down word that she herself was not coming to dinner, and the opportunity seemed propitious. Leo was pondering upon this resolution, and how to carry it out, as he returned from the village, where Lady William had told him that the need for finding Artémise was greater than ever. It was a hazy, rainy evening, not dark, but growing towards dusk, as he walked home soberly under his umbrella, full of this intention. And he had just passed the glimmer of the lake, all dimpled with the circlets of the falling rain, when a movement in the shrubbery behind caught his eye. The bushes

were thick there, a heavy *bosquet* of all the flowering shrubs that make spring delicious, a thicket of lilac and syringa, which extended along the further side of the pretty piece of water. Leo scarcely paused to think, but, putting down his umbrella, and pulling himself together, started at full speed for the house to intercept the visitor who, on whatsoever errand, was making her way towards the back entrance: probably only a servant using the legitimate way. He was not near enough, nor was there light enough to make out absolutely who it was, or, indeed, more than that the figure was that of a woman, covered from head to foot with one of the shapeless garments, ulster or waterproof, which are the habitual wear of a humble class of the community. He managed so well that he reached the neighbourhood of the house sooner than this gliding figure, who was more a movement than a being, and whom, in a less excited state of his nerves, he would probably not have noticed at all. He made for the little entrance which he had discovered and arrived there before her. Would he be convicted of spying by the astonished eyes of some innocent maidservant? Or would he——? What was that? Certainly the movement

had been there for a moment in the bushes, and there had been a pause—a pause was it of consternation to see him on the watch? A moment after, he perceived that the almost imperceptible quiver of the pale lilac, washed almost white with the rain, had gone further off; the visitor had retreated. He hurried along in the track, his heart beating. Certainly it was retreating. Down again along the edge of the little lake he followed, cautious, tracking the faint swaying in the branches. If the evening had not been perfectly still, he could not have noted any progress at all, the path of the fugitive was so judiciously chosen. Then he gave almost a shout of satisfaction; skirting among the bushes became no longer practicable, and, trusting to the dark and the rain, an indistinct form suddenly appeared in the open, moving like a shadow, but with great speed, over the grass. He uttered a cry, almost without knowing it, and launched himself forth in pursuit.

IX

He had almost stumbled in his haste and perplexity upon another figure all cloaked in waterproof and sheltered under an umbrella near the Rectory gate. By this time it was quite dark, and the rain, small and soft but persistent, had increased so much as to be almost blinding. A faint exclamation —"Oh, Mr. Swinford!"—greeted him as he was passing.

"Miss Plowden," he said, "I beg your pardon," and then he added, breathlessly, "I am running after a lady—don't laugh—an old friend of whom I had a sudden glimpse. I have pursued her all the way from the lake, and thought I had kept her well in sight, but at last I have lost the track. Have you met any one? Excuse me for keeping you in the rain."

"A lady?" said Emmy. "No, I have seen no one—that is, no one that is not well

known in Watcham. I suppose it was a stranger?"

"How can I tell?" said Leo in his perplexity; "a slight woman, exceedingly swift and energetic—witness, I have not been able to make up with her all this way—in a cloak—impermeable—what do you call it?—like what you wear."

"In a waterproof!" said Emmy. "No one has passed me but the schoolmistress. It could not be the schoolmistress?"

The idea was so ludicrous to Leo that he burst into a laugh in the midst of his wretchedness and perplexity.

"That does not seem likely," he said.

"No one else has passed," said Emmy; "but there are some lanes, if the lady had wanted a short cut to the station, for instance."

"That is exactly what I should expect."

"Then if you will turn down to the right the first opening you come to, and afterwards to the left, and then—— The quickest way," she said suddenly, with a blush and a laugh, "would be to show you; for I fear I am not clever enough to describe it."

"Not in this rain?"

"Oh, I don't care for the rain. We are out

in all weathers; it will not take ten minutes." She had already turned and was hastening on in the direction she had indicated with a friendly desire to serve him, at which Leo admired and wondered. "Besides, I don't call this bad rain," said Emmy cheerfully, "it is so soft and warm. But for habit I should prefer to have no umbrella. But you, perhaps, would like a share of mine?"

"Thanks, it would do me no good and hamper you. I am as wet as I can be."

"Yes, you are very wet I see. Well, there is one good thing, you cannot be any worse now, and you must change as soon as you get in. When one is only a little wet one does not see the need, but when it is as bad as that you must. This way: I am afraid it is a little dirty, Mr. Swinford," said Emmy, with a tone of apology, as if it were somehow her fault.

"It is not very clean," he said, with a laugh, "but it is worse for you than for me. I have an object, but you have none, save kindness," he added, with a grateful look that pleased Emmy.

"If it were kindness," she said, "that is the best object of all. But I can't claim

that, for it is a pleasure to help a—friend if one can, in such a very little thing."

"You hesitated, Miss Plowden, before you said a friend."

"Yes," she said, with the faint little laugh of embarrassment, "I was not sure that I knew you enough to use that name."

"I hope," cried Leo, "you will never doubt that again after all the rain and mud you have faced to help me."

"Oh," said Emmy, "I would do as much for any one—if I had never seen them before: I should be a poor creature indeed if I took credit for this. Is that your lady, Mr. Swinford, running down the lane to the station? I am afraid she will be late for her train. Run on, please—never mind me—I'll follow and see if you find her, though," she called after him cheerfully.

It was the pleasantest little excitement to Emmy, even had it not been Leo Swinford about whom she had once entertained so many romantic dreams. These dreams had faded away in the most wonderful manner in the light of reality—though they still kept a little atmosphere of romance about him. But it was perfectly true that she would have done this little service for

any one, and would have felt the exhilaration of a small adventure in doing it, and the same curiosity to see how it ended. She went on accordingly smiling under her umbrella: her hair was touched here and there by the raindrops, and shone in the light of the lamps, and her walk and the little excitement had given her a pretty colour. All the likeness to Lady William, of which Emmy was so proud, came out in the pleasant commotion in which she stood on the opposite side of the platform to look if Mr. Swinford had found his friend. But his friend, as the reader knows, was not bound for the station, and was, indeed, at that moment secure in the last place in the world where he was likely to look for her, shaking the rain from her cloak, and changing her shoes with the sensation of warmth and comfort which dry garments give after a drenching. Mrs. Brown had on the whole rather enjoyed the stern-chase, in which she felt herself quite safe: for she knew that she could elude her pursuer one way or the other—either by allowing him to overtake her, in which case she was confident that her own wits were quite equal to any encounter with Leo—or by vanishing into

some side way by which she could gain her school-house—the last place where he would seek her. Artémise was quite invigorated by the incident, which kept up, perhaps, an interest which was slightly flagging in her continued visits to Mrs. Swinford. If she were to be pursued every time, it would give to these visits a wonderful zest.

Leo came across the railway with a sensation of pleasure, for which he was quite unprepared, to give his guide the information that he had failed in his search. Emmy had always been pensive and stony when he had seen her before, a pale resemblance, like a half-faded photograph, of her aunt. Now her bright interest and readiness to listen and sympathise warmed him almost as much as the dry shoes which Artémise was luxuriously putting on by her little kitchen fire.

"No," he said, "she is not there. Perhaps she felt that I was likely to go to the railway, and so avoided me—to take, perhaps, a later train."

"Oh," said Emmy, "did she want then *not* to be found?"

There was a slight unconscious tone

of suspicion in this which was very flattering to the young man.

"She wanted to avoid me—yes," said Leo. "She knows that I don't love to have her in my house. She is an old friend," he added, "I am not sure what—but a sort of relation of my mother."

"Oh," said Emmy.

This very English exclamation, which is so often laughed at, has, according to the intention—or sometimes contrary to the intention—of the speaker, a wonderful deal of meaning in it. In the present case it meant surprise, mingled with a sort of disapproval, and almost reproof. An old friend, a relation, and yet you don't like to have her in your house! This was all expressed in Emmy's tone. She would not —I need scarcely say—have put such a sentiment in words for the world, and had not the least intention of expressing it even in her astonished "Oh!"

"You think that strange?" said Leo.

"Oh—no," said Emmy, hesitating slightly. "I—don't know any of the circumstances," she added hastily, with a sudden blush. "Please, don't think for a moment, if I knew them all, that I would set up myself for a judge."

"Why not?" he said. "You are as well qualified to judge as any one I know; and even your surprise throws a little new light for me on the situation. It is always good to see a thing through another pair of eyes. However, what I want to find this lady for, is to prevent a wrong thing being done—which she could set right, but I fear does not want to set right. So I must find her."

"Certainly in that case——" said Emmy. She added, "I wonder if I could help you—if there was any place here where you think she might have gone!"

"She may, perhaps," said Leo, with a laugh, "have doubled like a hare, and got safely into my mother's room after all, while I have been hunting her here."

"Into—your——!" Emmy was so bewildered that she could not keep in these astonished words, which were out of her mouth before she felt that here was some complicated matter with which she had no right to interfere. "Oh, never mind," she cried, "never mind! I did not mean to be so impertinent as to make any remark."

"Well," said Leo, "perhaps I did not mean to say so much: but I must tell you now, Miss Plowden——"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, please," said Emmy in distress.

"That my mother and I don't look on the matter in the same light. She takes one view, I another. We need not enter into the question, but that is the fact. It is permitted to a man to differ with his mother in judgment when he is as old as I am."

"One cannot help it sometimes," said Emmy, in a low tone, with a slight bowing of her head. "It is very painful, but I suppose God never meant that we were not to exercise the faculties He has given us. We may keep the commandment all the same. It says 'honour.' It does not say always agree. The Bible is always so reasonable, don't you think?"

"Oh! I don't know that I have very much considered that question, Miss Plowden."

"Never anything excessive that would be a burden," said Emmy, with the grave simplicity of assurance. "Perhaps if you could give me any indication, Mr. Swinford, I might think of a place to look for her, being on the spot, and knowing all the people."

"Indeed you must go in at once out of

the rain—with my most grateful thanks for what you have done."

"To be sure," said Emmy, "no lady would be likely to stay out in such a wet night—but there are two or three people who keep lodgings in Watcham where I could inquire for you—or I could go to the early train and see if she goes by that. But you must describe her—what she looks like, and what I should say——"

"And you would really take all this trouble for me?"

"Oh, for any one!" cried Emmy. Then she laughed, and added: "That does not sound very civil. Of course I should do everything I could—a great deal more—for you, who are a—friend. But I mean I would do that much—or any of us would do it—for any one. You know my father is the Rector. It is in a kind of way our business to be of any use we can — especially," she added, "when it is a question of right and wrong."

"You are too good," said Leo. "You are too systematically good. I don't want to be helped merely because I am a fellow-creature, which I fear is what it comes to. I should like—very much—to be helped—because it was me——"

"And it would be because it was you," said Emmy. These words were far more pleasant to hear, on both sides, than it is to be feared they were intended to be—but they were even upon Leo's part perfectly sincere. He wanted to be more than merely any one, to be helped and served for his own sake, and perhaps it did not occur to him that to an unsophisticated girl like Emmy (of whose romance, to be sure, he was profoundly ignorant) such words as those meant more than they did to him.

"You are very wet," she said suddenly; "will you come into the Rectory and get dried? Perhaps you could wear some of Jim's things. You ought not to be so long in your damp clothes."

This motherly solicitude amused Leo much, and, to tell the truth, he began to forget the annoyance of his unsuccessful quest and to feel very uncomfortable in his wetness, and disposed towards a little light and warmth. He hesitated for a moment. "It would be wise to go home at once," he said, "and change my wet things there."

"Oh!" said Emmy, who had indeed expected no favourable answer to her invitation, "I am sure mamma would be very

sorry if you went away that long walk without resting. She would ask you to share our dinner and go home in the fly—for it means to rain on, I am sure, all night."

"Do you think Mrs. Plowden would be so very good?" Leo said.

I do not deny that dreadful questions ran through Emmy's mind about the dinner. She did not know in the first place what it was, for Mrs. Plowden was severely determined on the point of retaining the housekeeping in her own hands: nor was she quite sure that she would escape a lecture for bringing him in upon them like this without notice, a man accustomed to a French cook. But Leo was town-bred —Paris-bred, and not accustomed to long expeditions in all weathers, and it was clear that he was beginning to shiver in the persistent though softly falling rain.

"I am quite sure mamma would never forgive me if I let you pass the door," she said, leading him in through the damp garden, where already the rain began to form little pools.

Emmy felt no cold as she went in by the side door, which was always on the latch, leading her captive. Her cheeks had

never glowed with such a rosy colour; her eyes had never shone so like two stars. She slid off her cloak in the passage, and stood dry and trim underneath in her little grey dress as if she had come straight from her toilette. When she pushed open the drawing-room door the light flashed about her in a sudden warm dazzle, shining in her eyes, and in those raindrops that were like pearls in her hair.

"Mamma," said Emmy, in a voice that had never before sounded so soft, "I have made Mr. Swinford come in with me, he is so wet; and I have told him you will make him stay to dinner; and that he must put on some of Jim's clothes."

"Which will be much too long for me," said Leo; "but if you will really be so charitable as Miss Plowden says——"

What a sudden sensation it made in the drawing-room! Mrs. Plowden sent Florence upstairs flying, to put a match to the fire in Jim's room.

"It is all laid ready; it is no trouble," she explained breathlessly; "but Florry will do it so much quicker than ringing the bell. And Emmy, call Jim—he is in the study with your papa—to get everything

comfortable for Mr. Swinford. You are wet indeed. I will not even keep you downstairs to give you some tea."

"Perhaps," said Emmy modestly, "a little wine or something, mamma, to keep him from catching cold——"

"And what do you take to keep you from catching cold?" he said. "Am I supposed to be more delicate than you?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Plowden, sending Emmy off with a look, "they are used to it; they are accustomed to our climate. How glad I am you came! This is the way, Mr. Swinford; let me show you the way. You must excuse me if I don't take you to one of the best rooms, but only to Jim's, which will be the most homely; for I think comfort is the thing to think of when one is wet and cold. Oh, here you are, Jim. I will just go with you to see that the fire is burning—and you must get out dry things to make Mr. Swinford comfortable. Have you lighted the candles, Florry? And is the fire burning up? Oh, well, then I will leave you with Jim."

Thus the whole family ministered to Leo, who, half-horrified, half-amused to see the two girls sent flying in different directions

for his comfort, and Jim much puzzled and flurried, extracted from the dreadful depths of the study—submitted himself to these attentions with the best grace in the world. If he had fathomed Jim's dreadful perplexity as to whether he should offer the brand-new coat which he had got for the FitzStephens' ball, or his old one, which he believed in his heart would be a better fit, he could not have spoken more wisely than he did on this subject.

"Give me an old coat," he said, "one you had before you had grown so big. You are a head taller than I am."

The whole house was stirred by this unexpected visitor. Mrs. Plowden downstairs was eager in her questions to Emmy.

"Where did you meet him? What made you think of asking him? What a good thing that we have such a nice dinner—really too nice a dinner to eat by ourselves to-day. I said so to cook this morning. Those beautiful chickens Mrs. Barndon sent us, and a piece of salmon, and—— Really, a dinner for a dinner-party. What a very lucky thing it was to-day!"

Even the Rector came forth from his

study to hear what the commotion was about.

"Emmy brought in Mr. Swinford to change his wet clothes and dine."

"*Emmy* brought him in? Why, you must be dreaming, Jane!"

"And why shouldn't Emmy bring him in?" cried Mrs. Plowden, triumphant; "indeed, what could she do else on such a wet night?"

Thus, instead of dining mournfully alone, with Morris behind his chair, in the great dark dining-room with the mock marble pillars, Leo sat down with the cheerful Rectory party around the severe but shabby mahogany, upon a chair covered with horsehair, to a dinner cooked by a plain cook. He was more amused than words could say, and delighted with the new scene, the kind people, and, above all, the contrast of the family party with his solitude, and the *bourgeois* comfort with his own elegant and fastidious fare. The chickens, carved anxiously by Mrs. Plowden with "Just another little piece of the breast," in addition to the well-developed wing, were so good, and everything was so warm and bright, so honest and simple, that his amusement soon

grew into pleasure. What a contrast! He told them even his story with judicious elisions.

"I cannot think how I lost her," he said, "even if she did not want me to find her: and where she disappeared I cannot tell."

"I came all through the village," Emmy explained, to add to the tale, "and no one creature passed me but Mrs. Brown, the schoolmistress, flying along in a great hurry to get out of the rain."

Jim looked up at these words with a little start, but took care not to say anything, as may well be believed.

"Perhaps," said Leo, with a laugh, "it might be Mrs. Brown, the schoolmistress, whom I was pursuing all the time. She might be paying an innocent visit to some friend in the servants' hall. In which case she will think me a dangerous madman, and I owe her an apology."

"Oh, she's not one of that sort!" cried Jim. He said it under his breath, and fortunately nobody heard him but Florence, who gave him a look of inquiry, but no more.

"So I might have saved myself the trouble—and the wetting," Leo said.

X

As it happened, however, there were several people much occupied about Mrs. Brown on the morning after that wonderful chase with all its consequences. Mab, under one pretext or another, had spent most of the previous day in the school. She had heard the bigger girls say their lessons; she had hovered about the classes taught by the schoolmistress; she had watched over the course of instruction in general with anxious eyes. Was there any tampering with the morals of the girls of Watcham? Were the little ones taught their hymns and collects? Were the big ones kept up to their catechism now that the time for their confirmation began to approach? Mab had never hitherto felt herself one of the clergy of the parish, as the Rector's niece might have been permitted to do. But now she was torn with those sensations which we may suppose to be felt

by a priest who has received under the seal of confession a new light upon the proceedings and motives of an important official. This is a drawback of the priestly office which has rarely struck the general observer. To know that a man who is largely influential in life, who has important issues on hand, is using his powers for evil and not for good, and yet to be powerless to do anything, to prevent anything, to give any warning on the subject! Many a good priest no doubt has been bowed down under this unthought-of weight. And so was Mab, whose young shoulders were quite unfit for the part. Should she tell it all to Lady William, this knowledge that was too much for her to bear? Should she give her uncle a hint that she had discovered something which made the schoolmistress unfit for her place? Mab felt that in all likelihood Uncle James would laugh at her discovery, and to repeat Mrs. Brown's confidences, even to Lady William, would be a breach of trust. Thus the only thing Mab could do was to come in, in her own person, to hold Mrs. Brown (perhaps) in awe, to watch over the instruction, to correct what was wrong, to see how far it might be her bounden duty to interfere. One wonders how

a priest would act in a similar case, or whether the possession of many secret responsibilities in his consciousness may perhaps neutralise the weight of each. Nothing neutralised this dreadful weight in Mab's case. She watched Mrs. Brown as a cat watches a mouse. She did not like to let that enigmatical person out of her sight. She even followed down the ranks of the girls whose heads were bent over their copybooks, to see that the line so beautifully written in round hand at the head of each page was orthodox. Mab gave herself a great deal more to do than if she had herself been the mistress of the school. She asked the girls all sorts of unexpected questions to test their views of morality.

"What would you do if you saw somebody take something out of a shop? Suppose you saw a very poor person take a loaf from the baker's?" said Mab, with an anxious pucker in her forehead.

"Oh, miss!" cried two or three girls together; "tell Mr. White that minute, and if he runned away, catch him up."

"But if he were very, very poor—starving?" said Mab.

There was a pause, for of course all the girls studied her countenance to know what

she wished them to reply; and Mab's little round, blunt-featured face, with an anxious cloud upon its childish brow, was void of all expression that could be taken as guidance.

"If we knowed the man we could tell after—when he was gone," said one Jesuitical little person.

"And then 'e could run after 'im to 'is 'ouse—or send the police," cried the rest. The idea of sending the police was the most popular. It seemed somehow to take off the responsibility. But the girls soon perceived that this was not the solution required.

"If you please, miss," said a sharp little girl who was well acquainted with Mab's ways, "if I 'ad a penny I'd pay instead of 'im, and then it wouldn't be stealing at all."

This was received, however, by a spontaneous groan from the class. "Oh, Lizzie Jones! that would be cheating as well."

"And it ain't likely as I'd 'ave the penny," said Lizzie meekly. She drew from Mab's countenance the consolation that, after all, it was she who had answered the best.

To describe the delight with which Mrs. Brown looked on and listened to all this would be difficult. She read little Mab like a book, and her sense of humour was tickled

beyond description. That she was herself upon her trial, and that the sentiments of her scholars were to be considered in justification or condemnation—while, at the same time, Mab was covertly consulting their ignorance and (supposed) spontaneousness of perception like an oracle, was as clear as daylight to this clever woman. She had never met anything so funny in her life; and it delighted her as a good joke delights people who are given that way, whether it is against themselves or not. But the gravity of her aspect was equally beyond description. She seemed to take this question in ethics with the most perfect good faith and all the seriousness in the world.

"If the man was starving," she said, taking up the argument, "and Lizzie Jones had not a penny, as is most likely, and he was known not to be a dishonest man, but only driven mad by the poor children hungry at home——"

"Yes, teacher," said Lizzie Jones, who felt that she herself had thrown most light on the subject.

"Well," said Mrs. Brown, "of course it is never right to shield a wrong act."

This was so unlike what the girls expected

after her exordium that there was a little cry of surprise, swiftly modified into one of cordial assent.

"But," said the schoolmistress, "knowing that this is so—which you must never forget—I'll tell you what this young lady would do. She would go after the man to his house—which most likely she would know: and I'm not sure that she would not stop and buy some things on the way—at the butcher's, perhaps——"

At this the girls manifested a little doubt; while one murmured "Tea, teacher," and another said "Potatoes" loud out that she might not be overlooked; at which the class, consulting Mrs. Brown's face by a lightning glance, burst into a laugh.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Brown. "This is a very interesting question that is set to us—as good as a story; but you mustn't laugh. The young lady would go to the man's house, and she would probably see the children devouring the bread; and she would ask a number of questions—far more than she has asked you to-day, though she has asked a great many. She would discover there was no fire (supposing it to be cold, which it isn't to-day) and nothing to

eat in the house, and that the man was out of work and the wife ill and the children starving. She would immediately send off for all that was wanted——"

"Please, teacher," said Lizzie Jones, holding out her hand, "she'd give 'em a coal ticket and a bread ticket, and bid 'em send one of the little ones up with a basket for the pieces."

"Well, perhaps she would do that. And when she had supplied their wants, she would take the man aside, and she would say to him, 'I saw you steal that loaf at Mr. White's.'"

There was a long breath and a cry of "Oh!" from the girls, and Lizzie Jones, who was soft-hearted—or was it only that she was forward?—began to cry.

"'Now,' the young lady would say, 'come back with me and pay for it. You're going to get work again presently, and the children shall not starve; but you must not have anything against you when you get work.'"

There was another very large round "Oh!" from the girls, who turned their eyes with one accord from Mrs. Brown's to Mab's face.

"I don't know if I would do that," said Mab.

"Neither do I," said Mrs. Brown; "but judging by what I know of your character, Miss Pakenham, that is what I should expect you to do."

This happened on the morning of the day after Leo's chase in the rain. Mab went home very soberly when the children were dismissed for dinner and in a very uncertain state of mind. She did not know how to take Mrs. Brown's apologue, which already was being circulated through the village in a dozen different versions as a thing which Miss Mab had actually done, until it came to the ears of White, the baker, who contradicted it indignantly, and declared that he'd give a stale loaf as soon as look at it if the children were starving; but let a man off as stole it because he come and offered to pay up after was what he wouldn't never do.

In the meantime Leo had been turning over in his mind that idea of Mrs. Brown, the schoolmistress. At first it amused him to think that so harmless a visitor to the servants' hall might have been the object of his very unnecessary pursuit, and in this sense he laughed at the situation, which was

so ludicrous, and longed to cross over to the cottage in the rain, when he left the Rectory, to make Lady William the partaker of so good a joke. But as he drove home in Jim's clothes and the sober Watcham fly, which Mrs. Plowden, in her motherly care, had ordered for him, a different view suddenly occurred to Leo. The joke was good, but not good enough to last out that slow drive through the deep dark and the falling rain. It occurred to him as he thought of it that a visitor to the servants' hall might, indeed, be disconcerted by the curiosity of the master of the house, but would not, unless she had some very dishonest meaning, turn back and fly. Why should the schoolmistress, probably acquainted with the housekeeper and entertaining a very good opinion of herself, fly from Leo? There was no reason in the world why she should fly. She would probably have quickened her steps, and arrived at the little side entrance puffing and blowing, but chiefly with indignation, and given very warmly her opinion of the young master who spied upon the back-door visitors. But to turn back at the sight of him and get herself out of the way meant something more than a respectable visit to

the housekeeper. What did it mean? A village schoolmistress was not one to visit the young maids, or get them into mischief; but why, why did she turn and flee? It was impossible to assign a sufficient reason for this to himself.

And then there was suddenly shot into his mind, as our best intuitions come, suddenly and with a sharp shock—almost a pang—the question, Who was the schoolmistress? Artémise was nothing if not a woman of variety. He had himself known her go through the most extraordinary transformation; one time dazzling in splendour, the next almost a beggar. Why should not she herself be the schoolmistress? There could be no such concealment, no such unlikely place to look for her, as in the parish school of Watcham. There she would be at his mother's very door, accessible on every occasion, ever within call. He had thought it scarcely possible that she could come constantly from London and disappear again unseen; but if she were in Watcham, at hand, in such a place, where nobody could think of looking for her, the difficulty would disappear. And she was an excellent actress; a woman to take anybody in, not to say an unsophisti-

cated and artless company like the Rector and his churchwardens. He could scarcely help smiling to himself in the dark as he suddenly thought of the perfect representation of a model schoolmistress which Artémise would get up for the edification of the authorities. No schoolmistress in the world was ever so excellent a type of the class as Artémise would make herself look—her voice, her gestures, her demeanour would be all perfect. And she would have the satisfaction of being perfectly safe, for who would think of looking for her there?

But then there were the ladies, who were different. Would she take in the ladies, too? Would not they suspect the representation to be too complete? And then Lady William—Lady William could not have been deceived. She must have recognised at once the woman of whom she was in search. Leo did not know Lady William's peculiarity about the parish. He was aware that Mab knew everybody and all their circumstances, and it did not occur to him that her mother would hold apart. This seemed to cut the ground from under his feet again. But he determined to see for himself next day who the schoolmistress was.

Next day, however, was a half-holiday, and he did not reach the school till the afternoon, when all the children were dispersed and the house shut up. Mrs. Brown, he was informed at the nearest cottage, where it appeared her little maid-servant lived, had gone away for the afternoon, so that his inquiries made no further progress that day. He went to tell his adventure to Lady William, and, if not to suggest this solution, at least to ask what she knew of Mrs. Brown. But Lady William also was out of doors, and nothing more was to be done. He hesitated whether he should not go to the Rectory to make a call of thanks, and to see (perhaps) if Emmy Plowden resembled her aunt as much by daylight as she had done in the unusually favourable circumstances of last night. But this intention he did not carry out. Unfortunately for romance, Leo was so ungrateful as to recall what he called the *bourgeois* dinner, the drab-coloured comfort, the petty little anxieties and cares (chiefly on his own account) of the Rectory party, with more amusement than admiration, though with a compunction, too. Kind excellent people! How abominable it was to laugh at them! But his laughter was not checked

by the compunction, it only gave a certain piquancy to all that was ludicrous in the picture.

The third person whose mind was full of Mrs. Brown was Jim Plowden. He had seen her little of late, partly that the many calls Mr. Osborne made upon him left him less time for those strolls about the village, which had ended so often in the "Blue Boar," but sometimes, to his advantage, in the school-house; partly because now that the evenings were so much lighter, he could not go there unseen. This reason had acted with the others in the partial reformation of Jim. It was scarcely possible to go into the "Blue Boar" in the lingering daylight while all the village folk were about. Had he been altogether uninterrupted in his former habits, it is possible that by this time he might not have cared. But Mr. Osborne's warm and exacting friendship had begun with the lengthening days, and after an interval, even of a week or two, such a hindrance told. On this occasion, however, Jim felt that he must risk a little danger for the sake of a woman who had been kind to him, who had certainly amused him, and, he sometimes began to think, had done him good. It could be nothing to her advantage

to have a visitor such as he was. She had done it, he thought vaguely, out of kindness, and now he would risk something for kindness too; and then he could always say he had brought a message about the school from his father, or Florence, who took an interest in the school, or Mab, or somebody. Fortified by his good intention he walked into the schoolmistress's house about six o'clock that evening when all the people were about, several of whom stared, he could see, at Mrs. Brown's visitor—in which, however, I need not say, Jim deceived himself, for the village people were already aware that he visited Mrs. Brown, as well as that he visited the "Blue Boar," and held these secrets in store against the time when they might be of use either for or against the Rector's son. He went in, however, boldly, to the surprise of Mrs. Brown, who did not expect him, and who was engaged in some sort of operation that looked very much like packing. She invited him to come in, and cleared one of the chairs from a number of miscellaneous articles with which it was covered, and which she was putting away.

"You are not—going on a journey?" he said, alarmed.

"Oh, no, not that I know of; but you know, Mr. Jim, a woman in such a humble position as mine, with so many people to please, has but an uncertain tenure. I am putting some old things in order, so that should anything untoward happen——"

"But I hear nothing except praise," said Jim; "they say no one ever kept the school in such order, or the children so bright, or——"

"Do they really say so? How truly good of them!" said Mrs. Brown, with a laugh. It was a laugh of so much amusement that Jim, who did not see the joke, was disposed to be angry, but she ended by shaking her head and putting on a comically doleful look. "But I do not please everybody," she said, "oh, far from it. Your friend, Mr. Osborne, does not like me: and your cousin, Miss Mab, is full of suspicions."

"Mab," said Jim in high disdain, "as if it mattered what Mab thought!"

"Don't you know," said Mrs. Brown, "that Miss Mab will probably be an heiress one of these days, and that it will matter a great deal what she thinks?"

"Nonsense," cried Jim, "as much an

heiress as I am! We have no rich relations, alas! to leave us money."

"But she may have," said Mrs. Brown, "and if you will take my advice you will go in for your cousin, Mr. Jim; that would make everything straight if you got a nice little bit of money with your wife."

"Nonsense," cried Jim, becoming scarlet, and feeling the very tips of his ears burn. "Besides," he said, "if I ever have a wife I'd rather keep her than that she should keep me."

"A very excellent sentiment," said his adviser, "but I don't quite see how you are going to carry it out."

"I shall carry it out by having no wife at all," said Jim: and then he added hastily, "that's not what I came to tell you. Have you any reason for not wanting Swinford to know that you are here?"

"For not wanting—Swinford—to know ——?" A little colour seemed to rise, too, in her dark countenance. "This change of subject," she cried, "takes away my breath. You are too quick for me. Have I any reason——? It is Leo Swinford you mean, at the Hall?" As if she did not know who it was! Even Jim was clever enough to perceive that she was simply gaining time. "No," she

answered slowly, "I have no particular reason. I do not, perhaps, in a general way wish—to receive—friends who have known me elsewhere, here——" She looked round upon her little room, with a laugh. "You may, perhaps, if you think of it, understand why. Have you come to warn me that I am found out?"

"Oh, no," said Jim. "And I'm sure I don't want to interfere; but he was at the Rectory last night. He said he had caught a glimpse of a lady he knew, and had followed her all the way down to the village to speak to her, and she had disappeared. Some one said that no one had passed but Mrs. Brown. And then he laughed and said, 'Perhaps it was Mrs. Brown he had seen going to pay a visit to some one in the servants' hall.'"

A sudden flash shot out of Mrs. Brown's dark eyes. "I hope," she said, "you encouraged the idea that I paid visits in the servants' hall?"

"I didn't say anything—good or bad," said Jim.

Which was not strictly true; but then nobody heard him, which came to the same thing.

"Good friend," said Mrs. Brown, "true friend! but you can tell Leo Swinford when you see him again that one of these days Mrs. Brown is coming to call on him, with important information, at the Hall, and he will never need to hunt her through the rain any more!"

XI

WHAT a contrast from the little school-house, though it was so much more decorated than a schoolmistress's little sitting-room has any right to be, or from the drab drawing-room at the Rectory! The more one became acquainted with Mrs. Swinford's boudoir, the more exquisite it appeared. Those little water-colours which were hung on the walls were worth a small fortune, and a crowd of collectors would have appeared like ravens on the scene if it had been suggested that they could be sold: and the little Italian cabinets between the windows, with their delicate inlayings of ivory—not like the untrained beauty of the East, but fanciful and varied as a dream—were almost as valuable. And then the tempered, delicious warmth, and the softened, delightful light! Yet I think (though, of course, she would not have endured them for a day) that the roughest wooden furniture, and the

shabbiest surroundings would have been a sort of relief—for the moment at least—to Mrs. Swinford. She surrounded herself with all these beautiful things, and then she hated them. They never varied, they were lovely and novel for a moment, and then there they hung for years, and never changed. How tired she was of them all! To have broken the delicate frames, and torn up a picture here and there, which was only a piece of paper after all, would have given her a sensation. And yet that would not have done much good; it would have left a visible blank on the wall, which it would have been necessary to fill up, searching far and near through all the studios to find something that would fill its place—which would keep a little movement in life for a short time. But it would be ludicrous to tear up a picture for that reason, and ridicule was more unbearable even than weariness. On this particular occasion, however, the room looked brighter even to her than usual. It was again an evening of soft-falling spring rain. The skies had been one unbroken gray all the afternoon. The soft small flood fell almost unseen over the country, making the young

foliage, which did not dislike the wetting, glisten, and washing the colour out of the lilacs, and covering the ground under the fruit-trees with fallen white petals, almost like snow. A day which the lonely lady thought, if ever by chance she glanced from her window, was enough to account for any suicide. And she had been reading the greater part of the day, reading, save the mark! exciting French novels, in which all the ways of breaking the seventh commandment were dwelt upon to the sickening of any appetite. Even Mrs. Swinford, who considered that the chief occupation of life, was a little sick of one after another. The delicacy of the analysis of sentiment, etc., palled upon her after hours of such reading. She would have liked, perhaps, even at her age, if some gay Lothario had entered her boudoir, and led her, or tried to lead her, into those paths which relieve the idle soul: but only to look on while one woman after another was led astray! The books were like the room, her habitual reading as it was her habitual scene; and she would have declared it impossible to exist without the one and the other. But even to her accustomed faculties it became sickening at

the last. Was that life any more than the boudoir was life? It was impossible for any drudge to have been more sick of her toil and wretchedness than Mrs. Swinford was of her existence, if this were all.

But at the moment of distraction Artémise arrived, and everything for the moment became tolerable. She had thrown off her cloak and overshoes in the other room; that the shock of seeing a damp woman, who had walked through the rain, might not be given to the delicate lady within. And Artémise truly enjoyed the difference in the atmosphere, and held her feet to the fire, and breathed in the warm and balmy air with genuine pleasure. "How comfortable you are!" she said.

"Comfortable! I am miserable—always and always!" the great lady cried.

"My dear, many people would be very glad to have the half of your misery," said Mrs. Brown, "though I confess I agree with you more or less. It would bore me to death. A fight with Mrs. Jones on the question whether or not Lizzie is getting on with her lessons as well as she ought, for the great sum of fourpence a week, is more agreeable to me."

"Are you going on with that dreadful work for ever, Artémise?"

"No, I am afraid not. It is not that I dislike it, however. It is great fun. You should see little Mab Pakenham, who has conceived some doubts of me from what I have told her—so it is entirely my own fault—coming down as grave as a judge to superintend the moral effects of my teaching. She would not betray me for the world, but she is afraid of me lest I should teach the girls principles unknown to Watcham."

"The little impertinent! She ought to look at home——!"

"She does look at home, and that is what makes her so staunch. She comes and superintends, but betrays me, never! However, as my morals might prove too great a charge for little Mab, and as your son Leo has got on my track——"

"What, Leo—has got on your track, Artémise?"

"Yes, that was rather fun, too. I saw him the other day watching me through the bushes, and as I did not want to fall into his arms at that little side door—which is so convenient—I turned and dodged him. His patience was wonderful; he was resolved to

have me. We played an amusing game through and through the shrubbery, and then I took to the open, thinking I was lost. But the rain was blinding, I suppose, and the dark coming on, so I got off safe. Were you aware that he dined at the Rectory one night?"

"I heard he did not come in for dinner. I was not downstairs. It did not concern me. At the Rectory—with that Plowden woman——"

"And that Plowden girl. Do you know one of them is like her aunt? How should you like it if Leo——"

"You insult my son, Artémise."

"Ah, well! There is never any telling; since he cannot have one, he may content himself with the other. I have seen more wonderful things before now."

"Who is the one he cannot have?"

"My dear Cecile, why this tone of surprise? I told you before. Leo thinks Lady William the most attractive woman he ever saw, and I do not wonder. She was always attractive, even as a silly girl."

"How you insult me, Artémise!—a woman I hate, who has no right to that name, and

will soon be proved the impostor I have always known she was."

Mrs. Swinford sat upright on her sofa, with a glow of anger on her face.

"Then I had better hurry off," said Mrs. Brown composedly. "If she is to be attacked, it is evident I cannot stay here."

"But you said it was the safest place," cried Mrs. Swinford in alarm, "that nobody would think of looking for you in Watcham."

"It is no longer safe now that Leo is on my track, and little Mab full of alarm as to my morality. She will not betray me, that little thing; but some time or other she will make her mother come with her, to judge if my teaching is all right."

"Then you must go, Artémise—you must go at once; though how I am to live, in this dreadful place, with no one to care whether I am alive or dead——"

"Yes," said Mrs. Brown solemnly, "I have thought of that. You want somebody to look after you. You will have to make up your mind between two things, between the two greatest things in the world—love and hate. If you hate her more than you love me, I will go. But you must remember, it is not going to come back. I will have to

disappear so entirely, that no one will ever hear of me more. I can't turn up again when you want me, even by stealth, as I do now."

"Why, why?" said Mrs. Swinford, who had uttered this question again and again, while Mrs. Brown was speaking. "Why should you disappear entirely? When it has blown over, when it is forgotten—everything is forgotten after a while."

"Do you think Emily will forget a thing that means her honour, and her child's inheritance?—you have not forgotten, and it ought to be nothing to you."

"Nothing! You know what it is to me, Artémise."

"Yes, I know what it is to you. It is hate and revenge—and do you think your motives are stronger than hers? You want to pay off an old score, but she wants to live respected and to provide for her child. She will send detectives after me everywhere as soon as she knows. She will have you watched so that I shall never be able to approach you. It will be good-bye for ever between you and me, Cecile, if I am to carry out that rôle——"

"Artémise, you are too cruel! You know that I cannot live long without you.

You know that seeing you, having you at hand, is my only comfort. I live only while you are here; for the rest of the time I only exist, I vegetate, and hate the light——"

"I know," said Mrs. Brown, in a slightly softened tone, "that you are fond of me, Cecile; that I have been more or less necessary to you ever since I was born. You must make up your mind, however, soon, for it will certainly be as I say."

"No, no!" said Mrs. Swinford, rising from her sofa, trailing her long skirts after her from end to end of the beautiful room. "No, no! We will leave this place; we will go to Paris, where we can be secure. There are places there no detective would think of. Detective—an English detective"—she laughed her tinkling intolerable laugh. "Bunglers all! what do they ever find out? I tell you, Artémise, we can live there in perfect safety, you and I together—and see our friends—and amuse ourselves. All with you! Fancy what a changed life!"

"On the edge of a volcano—for me."

"On the edge of no volcano—what could be done to you? Nothing! It is no crime—and she would give it up very soon. She could not help herself, she would have no

money. These people will take even her allowance from her—she will have nothing, nothing—not a penny, not a name; she will have to work—she will not think much of detectives then; she will not be able to go to law. No, Artémise; we shall live together, and you will be safe, safe as a child."

"My dear Cecile! In the meantime if all this should come to pass, Leo will marry Lady William, who will have no alternative but to accept him, and it will be she who will have the revenge, not you. Stop a bit—and he has plenty of money, and will never rest till he has found me out. He will know well enough where to look. All that you know in Paris, and more, he knows."

Mrs. Swinford had kept saying "No, no, no!" all the time. Her face flushed, her eyes shone.

"He shall not, he shall not! It will be with my curse. He shall never, never do it," she cried. "I would rather he were dead."

"It does not matter much what you wish—your curse! you have not made your blessing a thing to be desired, Cecile. Oh, I am not blaming you, it is not my affair, but

I don't believe in the curse, you know. He will do it, and the woman whom you have ruined will marry him, for she will have no other resource. And Leo will find me wherever you hide me: no, it is for you to choose—between love and hate, Cecile."

"I will never," she said between her closed teeth, "let that woman go."

"Then you choose hate? I knew you would," said Mrs. Brown, still perfectly calm; "and now, my dear, you must hear me. For I never meant to serve your hate all the time; I never meant to let Emily be ruined. If she needs me I shall reappear. Yes, wherever I am. I am going away, but I shall leave my address with Leo, or with Jim, or with——"

"Artémise!" she cried.

It was rarely that the sound of a raised voice was heard out of Mrs. Swinford's room. She had nobody there to excite her to anger, but on this occasion she was no longer the sovereign in her own palace. It was not rebellion that moved her, for Artémise had always retained her independence; nor defiance, for nothing could be more quiet than Mrs. Brown's tone. It was the impatience of contradiction, the surprise at opposition which a woman to

whom everybody has yielded feels at the first check, and the sound was so sharp and keen, and raised to such an unusual pitch of surprised exasperation, that when a knock came immediately after to the door, and Leo's voice was heard asking "May I come in?" it was impossible for his mother to stop him with the languid, "No, I do not wish to be disturbed," with which she had often closed the door upon him. Julie, the usual sentinel, had stolen away, believing her mistress to be too much occupied to miss her—unhappy Julie when the moment of retribution came.

There was not a word said. Mrs. Swinford had not recovered her composure when her son opened the door.

"You do not say anything; so I suppose I may come in," he said.

The man's intrusion was strange in this chamber never intended for him. A man and a son!—that is something different from a man and a brother. Mrs. Swinford gave her visitor a sharp and meaning look, and then said:

"What may you want, Leo, coming upon us in such a sudden way?"

"Was I sudden? I heard you with some one, and I thought I might venture

also, as you were evidently talking. And here I find precisely the person I wanted."

"Leo, you are very ill-bred. When you come to your mother's room, which is not very often, you might pretend, at least, that it was for her you came."

"That surely goes without saying, mother. I was not aware when I came that there was any one here."

"And you may be very well assured, Cecile, that at all events it was not for the love of me."

Mrs. Swinford returned to her sofa with an exclamation of impatience.

"You have all your own objects," she said, "you are all pursuing your own ends. There is no one who thinks what is best for me. Leo, we were talking on private matters, women's matters. Now that you have seen Artémise, as you seem to have wished, your good sense will tell you that it is best to go away."

"It was not from any desire to see her," said Leo. "Madame Artémise knows very well what I should be likely to wish in that respect: nor to talk to her, though she is so entertaining, but to know where I may find her, for the sake of others."

"Oh, yes, we all know what you mean. It is Emily Plowden you mean—it is you who have been backing her up all this time against your mother. I know you, Leo—that it should be against your mother, gives it a zest. You make her think—poor thing!—that it is for her, while your real desire is to expose your mother—to build her up in opposition to me."

"I think you must be dreaming," he said, provoked. "Madame Artémise, was it you I saw the other night in the shrubbery? Why did you run away?"

"Do you call that running away? I wasn't, however, displeased to have had a little excitement for once. But you see I was not afraid of you, for I have come back."

"I don't know wherein the excitement lies," said Leo impatiently. "I have a message to give you, that is all."

"You will give no message to Madame Artémise in my room."

"Are you mad, mother? Why should I not say what I have got to say? There is nothing so sacred in your room. I respect your seclusion, and never interfere; but surely when I find you with your chosen companion——"

"She is my chosen companion. She is the only person who cares for me in the world. She shall come here and live with me, and comfort me for all the evil I have had to bear. She knows how I have been treated here, by those who should have cherished me most. My husband, who never understood me: my son, who has been beguiled from my side by my enemy. Artémise knows all my miseries, every one. She has consoled me when I have been at my worst. She shall come and live with me now, and be my companion, as you say, or else——"

But then Mrs. Swinford paused. There had been a certain pathos and dignity in her complaint. And she meant to add a threat, but instead stopped short and looked her son in the face.

"Mother," he said, "you have always been the mistress of your own house, and chosen your own company. You invite whom you choose here——"

"Yes, I will invite whom I choose. Artémise shall stay with me, and we will fill the house. Oh, it is not the time for the country, I know; but later, later. Thank you, Leo, I will trouble you no longer. Send

the housekeeper here, I will give my orders; or Julie—Julie will give my orders. You need not take any trouble. And we will not detain you any longer; you must have affairs of your own that interest you more than ours."

Mrs. Swinford waved her hands and all her rings, dismissing her son, who made a step towards the door.

"Leo will stay a little longer, please. You are speaking very much at your ease—mother and son: are you aware that this is a proposal that has been made before, and that I have never consented to it? No, Cecile, I will not live in your house—nor will I do your bidding, whatever it may be, Leo. The schoolmistress of Watcham has her own humble duties to perform, and she will perform them just as long as she chooses. She is a woman not bound by rules in general, and who does not care for a character from her last place, or anything of that sort. But at present she cannot be spared from her duties, not even for the sake of the best of friends who dispose of her so sweetly. She is not a woman to be calculated upon or to be disposed of, except in her own way."

"Do you mean to say that you are the schoolmistress Mrs. Brown?"

Leo had no inclination or desire to thwart her, or to disturb her in her position. He commented to himself with secret satisfaction on the inconsequence of the woman who thus gave herself up, so to speak, into his hands. For all that he wanted he had now discovered, that is where she was to be found.

"Yes; I am the schoolmistress Mrs. Brown, whom you scared the other day. Why should I have been scared and fled, and led you such a dance? Because it amused me, Mr. Swinford: and I am here because it amuses me. And I shall go away when I please, probably without giving notice. I think, Cecile, if you will ring your bell, it would probably please Mr. Morris, your dignified butler, to let me out to-night by the great door."

"It rains," said Leo. "If you will permit me, Madame Artémise, I will order the brougham to take you home."

She made him another curtsey with a merry devil twinkling in her eye.

"The poor schoolmistress! That will be the best joke of all," she said.

XII

"MOTHER, I want you to come with me to the school," said Mab. She had lost no time in carrying out Mrs. Brown's previsions, though she was quite unaware of them.

"Me—to go with you to the school? You know I have never had anything to do with the school. There are plenty of ladies to look after the school."

"Yes, I know what you always say, mother: and I never asked you before. You will never have anything to do with the parish; but this is not the parish, it is me. Mrs. Brown is a very queer woman. She has them all in the most excellent order; but—I want you to see with your own eyes and tell me what you think."

"I have a very important letter to write, Mab."

"You are always writing important

letters now, mother. What is it about? You never tell me anything now. I used to know all about your letters, and lately you never tell me anything. You are always conspiring with Uncle James. You never trust anything to me!"

"Poor Uncle James! How much perplexity and trouble I have brought him—and everybody connected with me."

"You—mother!"

Mab stood and stared at her with wide-open eyes.

"No," said Lady William, with a blush and a laugh. "You do well to stare, Mab. I suppose that is one of the conventional things that people say when they are in trouble. No, I have not brought perplexity upon any one, or trouble, for a great number of years; but it is true that I have begun again now——"

"What is it, mother?" Mab came to the back of her mother's chair, put her arms round Lady William's neck, and rubbed her downy girlish cheek against the other, which was paler, but not less soft. Then Mab made a guess at the trouble in the only form that occurred to her. "Have we been spending too much money? Have we got

into debt? Has anything happened about —Uncle Reginald——"

"Poor Reginald!" cried Lady William. "That is what it is to be the prodigal of the family—everything is laid upon him. No, it is quite another matter. It is—why shouldn't I tell her? It is your father's brother, who has died and left a great deal of money. And there are things to arrange. If I can settle everything, as I wish—you will be a rich girl. But it is all uncertain, and it has stirred up so much that was gone and past."

"Then it is about money," said Mab in a relieved tone. "And perhaps we may be rich! Well, that is nothing to trouble about, mother. I should like it, on the contrary. Come out, and leave the letter till to-morrow. Come anyhow — whether you come to the school or not——"

"What a little pertinacity you are! But, Mab, there is another side to the question. If it is not settled that you are to be rich —an heiress, as people call it—we shall, perhaps, be very poor, poorer than you can imagine: with nothing — less than nothing!" cried Lady William, thinking with a pang of the good name and honour

—the loss of which Mab never could understand.

"Well!" said Mab, with another rub of her cheek upon her mother's, "that's nothing so very dreadful either. Most people are poor—far, far more people than are rich. We shall be no worse than our neighbours. I dare say we shall be able to do something for our living. We are not useless people, mother, you and me. And now come out, come out, mother dear! You will write your letter much better after you have had a walk. The fresh air puts things into your head, the right things to say——"

"Ah, Mab," cried Lady William, "if you only knew how willing I am to be tempted, how much rather I would put it off—for ever if I could——"

"Well, mother, putting it off till the afternoon is not putting it off for ever," said sensible Mab.

And when Lady William went to get her hat, Mab, who had always a hundred things to do within as well as outside the house, in the course of her moving about as she put things straight upon the table, saw her mother's letter upon the blotting-

book, which Lady William had left open. Mab had no idea that she did anything wrong in looking at it. She had had no hesitation in all her life before, about anything that was her mother's, and why now? It began "Gentlemen," which was a queer mode of address, Mab thought, and this was how it went on:

"I had already heard of Lord John Pakenham's death, and expected your letter accordingly. I have no certificates to send you, as it never occurred to me to provide myself with anything of the kind, and circumstances, as I hear from my brother, have occurred to make it somewhat difficult to obtain them; but you will perhaps know better how to act in the matter than I do. I was married on the 13th May, in St. Alban's Proprietary Chapel, Stone Street, Marylebone, by the Rev. Mr. Gepps, who is since dead. And I am informed by my brother that the Chapel was burnt down some years ago. It seems an unfortunate concatenation of accidents, but I don't doubt that you will know how to proceed in the matter. There is no witness of the marriage still alive—except——"

Here the writing broke off, and Mab

stopped short with a curious sensation as if she had been pulled up suddenly. It startled her a little; she could scarcely tell why. What did people mean, inquiring into matters so long past? Her mother's marriage! Why, everybody knew all about her mother's marriage. "Am not I a proof of it?" Mab said to herself. "I hope they don't mean to suggest that I am not my mother's child!" It disturbed her a little, though she could not have told why. Poor mother! she never liked talking about her marriage. Why should she be troubled? Mab had long ago made up her mind that it could not have been a happy marriage, though natural piety (which was strong in her) prevented her from blaming her father. They did not understand each other, she supposed. Many married people failed in that: strange to think how anybody could fail to understand mother, who was so very easy to get on with, not jealous or touchy, or any of those things! And that anybody should worry her about her marriage after all this time when she had been a widow for such years and years! Mab could not bear that her mother should be worried in this or any other way.

"Mother," she said, when they set out, "I want to say something to you. I read your letter, you know, in the writing-book——"

"You read my letter, Mab?"

"Well, you never said I mustn't; I never thought you could be writing anything you did not want me to see."

"And you are quite right, my dear," said Lady William seriously; but all the same, she asked herself with a shudder, "How far she had gone, what she had said?"

"And, mother, if they are raking up everything, all those things you prefer not to talk of, that you have never even told me—because of this money that might or should come to me—mother, I don't want their money. Let them keep it to themselves. I will not have you worried or get that look over the eyes for anything of the kind. I ought to have a say in it, if it is for me."

"My love, it is very sweet of you to say that—and quite what I might have expected from my Mab; but unfortunately they, if you mean the lawyers, won't keep it to themselves, nor can they keep it from

you, if—— The family would keep it willingly, I have no doubt, but then it is not in their hands."

"If—what, mother?"

To think—among all her mother had said—that this little straightforward, practical mind should have seized on the one little word which she had not meant to say! Lady William was pale, besides having, as Mab remarked, a look over her eyes. "If —I can settle it all as I wish," she replied.

Mab gave a dissatisfied look, but said no more on the subject. Lady William's tone admitted of no more questioning, and the little girl knew when to stop. She took her advantage, however, in another direction, and seizing her mother's arm as they reached the village street, said: "Now, mother, come with me to the school."

Lady William laughed, and consented. A laugh, an escape from present anxiety, a run with a little coaxing, not-to-be-denied girl through the morning air and sunshine—how pleasant these things are! She had been a little vexed about the letter, and had checked Mab's inquiries in a manner which does not at all show in print but which was very effectual, and now she could not fail to

make up for all this by giving in to Mab. When they reached the school-room, however, it did not present the same aspect of quiet without and occupation within which it generally did. There was a little crowd round the door, in the midst of which were some of the elder girls talking volubly. And at the moment when Lady William and her daughter appeared upon the scene, Mr. Osborne was visible coming towards them on one side and Leo Swinford on the other. What was the matter? Mab, whom everybody knew, pushed into the midst of the agitated group.

"Oh, Miss, teacher's gone," the girls cried, hurrying round as to a new listener.

"Gone! Mrs. Brown!" cried Mab, with almost a shriek of dismay: and then the story was told by half-a-dozen eager voices at once. Mrs. Brown had returned last evening in a grand carriage—the carriage from the Hall—to the wonder and awe of the nearest neighbours who were witnesses of the event; but whether she went away again late that night or by the first train in the morning no one knew. What was certain was that when the children came to school in the morning the school-room (oh, joy!) was locked

up, and no trace to be found of Mrs. Brown. Later, when the schoolmaster decided upon the strong step of breaking open the doors, it was found that Mrs. Brown's trunks were fastened, her house stripped of all its embellishments, and no sign of her left anywhere. The boxes were addressed to a railway station in London to be left till called for. There was no letter, no statement of any excuse. She was gone, that was all that could be said.

This, of course, was by no means all that was said as the schoolgirls chattered and the women compared notes. A number of them had perceived as something was up. Some had seen from the first as she wasn't the kind of woman for our school, and it wouldn't answer long; though several acknowledged as it must be allowed she pushed the girls on.

"There's my Lizzie," said an admiring mother, "passed all the standards and done with schooling, and she but twelve; and the help it is to have her at home!"

"But teacher was allays fond of me, mother," said Lizzie, "and pushed me on."

Then a great many had burst in to declare that teacher was very fond of them individually, and had pushed them all on. A

little Babel of talk arose at the schoolroom door, which was only partially stayed when Mr. Osborne arrived, to whom the whole story had to be told over again. And then Mr. Swinford came up breathless, who received the news with more excitement than any one.

"Gone!" he cried, "gone!" as if he could not believe his ears. "Have they searched the house?" he inquired anxiously.

"Well, sir, what's the good o' searching the house? She can't be hiding upstairs," the women said.

Leo was not satisfied with this, however, but ran into the schoolmistress's house with a very white and anxious face, making his way upstairs to her bedroom and into the little kitchen and every corner. He came down again and took Lady William by the arm, leading her aside. He did not even observe the scrutiny of Mab, who, full of curiosity which she herself did not understand, watched and followed them.

"Did you see her?" he asked anxiously.

"See her?" cried Lady William—"the schoolmistress? Mrs. Brown?"

"Then you had not found out," he said, "that she was Artémise?"

And then Mab thought that her mother

would have fainted. She threw up her arms and cried: "Artémise!" almost with a shriek. "And she has been here at my door—here—and I never knew!"

"Mr. Leo," said Mab, "mother has been worried until she is almost ill. She has had business and all sorts of things to worry her. Why did you tell her this, whatever it means, to make her worse?" She had drawn Lady William into a chair and stood behind her, supporting her head upon her own breast, with her arms over her mother's shoulders like the wings of some homely angel half-fledged and not in full heavenly state.

"Somebody must go after her," Lady William cried hurriedly. "She must not, she must not escape. Here! do you mean to say *here*, at my very door? And I had been told to go and see her, and Mab, my wise Mab, had made me come at last. Oh, child, why was it not yesterday—why was it not——? And Leo, to think you should never have told me. The woman that can make all right, that can save Mab's fortune, and my—— Leo, Leo, why didn't you tell me? Oh, Mab, why did you not make me come before to-day?"

"I only made the discovery last night," he said, while she sat wringing her hands, "and that she should fly like this never came into my mind. I was on my way to tell you, to bring you here."

"Mab did that. Mab, though she knows nothing, understands. And who is to follow that woman and secure her now? Some one must go at once, before the scent is cold, before—before——"

"Dear lady, I am ready to go—wherever you please to send me. I am here only for your service. I will go to where the address is and wait, wait till she comes. It is easy. I will never forgive myself for letting her go last night."

Lady William had been slowly coming to herself, the giddiness going out of her head, and the dimness from her eyes. When she recovered her composure, she saw that a little crowd had gathered round her—some of the women from outside, one of whom held a glass of water, while another had rolled forward Mrs. Brown's sofa and was entreating her ladyship to lie down; while behind stood two tall figures looking on, Mr. Osborne and Jim. The curate had on that mask of disapproval which he was

too apt to show to any weakness. Why Lady William should get up a little faint because this schoolmistress, of whom he himself had never approved, had gone, he found it impossible to divine. A faint! As if it were anything to her—the schoolmistress! of whom she had never taken any notice. It was like the folly of women, making a fuss upon every possible occasion. Mr. Osborne did not pause to consider that Lady William was not the woman to faint in order to make a fuss, nor even to remember that she had not fainted at all. Such considerations interfere sadly with the solid foundations of tradition. Jim stood beside his friend with a very different expression upon his face. It was anxious, full of sympathy, and of something more than sympathy, eager to interfere, to speak; but nobody took any notice of Jim.

"Mother, do you think you could walk home now?" said Mab in her ear. "Please, please, mother, come away if you can."

"I ought to go after her, Mab."

"Dear lady, I will go," cried Leo. "Surely you can trust me?"

"Oh, mother," cried Mab, more and more impatient, "come home now, come home."

Mab could scarcely tell why it was that she was so anxious for her mother to come away. Other people were arriving from moment to moment. Miss Grey, on one of her parochial rounds, startled by the commotion and the sight of so many children about during school hours: and General FitzStephen, who, seeing that something had happened (always such a godsend in a village), had walked over to inquire into it. Mab could not bear that her mother's agitation should be seen by so many curious pairs of eyes. And by Mr. Osborne above all, looking disapproval over the heads of the little crowd.

"There is no train," she said, "till the afternoon; and if the things are not sent off, how can she come to claim them? And you could not hang about a railway station waiting. Oh, mother, come home."

"Mab," said Jim, making his way to her, "I'll do anything. You can send me anywhere. And let me take Aunt Emily home."

Lady William rose from among the attendants, recalled to herself by these offers of aid.

"Mab has always the most sense of all

of us," she said with a smile. "Of course nobody can go when there is no train. Thanks; but I don't think I need your arm, Jim. No, no; I am not ill at all. I was only much startled to find that Mrs. Brown, who has just gone away so hastily, was an old friend whom I had many reasons for wishing to see: and I never knew she was here."

"Do you know," cried Miss Grey, "I always thought her face was familiar to me; but I could not put a name to it. Who was she? I ought to have known her, too."

"And she has gone away—without any notice!" said the General. "I never heard of such a thing. The schoolmistress! And what is to be done to fill her place?"

Lady William, under cover of this discussion, which was immediately taken up by the curate and Miss Grey, left the house, which had never before, perhaps, been so invaded by the crowd. The released children were in full *émeute* outside—those who had not already been secured by their mothers—filling the village street with commotion, and sorely trying the patience of the boys on the other side, who heard but could not understand those sounds of jubilee. To think that

there were no means of checking the riot, and that half of the children in the parish had thus an unexpected holiday, was grievous to the soul of Mr. Osborne, who formed a sort of committee instantly in the abandoned house over Mrs. Brown's boxes. Miss Grey called to Mab that she would come in the afternoon and tell them how things were arranged, as they went away. That little lay-curate could not imagine, sympathetic as she was, that there could be any question so interesting as this.

And, indeed, nothing had happened in Watcham for years that had been so exciting. The schoolmistress! without a word of warning, without a thought, apparently, of the embarrassment or trouble it would cause to the parish, without any consideration even of her own interest—for how could she ever obtain another situation, having left her charge like this? People came out to their doors to ask, as Lady William passed, could it be true? and groups stood discussing the strange event all along the street. The schoolmistress! that functionary of all others in an English parish is the least apt to be revolutionary. What could this portent mean?

XIII

It was very hard to get rid of Leo Swinford, but Mab succeeded at last. He insisted on walking with Lady William to the cottage, full of apologies and excuses all the way.

"I thought this morning," he said, "when I was told she was gone, that it was a dose of chloral. All women like her take chloral, and all women like her are apt to take a sudden disgust with life."

"Poor Artémise!" said Lady William, who was always fair and rarely unkind. "Do any of us know what kind of woman she was? She has never had justice all her life, and with all that power and independence and spirit, she would have made a better man than a woman. I cannot think if she had known how much I wanted her that she would have gone away."

To this Leo made no reply. He thought he knew a great deal better. He thought it

was because of a cruel plot with his mother that Artémise had disappeared. But he would not destroy Lady William's confidence, nor did he dare betray how much more he knew about the matter, and the cause of her anxiety to see Artémise than had ever been confided to him. But he walked on by her side repeating what he would do. He would go to London and take the boxes with him. He would wait at the station she had indicated till she came. But she might not come. She might send a stranger.

"*Bien!*" said Leo. "I will be there. I will follow, whoever it may be. I will not lose sight of her property, her boxes, till I have found her or some clue to her. Dear lady, the boxes—that is the best of guides: for what is a woman without her 'things'? Is it not so?"

"You are always safe to have a theory about women to fall back upon," said Lady William, beguiled into a laugh; and then they reached the door of the cottage, and Leo, who was not invited to cross the threshold, had nothing for it but to go away.

The ladies, however, had another atten-

dant, who was more pertinacious, who waited for no invitation, but stalked in after them as he had stalked along by Mab's side, with a much-troubled countenance but few words, all the way. Jim found himself in the midst of this imbroglio, which he did not in the least understand, not as a spectator only, but as a potential agent with something to say if he could but secure the means of saying it. What the message with which he was charged meant he knew as little as he could comprehend what possible or impossible link there could be between Mrs. Brown and Lady William, the one the symbol of dignity and modest greatness to Jim, the other—— He thought no evil of Mrs. Brown: he thought she was "queer" though kind: that a woman so old and so clever should be on the terms of a *bon camarade* with himself was astounding to him, but agreeable. There was no harm in anything she had either said or done in his knowledge. But he had known that the ladies of the parish, at whom she laughed so much, would have very little approval of Mrs. Brown had they known more of her—and Lady William was "a cut above" the ladies of the parish: that she should be so much distressed by

Mrs. Brown's sudden departure as to faint, or almost faint, when she discovered it, was incredible to him. But things being so, Mrs. Brown's message, which he had thought at the time to be a kind of insanity, began to have meaning in it—meaning still dark to him, but which, perhaps, Lady William would understand. He went into the cottage after them, accordingly, indifferent to Mab's looks, who frowned him back: but Jim was not to be kept back by Mab. When he appeared in the drawing-room, Lady William had thrown herself into a chair, and was leaning back with an air of anxiety and trouble, yet relief to be at rest and unobserved for the moment. Jim's entrance made her start, with a little exclamation of annoyance.

"Jim," said Mab, "oh, do go away, there's a good fellow; don't you see that mother's overdone?"

"Yes, I see," said Jim, "but I've got something to say to Aunt Emily."

"Oh, what can you have to say? Something about going up to town. There's a hundred people ready to go up to town—if that would do any good. Please, Jim, please, go away!"

"I have something to say to Aunt Emily," said Jim, standing first on one foot and then on the other in his embarrassment, but with a dogged look of determination that had never been seen upon his face before.

"Get me a glass of water, Mab," said Lady William, "and let Jim alone. It is very kind of him to be so ready to help."

It did not occur to her, indeed, that Jim could have very much real help to give; but she saw the anxiety in the young man's face, and even (as she was always a person who could be amused at the most unlikely moments) the attitude of her little Mab, determined to sweep this big and obstinate encumbrance out of the way, stirred her with that sense of the humorous which gives so much solace to life. When Mab had most unwillingly gone out of the room, Jim came up, red and eager, and much flustered, to Lady William's chair.

"Aunt Emily," he said, breathless; "I know Mrs. Brown. She told me to tell you——"

"What, Jim! she told you—*you!*"

"Never mind that now," he cried, "I'll explain after. She said: 'If there is any

chance of harm to Lady William—it sounds like madness, but I must say it—if she is likely to be overwhelmed, tell her not to be afraid, I'll come.' That's what she said, Aunt Emily. I thought she was mad—but then I thought I must tell you——"

"She was not mad. Thank you, thank you, Jim. Don't say anything—to any one. She said she would come?"

"I was to tell you she would stand by you—not to be afraid—if you were likely to be overwhelmed——"

"Here is Mab coming back. Thank you, Jim, I understand, and I believe her—I believe her! You've given me great comfort. Thank you, thank you, Jim!"

Jim did not know why he was thanked any more than he knew what the meaning of his communication was; but he was greatly elated all the same, and felt the clearing up of Lady William's countenance—which was, he said to himself, exactly like the clearing of the clouds from the sky—to be his doing, with the warmest sense of beneficence and pleasure.

"She is ever so much better; she is almost quite right," he said to Mab, who came hurrying in with a glass of water, and

who could not help feeling a little annoyance to be thus assured by Jim of her mother's recovery. By Jim!—with a smirk as if he had been instrumental in the improvement. He went away with that look of complacence and gratification on his face for which Mab would fain have boxed his ears; but at all events he did take himself away, and that was always something gained.

"Now, mother, you will have a little peace," said Mab. "Lie down a little on the sofa, and close your eyes. That always does Aunt Jane good, and perhaps it may you. But I don't know what will do you good; you never give me the chance to know."

"I don't think closing my eyes will do me any good," said Lady William. "Give me that work of yours to set right, which you got into such a muddle last night. I am much better; I am almost all right, as poor Jim said."

"He seemed to think he had something to do with it," said Mab, with a snort of disdain.

"Poor Jim! and perhaps he had. He brought me a message. You never told me much about Mrs. Brown, Mab."

"Oh, mother! I told you till I was tired

telling you. I told you she was a lady. Well, what business had a lady in our school? But what does all that matter now? Who was she, mother? It is your turn to tell me."

"An old friend, Mab."

"Oh, that I know! But something more, surely? or you would not have been so startled to-day, or so distressed to miss her."

"The distress was selfish," said Lady William. "She was with me once, at a most important moment of my life; and she can help me better than any one to settle that question with the lawyers about your money, Mab."

"Oh!" said Mab. "She told me she knew my father, and old John, as she called him, and——"

"And you never told me, Mab."

"It was in a kind of confidence. And she did not say she knew you; and it was all so mixed up with things—that made me think she oughtn't to be there, mother, in our school. And yet how could I tell any one, and make her lose her place? And that is why I wanted you to go this morning, to see what you thought; for you would have known in a moment if there was anything wrong."

"And that is why you have been so often at the school of late, my little girl?"

Mab nodded her head, slightly abashed, but yet not shaken in her confidence that it was the right thing.

Lady William drew her child into her arms and kissed her. "My little girl!" she repeated, with a soft burst of laughter. And then she put her handkerchief to her eyes, and pushed Mab away and took the tangled work of last night, in which Mab had come to great grief, into her clever hands.

No doubt, whatever it was that had done it—even were it Jim—Jim, of all people in the world!—mother was better, brighter, happier, Mab concluded, half comforted, half perplexed. For that Jim should have had the power to do that—*Jim*!—transcended Mab's powers of imagination. Lady William retained her cheerfulness until the afternoon, when she sat down to finish that letter which had been left in her blotting-book. But she made small speed over it, and it appeared to Mab that "the look over her eyes" came back. If it could be imagined that Mab was capable of being glad at the overclouding of her mother's face, I would say she was at least not displeased when this occurred, so

that such a ridiculous instrumentality as that of Jim might be proved insufficient for the change it seemed to have caused. But this was a feeling of which Mab was ashamed after the first moment when it flashed upon her. Lady William sat for a long time over the letter, but she did not add anything to it. She held her pen in her hand, and on several occasions bent over the paper as if she were about to write, but always stopped short. What had she more to say? She knew now that when these words were written the all-important witness had been within her reach; but now she was as much out of it as Lady William had then supposed her to be—lost in that big world of London where the most anxious parent cannot find his child. And who could tell whether Artémise would ever hear how things went, or whether she was wanted? The promise Jim brought had consoled her for a moment. It had been like a revelation of comfort to hear that at least Artémise was on her side. But this did not outlast the depressing effect of the afternoon —that puller-down of hopes. Artémise might be on her side, but how, now that she had disappeared again, was she to find her when that moment arrived at which her word was

indispensable? And then Lady William felt that this promise of help only in the moment of uttermost need had something humiliating in it. To keep her in suspense to the last, trembling with the sword suspended over her head, and then to step in—no sooner. This was not surely the act of a friend. And why should Artémise be her friend when Mrs. Swinford was her enemy? Her heart sank. The little flush of satisfaction faded. She threw down her pen, and left her letter unfinished, as before.

And then Leo Swinford came with his eager proposals to go to town, to find the runaway at all hazards, until Lady William, exhausted by many emotions and by that sickening revulsion of fresh despair after a rising of hope, became impatient, and more than half resentful of his importunities, which were more ardent than the occasion required —or seemed so to this fastidious lady, who in the failure of her own confidence was disposed to take umbrage at his—which rested upon the certainty of being able to do himself by his unassisted exertions now, what it would have been so easy, so simple, to do yesterday, and so entirely within his power.

"It scarcely seems to me worth the while," she said, with a weary look. "Why should you make a sentry of yourself at that railway? She will send some one for her boxes and elude you, as she has done before."

This was hard upon poor Leo, who, indeed, had done his best. He was still there when the Rector appeared, who interrupted one of those protestations and entreaties to be trusted, from which Lady William turned so coldly. And the Rector was still more cold.

"If we had but known in time," Mr. Plowden said. "I had never seen the lady. If any of those who must have known her had but given us a hint in time."

It could only be Leo to whom this reproach was addressed, and the Rector did not notice his protest that he had never associated his mother's visitor with the school. Even Lady William was unjust. She said: "You must have suspected that she had some haunt or shelter at Watcham." Leo had to fall back upon some of his own general theories about women, that they are always unjust. But he did not go away, which made the Rector more angry still:

for Mr. Plowden had come on business. Some days had elapsed since the lawyer's letter was received, and yet it had not been answered, nor had any decision been come to as to what was or was not to be said in the reply. He had come again to-day with the intention of pressing for Mr. Perowne — Mr. Perowne and his firm had known all the secrets of the Plowden family for generations, why should not he be entrusted with this? But Lady William would only look at him with a silent resistance. She would not accept Mr. Perowne, nor would she tell him why.

"I have begun my letter," she said, "I will finish it to-night; it is merely to tell them the facts——"

"For Heaven's sake," said the Rector solemnly, "don't send it away at least without letting me see it—without taking my opinion at least."

"There is as much as I have written," she said, handing him the letter, "you are welcome to see it, but whatever comes of it I must do it my own way."

And Leo had the bad taste to sit through this discussion, to remain even while the Rector read the half-written letter, vehe-

mently shaking his head and saying "no—no—no" as he went on. It is true that Mr. Swinford went to the other side of the room and talked to Mab, whose presence there her uncle also felt to be *de trop*. For the room was so small that being at the other end of it only meant that those other two people were some two or three yards away.

"No," he said, "I would admit nothing, Emily. You are wrong—you are wrong. You are making no stand for yourself at all. Why tell them about the chapel being burnt down, and why say you don't know where she is——. It is wrong, I say; it is betraying everything. When they see this, they will have no mercy."

"You think I should go away?" said Leo to Mab. "But I have not yet received my orders. Have patience with me a little, and I will go."

And then, as if there were not already too many, Miss Grey came in, to fulfil her volunteer promise to bring them news of how things were settled.

"Oh, Mr. Plowden, how glad I am to see you," she said, "for I am very anxious to know whether you will sanction our arrange-

ment. Mr. Osborne seemed to think it was all right because Florry—though, as I said to him, Florry is a darling, but she is not the Rector. What an extraordinary business it was, to be sure!"

"Do you mean Mrs. Brown?" the Rector asked, very impatiently: and yet incivility was not possible to Miss Grey.

"What a wonderful thing to do, to shake the dust from her feet, as the Bible says. But we never did anything unkind. I should have laid myself out to be friendly if she would have responded. But I always felt she was a most unlikely person to hold that position. Did you happen to keep her testimonials, Mr. Plowden, or do you remember who they came from? There should be some inquiry made; and the people who recommended her should be warned of the way she treated us. Not that there was a word to say against her management of the school. Everybody seems to say she did very well there."

"I don't remember," said the Rector, more affronted than ever, "anything about her appointment, Miss Grey."

"Ah, well! but you remember something about her, Emily. Didn't you say

you knew her—under some other name? If it was here, I must surely remember her, too. I always felt that I had seen her face somewhere before. The first time I saw her it made quite an impression on me. I kept asking myself where have I seen that face? But, you know, familiarity breeds——that is to say, when you get used to a face, you no longer think. Was it in Watcham you knew her, Lady William, my dear?"

"She did not live actually in Watcham," Lady William replied, with hesitation. "I saw her—that is, she was present—at my marriage."

The Rector (for what reason I cannot tell) looked at his sister angrily, shaking his head as if this had somehow been a betrayal of weakness too.

As for Miss Grey, she threw up her hands as if a sudden light had flashed upon her, and cried: "Ah, to be sure! now I remember—at your marriage! I recollect all about her now: that was where I saw her—and often in Mrs. Swinford's carriage before."

"That was where you saw her?"

Lady William's bosom heaved with a

quick breath; her colour changed from pale to red; she bent forward as if her hearing had failed her. As for Miss Grey, she gave her friend a sudden apologetic look, put up her hands as if to cover her face, and burst into a deprecating laugh.

"Didn't you know?" she said. "No, of course you didn't know. I kept it to myself, for I had no business to be there. And I was a little huffy that you had not asked me. Yes, my dear, I saw you married," said little Miss Grey.

Lady William fell back in her chair, and covered her face with her hands. The Rector, for his part, got up and walked to the window, where he stood looking out, "to see if it rained," he muttered; though a brighter sky could not be than that which shone in upon the startled group. Mab and Leo, looking on, were as much startled as little Miss Grey herself, by the sensation she had evidently produced.

"You don't mean to say that you're angry," she said, "Emily, after nearly twenty years?"

Lady William uncovered her face, from which the blood had receded again, leaving her perfectly pale. She rose up tremulously,

and cast herself upon the neck of her old friend.

"Angry?" she said. "Oh, glad, thankful beyond measure. Why didn't I know it before?"

"Well, my dear, I suppose I was ashamed to confess the liberty I had taken," said Miss Grey, who was much surprised, and yet pleased by the impression made. "I may as well make a clean breast of it now, since you're not displeased. I was going up to town that day. I do assure you I was going up on my own business to town. And I saw you at the station, the dear old Rector, and you in a little white bonnet, and another lady. Bless me, to think that should have been Mrs. Brown! You were looking like a lily flower—paler even than you are now. Ah! you are not pale now, you are like a rose. Did ever any one see the mother of a big girl like Mab change colour like that before? I saw you all three get into a cab—and then my curiosity got the better of me. I dare say it was very dreadful. I was too much ashamed ever to tell anybody. I took another cab and followed you. And I crept in behind to the very back of that nasty

ugly little chapel, quite furious with the Rector and everybody that you should have had such a wedding. To think how things come out all of a sudden after one has bottled them up for twenty years!"

XIV

When Mr. Osborne found himself alone—the impromptu committee which had hastily discussed the emergency having melted away, with the understanding that nothing could be done for this morning, that the holiday must be permitted, and a more formal meeting held in the afternoon at which some expedient might be settled upon—he stood for a moment at the door of the school-house looking out upon the emancipated children, and making up his mind what to do. There was one thing very clear, and that was that the Rector ought to know. The curate stood and meditated with many things in his mind. He had not gone to the Rectory for some weeks, not since that disastrous moment when Florence had spoken her mind. His heart leaped up in his bosom, and began to beat in a most wild, unclerical, and unjustifiable way, when he saw that it was his duty to

go now, and that there was no one else to do it for him. Jim had gone off in attendance upon Lady William, which was wholly unnecessary, seeing she had already her daughter and Swinford with her; but the fact that he had gone was evident, and more immediately important than to decide whether he had any right to go. And there was nobody but the curate to fulfil this necessary duty. Miss Grey even, the feminine curate, who ought to have been the first to undertake that mission, had melted away with the rest, going off to her district—as if her district for once could not wait! Mr. Osborne looked round him for help, but found none. At last he buttoned up his coat, which was the same as the Scriptural preparation of girding his loins, and went forth, hesitating no longer, but walking with a firm foot, light and swift, up the village street, resolved to do his duty. His duty was clearly to beard the lion in his den: no, not the Rector—the Rector was no lion to this critical young man: the lion whom he felt himself called upon to beard was a person of very different appearance from that of the respectable middle-aged clergyman who was Mr. Osborne's ecclesiastical superior, and whom, with the instinct of the new genera-

tion, the curate was disposed to estimate lightly. It was a very different kind of lion indeed—a lion probably in a white gown, with pretty brown locks a little astray on her forehead, with a pair of mild brown eyes, that could indeed shine with sacred fire, as when she dared to discourse to a consecrated priest upon his duty—his duty! which was, first of all, by all laws, both of Nature and the Church, to hold her in subjection and ordain for her what she was to do—a case which she had taken upon herself to reverse. It would be difficult to say why Mr. Osborne should have concluded that this dangerous animal was the one he would see at the Rectory and not the true spiritual ruler of the parish himself, or even the ruler-ess, at whose pretensions the curate would have snapped his fingers. No, curiously enough, it was of neither of these that he thought. He felt absolutely certain, by what means I cannot tell, that it was Florence he would see—Florence, who had so offended him that he had all but insulted her sister and herself in the sight of the whole parish about their duet: and now he would have to face her—probably alone. To all ordinary calculations nothing could be more improbable than this — that circum-

stances should conjoin in such a concatenation accordingly as that nobody should be in the Rectory to receive Mr. Osborne but Florence; that her father should be out—a man always in his study till luncheon; and her mother out—a woman devoted to housekeeping and the cares of her family; and even Emmy out, with whom Mr. Osborne had no controversy. Only that spitfire, that little dictator, that feminine meddler, who had taken upon her to give advice to a priest! Such a contingency was not to be looked for by any of the laws of probability; and yet Mr. Osborne felt certain this was how it would be. His heart would not have beat so, his cheek taken such a colour, his head been held so high, if it had been the Rector he expected to see. He knew he should see *her*, and no one else; and he strode along accordingly, with sensations which were somewhere between those which moved David when he went out to meet Goliath and those which might be supposed to inspire a Forlorn Hope.

He did, however, everything he could to persuade himself that, after all, this was an ordinary visit upon parish business to the Rector. He went in by the parish door,

which, as has been said, was a swinging door, always open in case any shy and shamefaced parishioner should wish to communicate with the spiritual authorities: but Mr. Plowden was not in his study, as Mr. Osborne foresaw. As he came out of that room, pretending to himself that he was disappointed—which he was not—he met one of the servants, who informed him (what he had discovered without her aid) that her master was out, and missis was out, and Mr. Jim was out, but she thought there was some one in the drawing-room, one of the young ladies, if that would do. Mr. Osborne could not say to Mary Jane that *that* would not do, that it was the last thing he wished, though he had been sure of it all along. All that he did was to nod his head rather impatiently in reply, and push past Mary Jane. No, he would not have himself announced by the maid, as if it were quite a usual matter. He waved her away, and went on by himself and opened the drawing-room door. How his heart beat, and what a wrathful shining was in his eyes!

And of course his previsions were quite true, true in every particular: there she sat, looking as if—as if, according to the old wives,

butter would not melt in her mouth. Not with the air of a lion to be bearded in his den. Oh, no! much more like a lamb—in the white dress which (even that detail!) the unfortunate curate had foreseen, looking so peaceable and innocent, so — so — sweet, confound her! Oh, no, the curate did not say that. It is I who say it, in the impossibility of finding words to express his sentiments. It all surged upon him now—much worse even than he had expected! the abominable impertinence and presumption of her, the sweetness of her, the everything he liked best, conjoined with that intolerable something which he could not endure. Poor curate! He had foreseen it all—but not so bad, not quite so bad as it turned out. She was seated close by the window, at one side of the large table which had been thrust into a corner, but not put away, as being so convenient for work—with a good deal of white stuff about, cotton from which she was cutting out various shapes, of which I do not pretend that Mr. Osborne recognised more than the purpose of them, which was for the sewing class evidently in the first place, and the comfort of its members after that. A clergyman—if not celibate, which,

perhaps, is the best—but Mr. Osborne had regretfully allowed the difficulties of it some months before this—could not well behold in visions a wife more suitably employed. Florence was so busy that it did not occur to her to turn round when the door opened. She was singing to herself in a sort of undertone as she planned out, and pinned, and cut, not thinking of any visitor. It piqued Mr. Osborne extremely as if it were a special little defiance thrown out at himself, that she should be singing at her work.

"Miss Plowden," he said.

Oh, then he was revenged for the moment! Florence started so that she nearly jumped from her chair, and the scissors with which she was cutting out so carefully gave a long and jagged gash into the cotton like a wound, and the cheeks and pretty white throat which were under his gaze suddenly turned red to the edge of the white dress as if with some ruby dye.

"Mr. Osborne!" she said, with a half-terrified look.

"I am afraid I startled you. I came to see the Rector—to tell him of a most extraordinary incident."

Florence uttered a quavering, troubled

"O—oh!" and then she said, dropping her scissors, "I hope it is not bad news."

"Oh, not to any of us," said the curate hurriedly, "to the parish, perhaps; but I am not even sure of that."

When Florence heard it was only the parish that was threatened, she calmed down immediately; her "O—oh!" repeated, was in quite a different tone. "My father is out," she said, "and so, I am afraid, are mamma and Emmy. It is very seldom," said Florence, feeling herself almost on her defence, "that I am the only one at home; but I can tell papa—anything——"

Anything? How was it that it occurred to both of them instinctively that there might be things which Florry could not tell papa—which it would be Mr. Osborne's duty to say in his own person? If there is anything that it is specially embarrassing to think of, at any given moment, that, one may be sure, is the thing that comes into one's head. Anything? If the curate wanted to ask Mr. Plowden for his daughter, for example, which was a thing that did not seem unlikely some time ago, though not now—oh, certainly, not now! This thought in all its ramifications went like lightning through the minds of both, and

made each —thinking nothing could be further from the ideas of the other—more confused than words can say.

"It is to ask," said the curate, recovering himself, "that the Rector would call together the education committee at once, if he does not mind. A wonderful thing has occurred. The schoolmistress, without giving any notice or warning, without a word to any one, has gone away. When the children went to school this morning the door was locked, and she was gone."

"The schoolmistress? Mrs. Brown?"

"I don't know how she was appointed," said the curate; "I was away at the time for my holiday; nor who is responsible for her, nor what recommendations she had. I had never any confidence in her, for my own part. She did not at all seem fitted for such a sphere."

Florence felt that this was an assault upon her father's judgment, and immediately stood to her guns.

"She was an excellent teacher; the girls would do anything for her, and the inspector said there was such an improvement."

"She was not a woman to have charge of the moral training of all those girls."

"Oh, their moral training! But it was for the standards that she was there."

"We need not quarrel over that," said the curate, as who should say, we have plenty of subjects to quarrel upon, "the thing is that she is gone. I was going to say bag and baggage; but that would not be correct, for her boxes are left all fastened up—directed to a distant railway station. She has not even left an address."

"How very odd!" Florence said. And then there was a little pause: there is nothing so dangerous as a pause in certain positions of affairs.

Mr. Osborne stood in front of the window, and when he came to the end of a sentence looked out upon the garden. Florence, except when she was speaking and was obliged to raise her eyes to him now and then, kept them upon her work. She had not asked him to sit down—partly from inadvertence, partly from embarrassment—and both of them cast furtive glances at the gate, longing for somebody to come. Did they long for somebody to come? At last the silence became so very appalling that Florence rushed into it, not knowing what might come of that too eloquent pause.

"I am to tell papa that there is to be a meeting of the education——"

"I hope you don't think I would send my Rector a message like that? That, if he thinks well, there ought, perhaps, to be a meeting—for something must be done at once; the children are all about"—Mr. Osborne added, sinking into a more confidential tone—"we cannot keep the girls' school shut."

"No," said Florence, "oh, no; do you know of any one? There is Anderson's wife, the schoolmaster. He wanted her to get it, but now she has the infant school. At the worst, don't you think for a day or two we ladies, perhaps? If you can't hear of any one, I could take the reading and spelling, and perhaps the writing. Having the copy-lines makes that easy, though, of course, I don't write well enough myself."

"You might do it, Miss Plowden; you don't mind what trouble you put yourself to—" He had to pull up sharply, or he did not know what he might have said. His voice began to grow rather soft in spite of himself, which was a thing that could not be permitted to be. "We might think of Mrs. Anderson," he said; "as for the other ladies, I don't think it would do. It is useless trusting to amateurs."

"Yes," said Florence, with humility. "I never thought, of course, that I could be much good, or any of us, only for a stop-gap for the moment. Mrs. Anderson would be the most hopeful thing, perhaps."

"I did not mean to imply that you would be no good. Quite the reverse. I meant——"

"Oh! I know, I know, Mr. Osborne," said Florry. "We need not stand upon compliments; we are only trying to think what's best for the children."

That was all—what was best for the children—nothing more.

He stood looking out of the window, and Florence pinned her paper patterns to new folds of the white cotton. And there was again a pause—which Florry this time did not try to break. It was he who began. "Your brother," he said, suddenly but harshly, "was so good about that ridiculous entertainment of mine; I should never have got those men to come but for him."

"Jim?" said Florence. "I am very glad; he liked to help; but I don't see why you should call it a ridiculous entertainment."

"I felt it so," cried the curate fiercely. "What is the good of such attempts? Perhaps if they went on, like the public-

house, every night, a warm bright place, with ladies to sing and——"

"Dance!" said Florry, with unsteady laughter, "as Miss Grey said. Well, then, you must start a working-man's club, Mr. Osborne, and then you can have it every night, and there will always be a nice bright, light place to sit in, and games, you know, and papers——"

"And beer?"

"I have heard people say," said Florence, "that it is best to let them have whatever they would have if it was natural. But I am rather on your side about that, and so is mamma."

"On *my* side?" said the curate, with a faintness in his voice.

"About the temperance. But, on the other hand, papa says it is not having no beer, but having just as much as is good, that is temperance."

"None is good," cried Mr. Osborne impulsively.

"Well," said Florence, with judicial calm, "I have said that I think I am on your side."

A pause again, and Florence went on with her work steadily. Nobody came—

the May sunshine fell over the lawn without a shadow to break it. Would they never come back, Florry asked herself? And yet the present situation was not without its charm. All his displeasure was oozing out of his fingers' ends, all his unwillingness to be dictated to by a girl. He thought he would like it if she would dictate to him again, and tell him what was his duty. No; he did not think this, he only felt it vaguely—touched, he could not tell why, by her avowal of being on his side. Was he not her spiritual superior, and was it not her duty, as soon as she heard his sentiments on the subject, to be on his side? But somehow he did not feel so sure of that position, and rather wanted to hear her unbiassed opinion and what she would say.

"Your brother has been a great help to me," he said again.

He would not for the world have reminded her of what she had said that day. And, of course, she had said nothing in so many words about her brother. He was by no means sure that it was not a mean thing thrusting this forward to make her think she was obliged to him, but yet

—when a man is at his wits' end, what can he say?

"We have all been so glad to see that Jim was beginning—to take an interest——"

"And he knows so much," pursued the curate, "more than I do. If we were to get up a club, he might do almost anything he pleased with the men. I have to thank you, Miss Florence," he went on, finding as he proceeded that it was necessary to be definite if he was to make any impression, "for giving me a hint——"

"I don't think I gave you any hint," said Florence, dropping her scissors; while she stooped for them she went on, saying quickly: "We know what we owe to you; we all feel it. One can't talk of such things, Mr. Osborne, and I was very bold and disagreeable once; but if you think I don't thank you from my heart——"

"Florence!" said the curate.

"Oh, I don't mind, call me whatever you like. You had a good right to be angry, and I took a great deal, a very great deal upon me—but if you knew how we all thanked you from the bottom of our hearts."

"Florence!" the curate said again; he had got down on his knee on the carpet to look for the scissors too—they were strange scissors to disappear like that—scissors are not round things like a ring or a reel of cotton to run into a corner; yet they eluded both these people who were looking for them, and who, not finding them, suddenly somehow looked at each other, probably for the first time since that day.

I think it highly probable that these young people forgot from that moment that there was a girls' school in Watcham at all, much more that the mistress had run away from it, or that there was any occasion for moving heaven and earth, as Mr. Osborne had intended when he entered the Rectory, to get a substitute for Mrs. Brown.

XV

Mr. Osborne went off and had a long walk after this little scene, and Florence retreated to her own room. Neither of them for that first hour felt at all disposed to face the looks and possible inquiries of those ridiculously composed and commonplace persons to whom nothing had happened. The presence of these people surrounding them on every side, prying at them, laughing or wondering, or making investigation into their feelings, is at once a trouble and an astonishment to the hero and heroine. On a day which is the beginning of a new life to them, to think there should be so many in the world to whom it was only the fifteenth of May. How grotesque it seems! Only a day like another to be written down quite calmly as the date of their letters, and never thought of more, just the same as the sixteenth or the twenty-second! There are so many

stupidities, so much that is dull and common in this life.

And in the afternoon there was that other event, so much less important, but yet meaning much, in Lady William's cottage. That the Rector, after spending all the morning out of doors, should have gone out again in the afternoon was a contrariety which Mr. Osborne for one could scarcely believe. When he came back in the afternoon to see his chief and to tell his tale, the curate's face, on hearing that once more that chief was out, was a study. Astonishment, annoyance, even displeasure were written on it, as well as a subduing consciousness that Florence would laugh, which Florence did accordingly with a strong inclination partially mastered to mimic the curate to his face: an inclination which, perhaps—who can tell?—if indulged in might have been too much for that gentleman, though he was very much in love. She laughed, and explained that poor papa could not mean any offence, seeing he was quite unaware what great intimation was about to be made to him.

"I tried to keep him," she said, "but he had business with Aunt Emily, and frowned upon me when I tried to insinuate

that there might be more important business at home."

Florence had come out to meet her curate at the gate. She put her hand within his arm as they came together across the lawn, and as she said these words she looked up into his face with so exact a representation of the Rector's frown, and his "Go away, child, don't worry me with nonsense," that Mr. Osborne, all grave, provoked, and half offended as he was, could not help but laugh.

"Florry, darling," he said, pressing her arm to his side, "it is very funny—but when you are a clergyman's wife, you know——" Poor Florry had not had the heart to mimic anybody since that April day: but now she only laughed at the reproof: she was ready to have "taken off" the Archbishop of Canterbury had His Grace come in her way.

I need scarcely say that the sight of Florry coming across the lawn with her arm within that of the curate, laughing and looking up at him, while he looked down, and shook his head, and had the air of reproving, though with a smile on his face, had the greatest effect upon the people in the draw-

ing-room who saw that scene from the windows.

"Emmy—*Emmy!*" cried Mrs. Plowden to her daughter, who was coming in calmly with the basket of stockings to be darned—and as soon as Emmy was within reach, her mother seized her by the skirts and pulled her forward to the window. "What does that mean?" cried the Rector's wife. Mrs. Plowden's heart had leaped up into her throat, beating almost as fast and as tumultuously as the curate's heart had done when he stooped down in that very spot to look for the scissors. "Tell me, *what* does *that* mean?" she said imperiously, while Emmy in consternation gazed out, not knowing what to say.

"Well, mamma, you are not angry, are you?" said Emmy, with a sympathetic jump of her heart, too.

"Angry!" said Mrs. Plowden, and began forthwith to cry; for though she was fussy, and perhaps commonplace, she was a very devoted mother. And there was not a word to be said against Mr. Osborne—he was tolerably well off, well connected, likely to "get on," and an excellent young man—almost too good, if a fault might be hinted;

and Florry liked him; and, crowning virtue of all, he had been kind to Jim. Afterwards, when the little *épanchement* was over which followed on the entry of these two evident lovers, after she had cried a good deal and laughed a little, and given her consent and blessed them, and retired to see whether Mr. Plowden had returned, followed by Emmy, who thought it would be well to tell the cook to have some sally-luns for tea —Mrs. Plowden expressed her sentiments more freely. "I should not like to marry him myself," she said, "but since Florry likes it, and everything is so suitable, I feel quite sure your father will be pleased."

"No," said Emmy thoughtfully, "he is very nice, but I should not like to marry him." Which was just as well, probably, since there was no possibility of anything of the kind. Emmy thought of Another, with whom she thought Mr. Osborne could not bear comparison. But, alas! that Other, it is to be feared, was quite as little likely to fall in Emmy's way.

The young pair walked over to Lady William's cottage after a while, with that satisfaction in communicating the fact of their happiness which is natural to well-conditioned

friendly young pairs. I am not myself sure that Mr. Osborne, indeed, liked to be led in triumph even to the house of so near a relation, for he had a secret dread of ridicule, which gave this young man a great deal of trouble. They met Mr. Swinford walking away from the cottage with a grave face, accompanied by little Miss Grey, who was full of excitement. I need not say that by this time, as they walked along in full view of the village, Florence no longer hung on the curate's arm, as she had done while crossing the lawn at the Rectory. On the contrary, they were walking very demurely side by side, with the air of people who had met accidentally in the street and could not help but walk together, little as they liked it, as they were going the same way. Miss Grey's chatter was audible almost before they came in sight of her. Her countenance was wreathed in smiles, her old-fashioned broad hat had got a little to one side, and looked more jaunty and "fast" than the most fashionable headgear.

"I could have told her years ago if I had thought it would be of any consequence," Miss Grey was saying; and so much preoccupied was she, that the unusual spectacle

of the curate and Florence walking together, although in the most austere manner, which would have excited her so much on another occasion, did not even attract her observation now.

"Has anything happened, Miss Grey?" Florence asked demurely, with a secret consciousness which made her heart dance, of all she had herself to tell, and of the very great thing which had certainly happened, far greater than anything else which could possibly have taken place in Watcham. And Miss Grey remarked nothing! The young people gave a glance of amazement at each other, and Miss Grey fell in the opinion of both—but most in that of the curate, who had been so great a friend of hers, and who felt that she ought to have divined him at the first glance.

"I should think, indeed, something *has* happened," cried Miss Grey. "I have just been telling your dear aunt Emily, Lady William, that I was at her marriage. And she is so pleased, it has been quite a little *fête* for me. Think of Lady William, the darling, being so pleased that I was there, and I always frightened she should find out, fearing she would think it a liberty! I am

sure I might have told her years ago if I had thought she would have liked it. It made quite a little sensation, Mr. Swinford can tell you. It agitated her a little, poor darling, to think of that time at all; and yet she was so pleased."

"She never speaks of her marriage," said Florence carelessly. Oh! what waste of sentiment to think of people making a fuss about a marriage of twenty years ago when they might hear at first hand of one that was going to be now!

"No, she never speaks of it; and I had taken it into my head that she did not like to go back upon it. We never knew *him*, and I don't know why people should have taken an unfavourable impression; but to see her agitation and her change of colour when I spoke! Ah, my dear Florry, there are many things in this world that are never thought of in our philosophy! She must have been thinking of him many and many a day when we thought there was no such thing in her mind."

It surprised Miss Grey a little, it must be allowed, to see that the curate stood by all this time, and did not stalk on about his business, leaving Florry to go also her own

way; and afterwards she thought of it with a little surprise and a question to herself. But, in the meantime, she was much more taken up with what was in her own mind.

"I thought," cried Florry when they had passed on, "that we carried it written all over us; and yet she never found out anything! Miss Grey, too, who knows so many things."

"It proves," said the curate loftily, "how much more largely the most trivial incident in our own experience bulks in our eyes than the greatest event in another's. I must say I am surprised that Miss Grey should be so obtuse—Miss Grey, of all people in the world."

He was perhaps, to tell the truth, a little offended, too.

They went into the cottage, where Lady William was in the course of writing a letter, for which the Rector seemed to be waiting to give it his approval. Lady William was writing hurriedly, sometimes pausing to listen to something he said, but, I fear, not giving him the devoted attention which the Rector felt that he merited. Mr. Osborne was not a very common visitor at the cottage, and Lady William stopped her writing to

give him a reception a little more ceremonious than usual.

"Will you excuse me for a moment," she said, "while I finish a letter? It is an important one, which must be ready for this post, and my brother must see it before it goes."

And then there ensued a curious pause. Mab did her best to entertain the visitors, discoursing to them on what she in her innocence still believed to be the principal event of the day—for Miss Grey's revelation did not strike Mab as particularly exciting, and she had thought her mother's interest in it quite out of proportion with the importance of the subject. And she felt the appearance of Florence and the curate together to be another proof of the momentous nature of the morning's event; for what could have brought them here but a desire to settle about Mrs. Brown's successor? So Mab began, thinking, no doubt, this was the chief matter in their thoughts, to talk of Mrs. Brown.

"I was there yesterday," she said, "she might have given me a hint. I was there almost all the morning; the afternoon was a half-holiday. She might have said she was going away."

"My dear," cried Florry, a little impatient, "if she had intended to tell, there were other people whom she was more likely to tell than you."

"She told me a great many things," said Mab, "and I was interested in her. But, Mr. Osborne, there is a very nice girl, who was a pupil teacher, in one of the houses down by Riverside. She would do very well till you can get somebody, if you like to try her. I meant to have told Uncle James, but Uncle James is so full of that business of mother's."

"Just as you are about the schoolmistress, Mab," said Florence, with a laugh.

Mr. Osborne did not make any remark, but he, too, thought—to fuss about Lady William's business, whatever it might be, to make a commotion about the very ordinary and commonplace fact that Miss Grey had been present at a certain wedding twenty years ago—what a waste of emotion, what folly it was, when there was here, waiting for the telling, a piece of news so much more interesting! He exchanged a glance with Florence, and they both laughed at human absurdity and the blindness even of fathers and aunts, the latter especially, who

are supposed to have an eye for events of the kind of which these two were so conscious. And then that everlasting affair about the schoolmistress! To be sure, somebody must be found and something done; but to thrust it upon them *now*!

Lady William had finished the letter, which was the one she had begun in the morning with the admission which Mr. Plowden thought so rash of the burning down of the chapel. She had struck out the line in which she said "one witness of my marriage is alive, but——." What she wrote was as follows:

"There are two witnesses of my marriage alive, one Miss Grey, The Nook, Watcham, who will make an affidavit, or see anybody you may send to take her evidence; the other, Mrs. Artémise Mansfield. I do not know at this present moment where to find the latter, but she will appear if necessary. There is also a record in a diary of my father's which I am told would hold good in law——"

"Yes," said Mr. Plowden doubtfully, "I suppose that is all right, Emily; Miss Grey's evidence, of course, makes all the difference. Still, I can't see why you should be so anxious

to confess to them that the chapel is burnt down."

"They would discover that fact themselves: and they might think we knew it all the time, and had chosen that place on purpose to have a good excuse."

"Who is thinking ill of her fellow-creatures now?" said the Rector. "Yes, yes, I suppose it will do—with my father's diary and Miss Grey to back you up, you may say anything you please. Yes, I think you may send it, and I think I may congratulate Mab now. Yes, I believe we may allow ourselves to think that it is all right now." He watched while Lady William folded up and put the letter into its envelope. "Yes, yes," he said, so as to be heard by all, "this has been a very interesting day. There was first that untoward act of the schoolmistress going away—which indeed I must not call untoward, for she was not the sort of person for the place: but that also had to do with you, Emily: and then the quite unhoped-for, unthought-of discovery that Miss Grey had gone to see you married in such an easy, natural way; and then the great fact, to be announced to-day for the first time, that little Mab is an heiress. Do you hear, Florry?

Could you have believed such a thing? The finest piece of news! that our little Mab is an heiress. She has come into a great deal of money. She will be able to take her proper position, which is far better than anything we can give her in Watcham. Mab," said the Rector, rising up and looking round him, as he had a way of doing when addressing a much larger audience, "has come into a fortune of fifty thousand pounds—as to-day."

A little shriek broke from Florence—it came against her will. It was not wonder and sympathy, as might have been expected from her, but an intolerable sense of the contrariety and distraction of things. "Oh, papa!" There was a protest in it against Mab, Mab's mother, and all that could happen to those secondary persons. What did anything matter in comparison with what she herself had to tell? And they were all in a conspiracy against her to prevent her from getting it out!

At last, however, there arrived a crisis, as the Rector got his hat and prepared to go away. The curate rose, too.

"I'll go with you, if you will permit me. There is something I want to talk to you about," said Mr. Osborne, with a visible

blush, which Lady William, looking suddenly up, caught, and started a little to behold, feeling for the first time some thrill in the air of the new thing.

"Oh, yes, to be sure, the schoolmistress," the Rector said. He gave a little sigh of impatience. "To be sure, that is a thing that must be attended to," he said.

"No, it is not the schoolmistress. It is something much more important," said Mr. Osborne, at the end of his patience. There was something in the tone of his voice this time which made them all look up.

"Ah?" said Mr. Plowden, half alarmed.

"Oh!" said Lady William, sitting upright, bending forward to catch the new light. Mab did not say anything, but her eyes turned upon Florence with a certain illumination too. Florence, excited, exasperated, and worn out with the suspense which had been so little expected, was on the point of bursting into tears. Mr. Osborne took her hand, and pressed it so that she gave another little shriek of excitement and almost pain, as he followed the Rector out; and there was Florence left half sobbing, angry, full of the news which was so much greater than any of the others—even Mab's fortune, which she

did not in the least believe in—which nobody would take the trouble to understand.

"Florry, dear child, what is this?" cried Lady William, while the big steps of the gentlemen were heard, one following the other, from the door.

"Oh, what does it matter?" cried Florry, "you are all so full of your own affairs. We came to tell you, thinking you would be interested; but you would not let us speak; and to see papa standing there talking about the finest piece of news! 'Mab, our little Mab, is an heiress,'" cried the irreverent girl, getting up and looking round exactly as he had done, and with all his solemnity, "'Mab has come into a fortune.'"

"Florry, Florry, spare your father!" cried Lady William, with an irrepressible laugh.

And then Florry, who, notwithstanding her white frock, and her agitated heart, and her girl's face, had been the Rev. James Plowden in person for one malicious, humorous, angry moment, dropped into her chair and fell a-crying in her own character and no other.

"Oh," she cried, "to think that you should be so stupid, Aunt Emily, you that always

see everything. When we came expressly to tell you! Good gracious, what are fortunes, or schoolmistresses, or Miss Greys, or anything, in comparison with it being all right, all right, and everything settled between Edward and me?"

XVI

NOTWITHSTANDING Miss Grey's testimony and all that had happened to make her quite sure of her position, it cannot be denied that Lady William awaited the lawyers' reply to her letter with some anxiety. How does an uninstructed woman know what lawyers may do? They may find the clearest evidence wanting in something, some formality which may invalidate the whole. Had she not heard a hundred times of the difference between moral certainty and legal evidence? They might allege something of this sort, and perhaps, for anything she could tell, insist upon a trial, and the public appearance of witnesses, and the discussion of her marriage in the papers, a possibility which made Lady William's heart sick. I am not at all sure (but then I know little more about law than Lady William did) that had Messrs. Fox and Round been pettifogging lawyers, and

their clients petty and unknown people, they might not have attempted something of the kind; but, as a matter of fact, they had never advised their clients to do anything in the matter, and Lord Portcullis, who remembered his sister-in-law very well, and all the circumstances of Lord William's death, had never entertained a doubt on the subject.

"Certificates?" he said, "why, I have seen the woman!" as if that was more than certificates; and Lord Portcullis was not a man who was ignorant of the evil that exists in the world, or who was at all in a general way an optimist about women. It had been the Marchioness, more hasty, and more disposed to think that by a bold *coup* anything could be done, who hoped to secure the whole of Lord John's fortune in that way. When she found that this was impossible (though she always retained a secret conviction that Lady William was "just as much Lady William as my old housekeeper is!") my Lady Portcullis thought of another way—a way, indeed, which had been one of the two things she had thought of in sending her son Will to see into the affair.

"If we can't have it in any other way we might at least marry it," she said to her husband. "If Will got it in the end it would not be altogether lost." And this was how it happened that the gay Guardsman, cursing his luck, was sent down again to Watcham to pay a visit "at that hole of an old Hall, with that dreadful witch of an old woman," as he expressed it to his friends, in the first burst of the opening season, when everything had a special zest, and all was delightful, fresh, and new. Lord Will's petition to be received so soon again was the first thing which revealed, to the Swinfords at least, that against Lady William there was now no further word to say.

"Why don't you come up to town?" that young gentleman said at dinner, where Mrs. Swinford was not present. "What good can it do, Swinford, to bury yourself down here? Why, man alive! it's not even the country; it's not much better than a suburban villa. Fine place, I allow, and all that; curious old relic of grandpapa, don't you know; but grandpapa is such a very recent relation, it is not much worth your while keeping this up."

"Thanks for your kindness," said Leo;

"I may say, also, if that is not too much, that, had I not been here, it would, my dear Will, have been less convenient for you."

"Ah, yes," said the young man, "less convenient, but much nicer, if the truth must be told; for to come down here a-fortune-hunting, don't you know, is about the last thing in the world to please me."

"Oh, that is it!" said Leo.

"That's it, to be sure," said the other. "A cousin, too; and it is not such a heavy price to put oneself up for. There's half-a-dozen little Americans about town, or Australians, or whatever you like to call them, that are much better worth than that, if a man is to make a sacrifice of himself," said poor Lord Will.

"But so long as your brother Pontoon is well and strong, the Americans don't care much, do they, for a courtesy title?"

"They're getting awfully well up," confessed the other in a doleful tone, "got their peerage at their fingers' ends, and care nothing for younger brothers, that's the truth; and I'm sure I don't want to marry any of them, nor any girl that I know of. I say, Swinford, you don't know how well off

you are, you lucky beggar, to be all there is of your family. I don't mean to say that I'm not a bore to Pontoon, and all that, having to be provided for somehow — as much as he is to me, standing in my way."

"You think it would be a better arrangement having only one son?"

"One child, that's what I should recommend; like the French do," said this victim of English prejudices. He was not aware that his grammar was bad, and would not have cared had he known. There are some people who are above grammar, just as there are many who are below it. He sighed, and added, as if that was a dreadful fact that needed no comment: "There are four girls, and none of them married." A second sigh after he had made this announcement was something like a groan.

"They are almost too young for that, as yet," said Leo, with good nature.

"Too young! This will be Addie's third season, and not so much as a nibble. If you don't think that serious, by Jove, I do—and Betty treading on her heels, and the little ones beginning to perk their heads out of the school-room. The poor old mother, it's enough to turn her gray. And

when she bids me up and do something for myself, I can't turn on her, Swinford, I can't indeed, though it's hard on a fellow all the same. It ought all to have come to us, it ought indeed—without any encumbrance, the advertisements say."

"The incumbrance," said Leo, who was half angry and half amused, "is not a thing you will find it so easy to reckon with, my poor Will. She has her own ways of thinking, and a will of her own."

"Ah!" said Lord Will, with much calm. He was not afraid, it would appear, of Mab. He thought of the little roundabout thing whom he had seen on his previous visit, not, certainly, with much alarm, but with a sense that if she resisted his advances (which was so very unlikely) he would not be inconsolable. Anyhow, he would have done what duty and his parents required of him. It was very satisfactory to him that Mrs. Swinford did not come downstairs that evening, for the recollection of his last interview with her was not agreeable to him in the present changed circumstances. How he was to explain to her the *motif* of his conduct now, and how the failure of all her information—her hints and prophecies of evil

—was to be got over, did there ever again ensue a *tête-à-tête* between the hostess and her visitor, he could not tell. Mrs. Swinford was much more alarming to Lord Will than the little cousin whom he came to woo.

The first assurance received by Lady William that all was well was thus conveyed to her by the second visit of the young man who bore her husband's name, who came stalking into the cottage alone on the morning after his arrival as if he had been one of the intimates there, and addressed her as Aunt William, to her great surprise and agitation. Not a word did Lord Will say of his uncle's money or the proceedings of Messrs. Fox and Round. Watcham was so handy for town, was what the young man said. It was so easy to run down for a breath of fresh air: and boxed up in town, as it was his hard fate to be, nobody could think what a pleasure it was to get into the country from time to time.

"I had no idea that you were such a lover of the country," Lady William said.

"Not the country in the abstract," said Lord Will; "but a pleasant little place like this within an hour's ride — with such a pleasant fellow as Swinford always throwing

open his doors—a man with really a nice place, and the best *chef* I've met with, out of the very best houses, don't you know."

"Yes, I see," said Lady William; "I should not think of asking you to meet *my* cook after that."

"Oh, delighted," said Lord Will. "I don't demand a *chef* like Swinford's everywhere; besides, there's not a dozen of his quality in the world—brought him from Paris with them, don't you know. Women don't often care much for what they eat—but when they do——!"

"Yes," said Lady William, with great gravity, "when women are bad, as people say, they are worse than men; which is a compliment or not according as we receive it."

"There is nothing bad, my dear aunt, in being particular about what you eat."

"Nothing in the world, or I should be a great sinner. We both like nice things, both Mab and I."

"Oh," said Lord Will—"but I am not surprised," he added—"not even that my cousin should show so much sense: for when she has had the advantage of being trained by such a mother——"

Lady William burst into a laugh. His compliments pleased her, as showing how complete was her own victory; but he amused her still more.

"Let us hope that Mab will continue to show that she has profited by that training," she said.

"Oh, ah," said Lord Will; "now, of course, you will take her to town. My mother, indeed, wanted to know if she could do anything for you about that—look out for a house, or see after rooms, or that sort of thing?"

"Lady Portcullis is very kind. I am not sure if I shall make any move this year. Mab is only seventeen; there is plenty of time."

"That is just what my mother thought," said Lord Will.

Lady William could not restrain another laugh. The kindness of Lady Portcullis, and her desire to be useful, were profoundly amusing to her.

"Your mother is too kind to take my plans into consideration," she said.

"Well, you see, the mother has girls of her own, and knows all the fuss about introducing them and all that. A girl is ever so

much more trouble than sons. We are tossed into the world to sink or swim; but there's all sorts of fuss about invitations and things for them—the right sort of invitations, don't you know, to meet the right sort of people. My mother's deeply up in all that. She could give you a great many wrinkles. That's one reason, I suppose, why women are so pleased when they get their girls off their hands."

"Is it the result of your personal observation, my dear Lord Will, that women are so pleased to get their girls, as you say, off their hands?"

"Oh, Lord, yes," cried the Guardsman, with warm conviction; "to marry them off in their first season is the very best thing that can happen, especially if there's money in the case. You get a lot of fellows dangling about that think of nothing else; and the poor things get ticketed, you know, with their values, and if a man thinks he can let himself go at that price——"

"What a terrible prospect for the girls with money—and their mothers!"

"So it is. And if a decent fellow turns up beforehand who can take care of the girl, don't you know——"

"I see," said Lady William. "How good you are to come and give me these hints—to be a guide to my ignorance!"

He gave her a doubtful look; but seeing her perfect gravity was encouraged.

"Well," said Lord Will, "some people would think it wasn't my place; but when I see a nice woman like you, Aunt William——"

"Thank you, Lord Will."

"Oh, you need not thank me; it is a pleasure. When I see you just starting out of this nice quiet place upon the world, and think what a horrid wicked deceitful place it is——"

"My dear Lord Will, you almost make me cry over you in the character of youthful prophet and myself in that of the inexperienced novice. You are a Daniel come to judgment; but surely you have too bad an opinion of the poor world."

"I hope you will think so when you come to try it," he said. And then looking up suddenly he was caught by the gleam of fun in Lady William's eye.

"I believe," he said, "you are laughing at me and my advice all the time."

"I shall not perhaps require to take advantage of it," she said evasively, "till

next year: and one can never tell what wonderful things may happen before that time."

It was Lord Will's decision as he went away that his dear aunt was much "deeper" than he had given her credit for being, and that perhaps to be chary of advice might be better on the whole. But he came back in the afternoon, and also next morning before he went away, and was very anxious to be permitted to be of use to the ladies when they came to town—if they should come.

"I suppose you'll come up—for the pictures or something," he said, "or to go to the opera, or that sort of thing?—when a fellow that knows his way about might be of use. Drop me a line, Aunt William. There is nothing I like so much as being of use."

"I like a day in town," said Mab, who this time was present. "Don't you think, mother, it's a good idea? There are a number of things I want to see. I should like to go to the Row with somebody who could tell me who everybody was. And if Cousin Will can spare the time——"

"I shall take care to spare the time, Cousin Mab."

"And you can tell me who everybody is?"

"Oh! I know a few of the swells," the young man responded modestly; and an appointment was accordingly made. But in the evening, when they were alone together, Mab made inquiries into the sudden cordiality of her cousin. "Why should he have come back again so soon? I am sure you did not wish him to come back: and why should he be so kind? He was not kind like this when he was here before. And you look either as if you were very happy about it, or as if it were a capital joke."

"It is a capital joke—as it has turned out, Mab; but I don't know what it might have been if Lucy Grey, devoured by curiosity, had not gone to my marriage without being asked, as she told us the other day."

Mab opened her eyes very wide.

"What could it matter whether Miss Grey was there or not?"

"I will tell you, Mab—I can't keep secrets. I was married in a great hurry, and got no—certificates, or things of that sort. The church has been burnt down; the clergyman is dead—accidents which your uncle James thinks have been partly my fault for being married there—and I might have had difficulty in proving my marriage——"

"Why, mother?"

"Well, Mab—— Why, because I had no evidence, don't you see?"

"You had me," said Mab calmly; "surely I am evidence. If you had not been married how could you account for me?"

Lady William kept an expression of perfect gravity, though not without some trouble.

"That is an unquestionable proof, to be sure," she said, bending her head; "but," she added, in a lighter tone, "I could not send you by post to show the lawyers, as I could have done a certificate."

"A certificate!" cried Mab, with mild disdain, "as if people would ever ask for certificates from you! But that," she added, "anyhow has nothing to do with Cousin Will. Why should he have come back so soon? and why should he be so kind? and why are we asked to lunch with the Marchioness, and all that? I think there must be more in this than meets the eye."

"You know that you have just come into a fortune——"

"Oh, mother, don't say it is for that," Mab said, in tones of disgust.

"No, it's not exactly for that. But

perhaps your cousin thinks that he might help you—to spend it, or take care of it——"

"Oh!" said Mab. She did not blush, nor was she excited, but a faint movement swept over her round face which indicated that she knew what this meant. And not only did she know what it meant, but it gave her a certain satisfaction as clearing up for her a question which had been very puzzling to her little sober brain.

"Oh," she said again, "is that what it means?"

"No one can speak quite certainly on such a subject," said Lady William, "but I think that is what it means."

It was some time before Mab spoke again.

"Is it then," she said, "a very large fortune, mother?"

"It is fifty thousand pounds."

"And how much does that mean a year?"

Lady William had a woman's limited understanding of interest, that is, a woman's view who has never had money to invest. She thought it meant something about five per cent., a little more or a little less, and replied accordingly that it meant a little more than two thousand pounds a year.

"That's not so much, is it, for a man like Cousin Will?"

"No, it is not so very much——"

"And a cousin—that would be no fun. If I were to marry a cousin I think I would much rather have Jim——"

"Jim!" cried Lady William, with a start. "Not for the world, Mab! an idle young man, with bad habits—you would never be so mad as that!"

"Everybody is not made exactly alike, mother," said Mab gravely. "Jim is idle, it is true, and he always will be idle, should all the Rectory people go on at him till doomsday. The more reason that he should be married (if he is ever married) to some one who is very steady, and has money enough to live on, and can keep him straight."

"But, Mab," her mother said, with a gasp, "what reasoning is this? To put a premium on idleness, and save a man from himself."

"Well, mother, I've heard you say what a pity it was that people were so afraid of responsibility. I am not afraid of it. If I were to marry my cousin—which would be no fun at all, in the first place—I should certainly rather have Cousin Jim, whom I could be of most use to, than Cousin Will."

XVII

"So that is all finished and settled and done with," said Leo Swinford, with no great expression of delight on his face.

"You don't seem to see the great happiness and satisfaction of it," said Lady William.

"No, perhaps I do not. I had always the hope that I might have been of some use, of some service to you, something more both in importance and use than a mere friend."

"Is there anything more than a true friend?" said Lady William, holding out her hand.

He took her hand, which was so cool and soft and white — and kind — and indifferent. As kind as could be, ready to soothe him, help him, do anything for him that he needed; and perfectly indifferent, as if he had been the little boy of ten whom

Emily Plowden had been so fond of in his ingenuous childish days.

"Yes," said Leo, "there is something more——"

"Not according to my understanding of life. Perhaps my experience has not been a very favourable one. I like a friend—one who understands me and whom I understand—who would stand by me in any need as I would stand by him—with a nice wife and children whom I could love."

"Ah!" said Leo, dropping the hand he had held. After a moment he said, in a different tone: "My mother has finally made up her mind that she can endure this hermitage no more."

"And you are going to town? It will be better for you in every way."

"She is going back to Paris. I have done all I could to persuade her to gather friends about her here—or in London better still. But she will not hear me. Her opinion is that Paris, even out of season, is better than London at its gayest. She will go, perhaps, to some *ville de mer*, and then back in October to her old apartment and her old friends."

"And you, Leo?"

"I am an Englishman," he said, with a little air half of pride, half of self-abnegation, which created in his friend a profane inclination to laugh.

"In spite of all temptations
To belong to other nations,"

she said.

Leo laughed, too, but not with the best grace in the world.

"It is true that I perceive drawbacks in it," he said. "The life is not—gay."

"No, it is not gay. You must go to town when your mother goes to her *ville de mer*. And in autumn you must fill the house. And then—you must marry, Leo."

He gave her a wistful, lingering look.

"Whom?" he said, and then he went away.

He went away, going down the village, turning many things over in his mind. It occurred to him to remember that rush down this same street in the rain in pursuit of Mrs. Brown, while he was still fully of the mind that much was in his power to do for the woman who occupied his thoughts—and with the possibility at the end that he might rescue her from undeserved humiliation by the offer of his home and name. And then he re-

membered the girl whom he had met, who had entered so warmly into his search, and of her eyes shining in the lamplight and the raindrops upon her hair. The raindrops upon Emmy's hair were certainly not moral qualifications like the unfeigned kindness of her look, the instant sympathy with which she had responded to his call, her concern about his condition of damp and discomfort. He thought of her with a rush of kind and almost tender feeling. Certainly she never looked so pretty as on that evening. And she was very like Lady William. When her mind was roused to interest, and what he in his modesty called kindness, there was nothing in Emmy of the vulgarity of her surroundings. Nor was it vulgarity, properly speaking. Mrs. Plowden, good woman, was *bourgeoise*, that was all. And how kind she had been! How she had stirred the whole house to attend to his comfort! Leo saw all the family running this way and that to wait upon him, and Jim turning out his wardrobe to give him whatever he liked. How kind they all were! He had never been in the smallest degree civil to them. None of the entertainments to which Mrs. Plowden had looked forward had been given at the Hall.

There had not been so much as a dinner to the neighbours. Mrs. Swinford had put her veto upon anything of the kind, and Leo had felt it impossible to do anything without his mother. And yet how kind, how anxious to serve him they had all been! Leo laughed within himself at the race of civility —every one trying to be agreeable to him. And then his thoughts turned upon Emmy, who, after introducing him to the Rectory, had done nothing—had stood aloof a little from all these attentions. Why did she stand aloof? Perhaps if she had been the kindest and most active of all, doing everything for him, his vanity would have profited by that. It did still serve when he remembered that she was the only one who stood aloof. Why? Was it because Emmy felt the inclination to be a little more than kind which he had felt for Lady William? A very small matter is enough for a complacent imagination to build upon.

He hesitated, with a half intention of going to the Rectory, of making a call upon—whom? His call could not be upon Emily. It would be upon her mother, who would receive it as a piece of ordinary civility. He paused, lingering at the corner

where the road to the Rectory crossed the high-road in which stood the great gates and chief entrance to the Hall.

It was at this moment that Jim, feeling himself much "out of it," suddenly loomed in view. Very much out of it was poor Jim once more. Mr. Osborne was so much engrossed with Florry that he had clean forgotten that Workman's Club which he and his future brother-in-law were about to begin to organise. And Jim was aware that to go to the curate's rooms was unnecessary, seeing he was much more likely to be found near or about the Rectory. And Mrs. Brown was gone. There was no longer the alternative of dropping in at the school-house. What was he to do with himself these late afternoons when the time for work was over, and there was nothing to do? Did he think of the "Blue Boar" again? I hope Jim had no hankering after the "Blue Boar"; but he wanted a little variety —a change, somebody to speak to who did not belong to him, who would not tell him over again the same things he had heard at breakfast and luncheon and tea. He, too, was wavering, not certain which way to go—the road that led out to the country,

where he could take a walk—a very doubtful kind of pleasure—or the road that led to the "Blue Boar."

No one had ever told Leo Swinford to put forth a hand to this youth, who was still lingering between good and evil. No Florence had taken upon herself to preach to him upon this text. It was no business of his; he had no responsibility in respect to Jim; but he suddenly remembered certain things he had heard, and good-nature and a good heart, which are sometimes even more efficacious, being more spontaneous, than a sense of duty, prompted him. It was more self-denying than the curate's interposition, for Leo had no Florry to please; and it was less self-denying, for he had no feeling of repulsion to the careless young fellow wavering between good and evil. He waved his hand to Jim, who was coming slowly towards him, and waited at that corner of the road.

"You are the very man," said Leo, "whom I wished to see. Come and dine with me to-night at the Hall, will you, Plowden? It will be an act of charity, for I shall be quite alone."

"At the Hall!" said Jim, startled.

"It is far to go for a charitable object," said Leo, with a laugh.

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" cried Jim, confused. And thus once more the "Blue Boar" (which was, indeed, quite an innocent beast, and rather relieved than otherwise that the Rector's son entered its jaws no more) was cheated of its prey.

But whether Jim, unconscious Jim, may be the means of bringing together Leo Swinford and the good Emmy, who was so like, and yet so unlike, the other Emily Plowden of the past, is a fact which lies still undiscovered in the womb of time—where also it remains as yet unknown whether the dispositions of Mab in his favour (conditionally) will ever be understood by him or carried out. Should they be, the reader may be sure that the strenuous opposition of Lady William will be a difficulty hard to surmount in the experiences of this young pair.

Mab and her mother, however, spent more than one day in town during that summer—it being decided that the young lady's introduction to society was not to take place till she was eighteen—under the escort of Lord Will: and they went to luncheon

with the family, and were most benignly received by the Marchioness, who regretted warmly that she had never up to this time made the acquaintance of her sister-in-law.

"But you see how my time is taken up," she said, with a significant glance at the four tall girls (all taking after her ladyship's family, and not a Pakenham among them, thank Heaven! she was apt to say) who assembled at luncheon, the two who were still in the school-room looking quite as mature as the two who were "out." Mab was the only one who was like Lord Portcullis, ridiculously like, all the family agreed. And one day they went to the Row together, where Lord Will and his sister, who accompanied the party, pointed out everybody who was anybody to Mab. They pointed out to her many people whose names she knew, and whom she looked upon with admiration and interest, and a great many who were to her quite unknown.

"I never heard of them before," said little Mab, ready to yawn after a list of such names. "Who are they? What have they done?"

"Oh, you little simpleton," said Lady

Betty, "they are the very smartest people in town," for that odious adjective had just come into use at the time.

As for Lord Will, he was at that moment engaged in communicating a piece of modern history to the charming aunt, whom that young man much preferred to her daughter.

"You know the Swinford woman's gone off," he said. "What a release for that poor Leo who was never allowed to stir from her apron-strings!"

"I don't know," said Lady William, "that he will think it such a release."

"And, of course, you know why she's going," said the young man of fashion. "The old witch thought everybody had forgotten her naughty ways. Well, she's old enough, she might be allowed benefit of clergy: and she meant to go to the Drawing Room and get whitewashed, don't you know. But H.M. has a long memory—wouldn't have her at any price—asked what they meant by insulting her Court, bringing such a Person there. When Her Most Gracious calls a woman a Person there's an end of *her*. So town don't agree with that old lady's health, no more does the Hall—and

she's off to her beloved France, she says, where there's something like society—society, don't you know, where there's nobody that has any right to interfere."

"Is that the reason?" said Lady William—her heart was touched, though she was aware that she had little cause to love Mrs. Swinford. "I have not been very much in charity with her lately, but she was once very kind. I am sorry this should have happened. Everything that is naughty, as you say, must have been over long ago."

"Oh, don't you be too sure of that," said Lord Will. "The old hag, made up for a burlesque, would have flirted with me the other day, between the showers of the venom she was shooting out upon you."

"Did she shoot out venom upon me?" said Lady William. Her face lighted up for a moment with a gleam of angry indignation. And then, "Poor old woman!" she said.

I am afraid Lord Will had no comprehension whatever of this misplaced pity. He stared; and he made up his mind that his handsome aunt overestimated his simplicity, and intended to take him in by that show of feeling—which was the most unlikely undertaking, seeing that Lord Will

was a young man about town, and up, as he himself would have said, to all the dodges. It was trouble altogether thrown away in his case.

"What did Will mean by H.M. having a long memory?" said Mab, who had overheard part of this talk.

"He means that Her Majesty remembers all about everybody—it is a point of Royal politeness—and that the Queen will not receive anybody at Court with a stain upon her name."

"But that is the very thing she ought to do!" cried Mab.

She was not aware that it was improper to use vulgar pronouns in speaking of the greatest lady in the land.

Lady William made no reply. She was thinking of the long life of self-indulgence, of luxury and pleasure, a life in which no wish had been allowed to remain unfulfilled, of the woman who had sentenced herself in her youth, remorselessly, to a horrible fate—to deception and undeception, one more dreadful than the other—in order to save her own reputation: and then had turned upon her and endeavoured to ruin her for having been thus deceived. Mrs.

Swinford had suffered little outwardly for all those indulgences which she had insisted upon securing for herself, and for all the wrong she had done to others. But here, at last, her lovers, her victims, her husband whom she had deceived, her friend whom she had sacrificed, were avenged. By what? —by the Lord Chamberlain's wand across that doorway forbidding entrance to one of the most tiresome ceremonials in the world.

"Poor old woman!" Lady William said.

"I don't know who is the poor old woman," said Mab, "nor what she has done; but it's grand of the Queen, if she is a wicked old woman, not to let her in. So, say poor woman as much as you like, mother; I approve of the Queen."

"I hope Her Majesty may be duly grateful, Mab," her mother replied.

I will not say that Mr. Edward Osborne's family were quite satisfied that he had done as well for himself as he ought by marrying his Rector's daughter. With his connections and prospects he might, as they said, have married anybody. But, at the same time, for a curate to marry his Rector's daughter is a thing that is always on the cards, and the Plowdens in their way were un-

exceptionable; and then there was that connection with the Portcullis family, which was always something. So the Osbornes and the kindred in general exerted themselves, as they had always intended to do on fit occasion, and provided the living which was always understood to be waiting until Edward should have gained a little experience. There was the prettiest wedding in Watcham Church, which became a bower of flowers, all the old lines of its arches and pillars traced out with lilies and roses, and the dim building made bright with a festal company of old and young, which filled it as if for an Easter or a Christmas service. The procession walked from the Rectory through the little private gate to the church, with all Watcham looking on outside the hedge of the garden. Fortunately, it was very dry as well as bright, and the most delicate dresses got no harm, and the sight afforded the truest gratification to all the parishioners, great and small. When Florence had changed her wedding robes for the pretty gray gown in which she was to travel, she lingered in the old room which she had shared for nearly all her life with her sister, and kissed her inseparable Emmy with a few tears.

"If it had not been me, it would have been you," Florry said. "One of us was bound to go the first. And it will soon be your turn, too."

"No," said Emmy, "I do not think I shall ever marry."

"Oh, what nonsense!" Florence said. "He has kept beside you all day."

Emmy disengaged herself from her sister with a gravity beyond description.

"That will never be," she said. "You know it was only a girl's fancy, and never, never meant anything."

"I know nothing of the sort," Florence said, "and I think it never meant so much as now."

"Florry!" cried Emily, in sudden alarm, "if you ever tell, if you ever breathe a syllable——!"

"No, I never will!" said Florence, pursing up her lips as if to prevent any treacherous word from coming out.

And, though she had many temptations and struggles with herself, she never did—until there came a time——

THE END

CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS, CRYSTAL PALACE PRESS.