

LUCY CROFTON.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“MARGARET MAITLAND,” “ADAM GRAEME,”

“THE DAYS OF MY LIFE,”

&c. &c.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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LUCY CROFTON.

CHAPTER I.

WE have been married some years. All my youth, and all its hopes and disappointments, are so far off from me, that I could almost think them part of another life. I forget the long separation, the parting, which we once thought a parting for ever, which was made between Derwent and me. What did it matter? But now, though we are together, we are still solitary people, with little natural occupation in this busy world. Derwent will be succeeded by his brother's son only, and not his own; and as for my Estcourt, it has no kin.

If any one should chance to remember

Clara Nugent of Estcourt, that friend will not need to hear my story over again. I am Derwent Crofton's wife, at the head of the oldest family in the county—for Sir John is of the younger branch—I have brothers, sisters, nephews, and nieces beyond number on my husband's side; but except some old cousins and distant kinsfolk, no friends on my own. We are both rich, perhaps we are still richer now, that is, in a modest country fashion, the riches of our own lands, but in all this great house, save when we have visitors, there is nobody but Derwent and me. Only Mr. Crofton and myself, and some score of servants, in-doors and out-of-doors, attending to us two, our house, our gardens, and our possessions. All the thoughts of all this little colony of people revolve around the all important questions what shall be placed upon our table when we dine? what fruits and flowers shall make our rooms fragrant? when we will ride? how we shall amuse ourselves?

what we shall put on? I go and visit the old people in the village, and the house-keeper has dainties made for them when they are sick, and flannels when the weather is cold. And Derwent hunts a little, rides a good deal, does some mild magisterial duty as seldom as he can, and takes care of me. And the country thinks very well of us, and gives us high credit, and so we spend our life.

Is anybody in this world ever content? Once upon a time we two, having everything else we wanted, broke our hearts for each other. Now we are married, and breaking of hearts is at once and for ever totally out of the question; at least, after that fashion. But if all the rest of you are content, you good women who dwell at home, and take comfort in your life, you are not like me.

My husband is, I believe indeed without partiality, the best and kindest of men. I cannot trust myself to speak of Derwent;

but then he is so good that his very goodness troubles his impatient wife. At the bottom of my heart I am happy; but I am not content. He has what people call a great stake in the country—he is a great proprietor—a man of perfect leisure, and of very good talents. When anything rouses him, his energy is fiery. I have never seen any one so prompt, so sudden, so sure; but then nothing does rouse him now-a-days. The greatest effort he makes at any time is a day's shooting. A mind more liberal, or a kinder heart, is not in Christendom; but then—I suppose after all, and in brief, it is just this—Derwent is content.

Which is a very great deal more than I am. There is nothing much to be expected from me, and he is satisfied; but there is a great deal to be expected from him, and I am quite the reverse. He ought to be in Parliament, he ought to take a great place among public men, he ought to be a public

strength and succour, a name for the weak to take refuge in. Perhaps few people know that he is able to be all that, if he would but put forth his strength—but I know—and it chafes me every day of my life.

For I think, perhaps, if he had children, young faces blooming up along his path, that Derwent would have had a motive for such exertion, which he has not now. I used to fancy that I hoped we should have no children; I used to persuade myself that I did not wish to have the dangerous joy of one such child as I was, a child of old age, and love too great—so that when that hope came, as it did come, I was amazed at the very flood and deluge of secret delight which overpowered me almost against my will. I never told any one of this hidden and inexpressible joy, this joy that was to brighten out of hope into reality, only, Heaven help me, for one day, but when it was past and gone, and I knew that was all over for me, then this came to my mind

about Derwent. What reason had he to rouse his heart into the din and toil of common life, what motive to seek fame? We were alone, we two, in this world, when all the people thought us so rich and fortunate; alone, far away down beneath that heaven where my child was. For we have a child, thank God! we *are* father and mother, but not *here*.

And this thought makes me still more and more discontented. Our free vacant lives, our minds without care, our great capabilities, are all unoccupied and useless; and when I sit an hour with a sick old woman, Derwent and all his neighbours think me a Lady Bountiful,—and he, so far from seeing how much our existence lacks of attaining the true end of all existence, thinks honestly that what he calls my charities put a touch of perfection and beneficence, quite complete and satisfactory, upon the good order of our life.

I do not say that the estates are badly

managed. I do not say that anything is positively neglected—only everything moves along at its own sweet will—and I do not feel that even the soil on which we stand will be any the better for us, when I and Derwent lie with all the Croftons in the family grave.

And this makes me feel all the more strongly, too, that I am not a Crofton, but a Nugent. I have no children in this world. I am not thus charmed to the other house, which no son of mine will ever rule. I have to think of Estcourt, which is my very own, and where I was born. Yet why speak of all these secondary troubles? But for this, that we have not the natural duties of a family, and that Derwent is somewhat idle, and does not care to exert himself, I do not suppose I have a trouble in my life, for we are still and always one heart and one soul.

We came to Hilfont when we were married, and great rejoicings were made over us, I am bound to confess, by all our friends.

I had made up my mind so decidedly before that time to live solitary at Estcourt all my life, and occupy my heart and leisure with the orphan children whom I had gathered there, that I rather feared to find myself ridiculous when all my good resolutions fled before Derwent Crofton's familiar voice ; but nobody laughed at me after all—for everybody remembered, what I supposed all the world to have forgotten, that we were betrothed in our youth. When we left Estcourt, six little orphan girls kissed me at the door—my children whom I had taken to my solitude to share my older orphanage—and then I left them in undisputed possession. These seven years have seen them all grow up to be almost women;—they are all my family still, and there are more of them now; but at Hilfont Mr. Crofton and I have lived for years alone.

Hilfont is a greater house than Estcourt. It stands on a hill—a lordly, gleaming white house, not picturesque, but rather what is

called imposing—for it has no antiquity to boast of, but was built grandly, and not without ostentation, by Derwent's grandfather—and may be seen by half the county, so striking is its position. The gardens are terraced, hanging on the sunniest slopes, the wonder and pride of the neighbourhood; and even the Duke's park is not finer than ours. From my morning room, which is still all white and gold, and bridal-like, and which Derwent will not have changed, I can see some twenty miles of open country, and can watch my husband coming home, almost in any direction, an hour before he reaches me. Since that time when our great joy was quenched in a day into sorrow and loneliness, far more poignant than if that hope had never been, I do not think any trouble has crossed our threshold—for Derwent's brothers and sisters are prosperous, and I have neither. We live in this great beautiful house, which is the most commodious and convenient of houses,

nearly all the year through. We go up to town generally for a few weeks in June ; sometimes we stretch our journey a little further, and cross the Channel. At Christmas three or four Crofton families, and some of my ancient kinsfolk, come to Hilfont, and all the year through I go often for a couple of days at a time to Estcourt, to see my girls. The girls are good girls, affectionate and promising, so *that* establishment thrives. We have good neighbours, tolerable society, friends who love us—and thus we live. It is not like the life of a woman that one imagines in one's youth—that grand impossible existence in which the ideal two of a young fancy live like persons helping each other to all unthought-of achievements. It is far too easy, too leisurely, too luxurious for that ; but it is what the other never comes to be, the common life. If Derwent were but to exert himself, and take in public estimation the place he deserves ! But we are lonely—

our heirs are other people's children—we have attained all that man likes to attain in this life, and have nothing to look for. Wherefore it follows, by a natural consequence, that the things which we do here, leave at least one of us restless, and that I cannot accept entirely, and be satisfied with, our placid and gentle lot.

CHAPTER II.

NOT very long after our great trouble—but about that time I lost dates—for the first week looked like so many years, and all the months following that were such a blank, that to turn back upon them, passionless and uneventful, they look as if they must have slid past like a single day—Derwent showed me a letter he had just received. It was from a cousin who was very ill—dying, indeed—at one of the German baths, whose illness had been so long taken for granted, that nobody could suppose it to be mortal. Mortal, however, it had suddenly turned out to be; and this Mr. Crofton wrote in sudden alarm and terror to the head of his house. He had an only daughter—a motherless, and almost portionless child. What was to become of her when he died?

“It is for you to decide, Clara,” said Derwent, putting the letter in my hand.

Of course there was but one decision possible. “She must come here,” said I; “but who is to bring her?—must you? Poor child! I grudge you to go, Derwent; yet she must not come alone.”

“I grudge to leave my pale Clara,” said Derwent; “but poor Crofton still lives. He may be making twice as much of it as is necessary—he always did so—we’ll write and see.”

“I think the man was dying who wrote that letter,” said I; and the hurried, unsteady hand, the words too earnest in their diction for anything less than the last appeal of nature, were witnesses indisputable. And so it proved; for even while we were discussing this letter, the writer of it was already dead. The next post brought us the intimation. His daughter, a girl of eighteen, was totally alone: we were not even sure that she had a servant

with her. Derwent rose up on the moment in one of his rare bursts of rapid action. Almost before I could say good-bye to himself, or I had half realized his going, he was away. I was still heavy with the lassitude and dulness of great grief; weak in health too, for my sorrow had told upon me; and exacting as lonely women are, I cannot justify it. I have never tried to justify myself; but the very suddenness with which Derwent set out upon this mission of mercy gave me an involuntary pang. When he was gone, I went to my window to watch him, as I always did, and he never looked back. My mind was exhausted and irritable. I was not myself. I actually cried with a mortification and annoyance which amazed me. So that, from the very first moment, one might say that I was prejudiced against Lucy Crofton, and had in connexion with her coming a thrill of unaccustomed pain.

I shall not easily forget the night she

came home. It was winter, a stormy night and snowing heavily. I expected them every evening, but was not sure that they were coming then. I was by myself in the drawing-room. The drawing-room at Hilfont was a very large room, always bright and cheerful. It had been newly furnished at our marriage, furnished brightly, with a great deal of gilding, and as much white as Derwent could persuade his craftsmen into tolerating. Perhaps Mr. Crofton had rather a florid taste—certainly he liked, with a child's liking, all manner of pretty colours. The carpet had a white ground, with bouquets of the brightest flowers on it. I remember how warm and velvety it looked under the glow from the low, bright fireplace, where all the polished steel and gilt ornaments reflected ruddy light. The curtains were drawn; the fire was bright; the unlighted warm-coloured room looked the very picture of home and comfort. I sat by the fire in a low, easy-chair, which was

my usual seat. The clock ticked on the mantelpiece; the fire sparkled in the grate; the snow came with a muffled heavy fall upon the window. I was longing for Derwent. I was anxious lest he and his young charge should be travelling on such a night; but beneath all, I was sad in my own heart, which was closest to me, over my own trouble. Now and then a sudden remembrance struck upon me, sharp and unlooked for, like an arrow—remembrances of hopes I used to have when I sat here in this same fashion before that grief came—but for all that I must have looked, and no doubt *did* look, a very impersonation of domestic warmth and happiness. I had a book in my hand, though I doubt whether I got through a page of it in an hour. My mind was very busy with my own thoughts.

I heard no sound of wheels, though my ears were sufficiently keen—the snow had impeded the road and made it noiseless—but I heard suddenly a bustle in the hall,

and felt, or supposed I felt, the cold sudden blast of air from the open door. I rose up to listen, wondering what it might be, when suddenly the door was thrown open, and Derwent appeared leading the stranger in his hand. He was glad to see me, and glad to come home; flushed by the cold and rapid journey, he looked exhilarated, bright, and cheered, more than seemed possible to me, and came in, in this sudden hurried way, rather to introduce his charge than to meet his wife, from whom, since our marriage, he had never been parted before. It was the most momentary pang in the world, but it was a pang which startled me out of my solitude. Then I went forward to meet them. "This is Lucy, Clara," said Derwent, giving her over to me. I took her hand and kissed her, in an anxious revulsion of feeling, determined not to be unkind to the orphan; and strange to tell, strange to think of, she, looking more self-possessed than I was, kissed *me*. When I felt the

firm light touch of her lips upon my cheek, I was more startled than I can describe, and involuntarily drew back a step to look at her. She was fair-haired and blue-eyed, a pretty girl. The journey and her grief, and her sudden entrance into a new home, had not discomposed Lucy. She looked at me, but not as a timid girl looks at the elder woman in whose hands the comfort of her life is henceforth to be. There was nothing wistful, nothing downcast, nothing propitiatory in her face. She looked so entirely able to take care of herself that insensibly my compassion evaporated. Every unconscious movement she made, every detail of her appearance, helped to extinguish my sympathy. Her big shawl was thrown on firmly over her arm with not a shadow of drag in it. Her hair was so smooth on her forehead, her step so unhesitating, one could not help feeling sure that everything Lucy wanted was there, exact, and in the most beautiful order in that

bag which she carried in her hand, and that there was not the remotest necessity for untying her bonnet and loosening her cloak, and making her sit down by the fire, as I did instinctively. I said, "Welcome to Hilfont, my dear; are you very tired?"—mechanically. They were such words as I should have addressed to another girl in her circumstances. And Lucy said, "How do you do, aunt?" The girl quite disconcerted me with her composure and sensibleness. I did not know what to say next; while she sat looking up at me, quite brightly, as if she rather compassionated my unreadiness. It was the oddest change of position I ever knew.

"It is too late for dinner," said I. "Derwent, you must be content with a nondescript meal, such as ladies love, for I daresay Lucy will like some tea. I did not know you were coming to-night."

"I thought it better to push on than to waste time writing," said Derwent. "What

a famous fire! It is almost worth a ten miles' drive through the snow to enjoy it, eh! You look quite bright to-night, Clara."

"Yes," said I, hurriedly, "we always look bright in this room, but I fear your rapid travelling may have been rather too much for Lucy. Are you very tired, my dear?"

"Not in the least, thank you, aunt," said that easy young lady, who sat upright in her chair, still holding the bag and shawl, and looking quite ready for action. "I was very glad when uncle proposed to come on without stopping. And we have got in in very good time after all."

"In capital time," said Derwent. "And now, Clara, for your nondescript meal."

"Immediately," said I; "but have patience, let Lucy rest for a moment; remember Hilfont is not so familiar to her as to you. Do not mind Mr. Crofton's rapidity, my dear. There is no haste. You must rest and be refreshed now."

“Then, please, I will go to my own room; aunt,” said the prompt Lucy, “I will not keep you waiting; but I should like to leave my bag, and make sure that I am fit to sit at table with you who look so neat and nice. Will one of the servants show me the way?”

“I will show you the way,” said I, as she ran and looked to the door, and I led her away accordingly. The room I had prepared for her was a very pretty room close to my own, closer than I should have chosen had I known how independent a young lady Lucy was. She looked round it with an approving glance as she put down her shawl and her bag.

“How kind of you to have taken so much trouble,” she said. “Thank you, I shall be ready directly. But please, aunt, don’t let me detain you. I can quite well find my way downstairs.”

Thus dismissed, I succumbed with quiet wonder, and left her to herself. Derwent

waited for me on the staircase to ask how I was, and to make up, if that was wanted, for the coolness of his first salutation. "I think my fair Clara looks brighter to-night," he said, "and, my love, you will have a companion now."

"I have you, Derwent," said I.

"Who am not a companion, madame, if it please you," said my husband, "but the other portion of the same individual. Lucy is a nice little girl; no nonsense about her; don't you think so, Clara?"

"Why did you have so little consideration for her?" said I; "so rapid and breathless a journey might make her ill. Did that never occur to you?"

Derwent was only a man; with all his excellences, he never suspected me of disagreeing with him about the nice little girl, nor perceived what my evasion meant. "I thought it the kindest thing I could do—keep her from thinking," said Mr. Crofton; "besides that, I was very anxious for my

own part to get home. Poor old Crofton was under the sod before I got there. She does not say much about him, and keeps up her spirits wonderfully for one so young, and has borne the journey like a hero. I made her quite easy by telling of you, Clara. She knew, before she came, that you'd be a mother to her."

"Ah! if she does not turn out older than me," I said to myself, under my breath. Derwent did not hear me, which was so much the better. We went into the dining-room, where the table had been spread for the travellers; and by-and-by Lucy joined us, as calm and easy as though she had lived here all her life. She was really quite a pretty girl. Somewhat dismayed as I was at her self-possession, I was disposed to think her blue eyes cold, and even her prettiness of a common kind; but Lucy Crofton was really, truly, unmistakably pretty, and her mourning did not harm her appearance, though she was totally black from head to

foot, dull, heavy, crapey, woollen black, which owned no sparkle, and enveloped her like a pall. She took her chair and her supper with perfect propriety, but no symptom of indifference. She talked without hesitation, quietly, I cannot say without feeling, but she was perfectly able to manage her sorrow. I, who could not divest myself of the idea that some chance word might wake her dormant grief, and that one ought to be specially tender in her circumstances to this orphan girl, was much more disturbed and embarrassed than she. It seemed so odd and contrary to all established notions, that an orphan so young and so friendless should show herself so entirely mistress of her feelings the first night of her entry into a strange house and a new life; and I could not suppose any other explanation than that she was heroically subduing herself, and by-and-by, when she reached her own room, would "give way." Once more I ascended the stairs with her when it was quite bed-

time. And then Lucy made a momentary pause of consideration, and spoke—

“I hope I may not trouble you, aunt,” were her first words, said with a very becoming gentleness of tone—then a little pause. I expected she would cry, and took her hand in mine to comfort her, but Lucy did not cry. “But I have always been accustomed to be useful,” she added, quietly; “uncle says you are a good deal alone, Aunt Clara. I should like to be of some use to you, and I hope you will let me try.”

“Time enough to think of that, Lucy,” said I, withdrawing my hand; “in the meantime you must rest, and recover your strength. I fear you are exercising an unnatural self-control, and if it is so, you will feel the reaction all the more severely. Have confidence in us, my dear, and do not think that anything is expected of you, just yet at least. I am almost afraid you are keeping up too well for your own peace.”

“Oh no, Aunt Clare,” said Lucy, with a

tear in her eye—a tear which looked quite sincere, and really seemed to evidence the full extent of her emotion. “I am not restraining myself, I am not very tired, and I am sure I shall be all right to-morrow, but I will not keep you; good night.”

So saying, she took my hand again and bent forward to kiss me, which farewell token I received in utter amaze and confusion, humbly withdrawing thereafter; yet I could not find the very least fault with her, either. When I looked round from the door, I flattered myself I saw a half wistful, deprecatory look from Lucy, but she was busy opening her bag, and I had no encouragement to stay. And this was how Lucy Crofton came home.

CHAPTER III.

THAT night was a violent, stormy November night — blasts of snow driving against the windows, and the fierce gale rushing back through the bare trees, which groaned again, and sending melancholy echoes through the house, kept up a continual conflict of sound through the dark long wintry night. I did not sleep much, but so far benefited by this new interest, lay awake—half amused, half disappointed, and very considerably puzzled—thinking of our visitor. I did not “take to her” certainly at first sight, but I did my best to convince myself that it was, and must be, self-restraint stretched to an unlovely and undesirable extent which made Lucy so calm and self-possessed. “It will be different to-morrow,” I said to myself; “when

she knows us better, she will know that nothing which is unnatural is looked for here; it will be different to-morrow." But even while I said so I became aware that my heart, instead of opening to her, began rather to rise in involuntary antagonism against this friendless young creature—though she *was* friendless and of Derwent's blood. I was dismayed to feel this; I ought to have loved her, received her, been, as my husband said, a mother to her. Can any one command love? I became disgusted with myself. Was it not enough that Derwent liked her, that she was his near relation? But reasoning did not improve the matter. At last I found my spirit so unmanageable, so ill-natured, so determined to dislike and condemn, that I turned my head from the light, and obstinately went to sleep.

Our breakfast-room next morning was as pleasant an apartment as could be supposed in such weather. Like all the rooms at

Hilfont, it had an admirable view. A great broad snow-covered slope of country, dropping down softly, with every angle cushioned into roundness by that wintry veil; from the heights where we stood, to the lower level of the plain through which the river, no longer in motion, stretched its proper line, with one icebound barge in the centre of the view, and lines of benumbed pollard willows, smitten to their hearts with the apathy of cold, tracing the chilly line of its further banks. The sky hung low over all, a heavy grey vault of clouds. The trees and scattered houses, and even the far-off pinnacles of the Cathedral, far away yonder in Simonburgh, which we could just see, were all distinctly touched and softened with drifts and droppings of the snow. I am always young as regards snow. This landscape pleased *me*, cold though it was, and within was the bright breakfast table, with that little *bouquet* of flowers which Derwent had bound the gardener to provide for me

every morning all the year round—a pale, cold cluster of tender blossoms now, yet still flowers; the warm crimson curtains drawn quite back from the window, to let in all the light there was, which was a softened snowy light, pale, yet with a dazzle in it, a light which radiated more from the white ground than the opaque sky—and the merry frost-exhilarated fire crackling with glee like a schoolboy,—and the sharp air and ice without. I myself entered this room about nine o'clock of that snowy morning, and was hastening to take my place for prayers, when some one rose to salute me—Lucy! Well! it was very proper—she was an extremely good girl. Still one is human oneself, and prefers to see in one's friends something of the weakness of common nature. It was no doubt much better to get up early, to be ready in perfect time, to be down stairs before anybody else; still—but of course she was perfectly right—I ought to be the last person in the world to blame her.

When Derwent pronounced her "a brick" at breakfast, I am afraid I must have looked rather doubtful. I said I feared she was quite over-exerting herself; at which Lucy looked up quite seriously in my eyes.

"Are you displeased, Aunt Clare?" she said; and of course I said "No, no, certainly not;" and felt very uncomfortable and ashamed of myself. Displeased! why should I be displeased? but certainly I would rather have had something for my companion which was less reprovably correct and unexceptionable than Lucy.

After breakfast Derwent left us to attend to his own not very heavy business. I sat with my work as near the bow-window as the cold would permit, and watched how the sun came gliding over the landscape, shaking lightly the snow off the branches. Lucy by this time had taken some crochet-work out of her bag. After her night's rest, she was even prettier than last night; and now a languid conversation got up between us, in which the stranger took her full share.

“I dare say you have not much society here, Aunt Clare,” said my young guest, to begin with.

“We are very well off in that respect,” said I; “you do not know the capabilities of the country, Lucy.”

“I have never lived in the country, in England,” said Lucy; “this snow chills me to look at; but you seem to like it, Aunt Clare?”

“I do,” said I; “an English winter is just cold enough to be exhilarating; at least, so I think.”

“I suppose it is because of poor papa,” said Lucy, quietly. “We have had to run about everywhere to avoid the winter; even now, I cannot help fearing it for his sake, as if he would feel it. I daresay I should like it for myself, but I have never been able to think of that till now.”

“Forgive me, Lucy, I fear I have spoken thoughtlessly,” said I, with a great compunction.

“How, aunt?” said Lucy, “I am sure you have said nothing which I could have wished you not to say. I cannot delude myself so far as to think poor papa is not dead, and I don’t want you to suppose that I make believe to be cheerful. Do not be overcareful of what you say for me, Aunt Clare. Uncle Derwent told me you were very kind, and I am sure you will never hurt my feelings, whatever you may say.”

This speech was delivered with such perfect sobriety and quietness that I really could make no answer to it. I sat silent and discomfited, feeling that my young companion took quite the superior place; that the sorrow and distress I had looked for was some merely romantic and visionary folly, possible to some people, perhaps, but not to sensible persons like Lucy Crofton. I found an unaccountable difficulty in resuming the conversation, and began to cast in my mind for some safe subject. Lucy,

however, saved me even that trouble. She was not destitute of something to say.

“I have often heard papa speak of Hilfont,” she resumed; “he was here before Uncle Derwent was married, besides knowing it well in his youth; but he stayed here the whole summer that time. Did you not know?”

“I forget,” said I, hastily. I did not choose to let any one suppose that I did not know, not that I cared, but because Lucy looked up significantly, as if she meant something.

“Uncle Derwent meant papa to have lived with him there. I was not with him, I was with Aunt Hartley, poor mamma’s sister,” said Lucy, “but I was to have come, and we were to have lived at Hilfont; so papa expected; but that was before we knew you were going to be married, Aunt Clare.”

And Lucy gave the slightest sigh in the world. Does anybody wonder that I felt

somewhat aggravated? She went on with her crochet so quietly, working and talking without looking at me. If she had been my dearest friend, I must have felt a certain displeasure, whether I would or no.

“I am sorry, Lucy, that I should have come in the way of any of your plans,” I said, with a smile, which, I daresay, was not the sweetest in the world.

“Not at all, aunt,” said Lucy, seriously. “I am sure we were very glad; Uncle Derwent’s happiness was the first thing to be considered. And of course it was only by his kindness that we ever could have been here.”

“How does it happen that you call Mr. Crofton uncle?” said I; “the relationship is cousin, I believe.”

“Cousin to papa,” said Lucy; “but so much older than me that *I* could not call him cousin, so I called him Uncle Derwent when I was a child. I ought to have asked your permission, Aunt Clare, but it would

seem strange to call *him* uncle, and you Mrs. Crofton. May I go on calling you aunt, please?"

"Surely," said I. "It seems natural indeed that there should be some title of relationship. Do you know your cousins the other Croftons?—they will be here at Christmas. We have to see a good deal of our neighbours about that time; but you must consider yourself quite free to keep apart and quiet for this year if you choose."

"For papa's sake, aunt?" said Lucy, raising her eyes.

I bowed my head in assent; Lucy for this once let her work fall on her knees while she answered me.

"Unless you think it proper, and say I am to do it; I should not mind for myself, it would not do him any good," said Lucy. "If you object to my mourning, I can stay upstairs; but otherwise, please, Aunt Clare, do not think of me as if there was anything particular required. I should like to be just

one of the family without any one minding me much, for indeed I do not want to be like a widow, or have any notice taken of me. I will not trouble any one with my grief."

"I only trust, Lucy, that you are not exercising excessive self-restraint," said I, though I confess I no longer found it; "if you are, you will do yourself an injury. It is entirely for your convenience and comfort that I make any such suggestion. We shall like the other better, of course."

"Thank you, aunt," said this young philosopher, and so returned quietly to her work. I might be embarrassed and puzzled, but that did not affect Lucy; she knew herself, and she was not much concerned about knowing me.

CHAPTER IV.

“AND now that you have seen her, Clare,” said Derwent, when we were alone one evening, about a week after our young guest’s arrival, “what is your opinion of Lucy now?”

“She is certainly pretty,” said I.

“I thought you would say so,” said my innocent husband, with guileless gratification. “I have just been thinking upon that point. Do you know, Clare, I don’t think you could do a better thing than make up a match between Lucy and Harry Crofton—they’d suit each other famously—not too much sentiment about either of them, you know—and—well, no one can tell—I thought differently some time ago—but there’s the chance that they might be our successors in Hilfont, Clare.”

I listened with a swelling breast. I could not either answer him nor see him for a moment. It might have been different—O heaven! that *might have been!*—but in the midst of my grief a sudden resentment rose in my breast. I could almost fancy those two indifferent young people, who as yet did not know each other, were the supplanters—God forgive me!—of that dearest unconscious soul who had his inheritance in heaven. It was unwise of Derwent; but he did not know how hot and terrible were the tears that blinded my eyes—it was to him a sadness only, a hope disappointed—he took my hand and soothed me tenderly: he did not know how all day long, and every day, I went about the house in a dumb show, thinking of other things by fits and starts, but of that always. There was this difference between him and me, but he did not know it, and meant no harm.

When I could speak at last, I thought my voice had hardened down into something

toneless and harsh. "I am not a match-maker," I said.

"That is true," said Derwent; "but this is a special case. You are very little of a matchmaker, Clare—almost less than one would suppose a married woman, who was happy herself, ought to be. I fear your maiden establishment at Estcourt made you sceptical of the necessity; but this is a peculiar case."

"They will all meet at Christmas," said I. "They are very suitable in age, and Lucy is portionless, and will appear to your brother a very bad match for his son, which will doubtless have its weight in attracting Harry. If you could persuade his father to warn him against her, I should think that would be conclusive so far as Harry is concerned."

"Don't be satirical, Clare," said Derwent, laughing, yet looking a little pained. "And what of Lucy?"

"Oh, Lucy will not object to have a

house and rank of her own," said I; "and, I should think, is quite disengaged, and very likely to be pleased with Harry Crofton. It seems a perfectly natural and likely arrangement, without any matchmaking."

"It scarcely seems to please you, however," said Derwent, looking at me closely for a moment. "Perhaps I have spoken rashly, Clare: make friends—you know I would not give you pain for the world."

Yes, I knew that very well; but there is always some one point upon which everybody is unreasonable; and this was mine.

"Lucy tells me," said I, after a little pause, "that she and her father expected some time since that they were to live here."

"Yes," said Derwent, with that honest glow of feeling which brightened his whole face; "at a certain period of my life, when I did not care two straws what became of Hilfont or myself either, I once told old Crofton that he might set up his headquarters here if he had a mind, or break

up the old house to bits if he had a mind. I was a Clareless man, and cared nothing for anything. I believe for one summer they *were* here."

"Lucy thinks I rather came in the way of a very pleasant prospect," said I. "I am not sure that she quite forgives me for it."

Derwent laughed, but looked at me a little doubtfully. "But you think she is a good girl, don't you?" he said.

"Oh, certainly, a very good girl," I answered; and so the conversation ended for that night.

But even Lucy's virtues were rather against her with me. She was a very good girl; she was first downstairs in the morning; she was ready to do anything in the world to save me trouble. At breakfast she was quite anxious to help, and persuade me to eat; later in the day became still more concerned about my exercise, and laboured to induce me to go out, with amiable wiles and expedients, which she was evidently

rather complacent of, and satisfied with, but which “aggravated” my temper very considerably, and often drove me to take refuge in my own room, in sheer despair. She herself walked every day, practised every day, and every day did so much crochet or embroidery; she took an interest in the conservatory, and had a fancy for birds, and liked light reading. Altogether, she was not only a very pretty but a very proper young lady. She never contradicted anybody, and was always pleased with what every one suggested. It was hard to find out Lucy’s own will about anything; but she had a way of getting her will which was ingenious in the highest degree. Everybody who saw her congratulated me on my new acquisition—such a pleasant companion! And Lucy hearing afar off—one’s ears are sharp when one knows oneself spoken of—grew more smiling, more “attentive” to me, more anxious about my comfort than ever. She thought she was doing her duty, I verily

believe, and pleased herself with the thought that she was a very useful person, and of the greatest importance to Aunt Clare.

Oh, young people! oh, young ladies!—I am an old lady, and may advise you thus far—don't do good to your fellow-creatures! don't try to be the benefactors of households when Providence sends you on a visit! I can't tell you what amount of exasperation one good girl, bent upon doing her duty, and exercising a beneficial influence on all around her, may produce if she tries; but I know from my own experience how great it is, and I was in a perfectly easy and uncomplicated position. If I had been like many wives in the heat and burden of common life—sometimes teased by my children, and sometimes a little out of temper with my husband—matters might have been a great deal worse. As it was, Lucy was certainly quite pleased with herself. She never helped me to bread-and-butter without a

delightful, quiet consciousness in her face that she was exemplifying the Christian duty of loving her neighbours, and was meritoriously ministering and attending to her Aunt Clare.

It turned out that she did not know her cousins the Croftons (except the Croftons of the Manor, whom she had seen abroad), and she was rather curious to hear about them, as was natural.

“Is Mrs. Reginald Crofton coming, Aunt?” she said to me one day. “We saw her in Paris two years ago. I suppose she was pretty when she was young?”

“Pretty when she was young?—Kate Crofton! How old do you suppose she is now?” said I.

“Nay, I cannot tell,” said Lucy; “but she is married, and has babies, and of course one expects her to be oldish. But I liked her very much, Aunt Clare.”

“She is not coming,” said I. “Mr. Crofton’s brother, Robert Crofton, comes always

with his family. There are four of them. Harry, the eldest; then Mary, a little younger than you; and Frank and Edward, two little boys. They are a very nice family. They are the next in succession after Mr. Crofton. You will like them, I have no doubt."

"Oh, I am sure I shall," said Lucy. "I liked Mrs. Reginald so much; and are these all, Aunt Clare?"

"No; there is Mrs. Fortune, Mr. Crofton's sister, and her two children, and the Croftons of Stoke. These are all *your* relations. I expect, besides, some young friends of my own—Alice and Clara Harley, who are about your age, from Estcourt, and Bertie Nugent, a young cousin from Sandhurst."

"I am so glad; I never had companions I cared for of my own age," said Lucy; "but I fear it is selfish to think of that. Will not a large party like this be very fatiguing to you?"

“I think not,” said I; “I am very well; you are too sympathetic, my dear.”

“Papa used to say rather the other way,” said Lucy, with a faint laugh. “He said I was not sympathetic enough. I am glad you do not find me so, Aunt Clare. And may I ask, please, these young ladies from Estcourt—are they some of your orphans, aunt?”

“*My* orphans; I do not quite understand you, Lucy. They are the daughters of the late rector of Estbourn,” said I. “One of them is my godchild. If you are at all afraid to find them inferior to yourself, let me reassure you on that point. They are gentlewomen, and my dear children. I cannot permit any one to look down upon the Harleys.”

“Aunt!” cried Lucy, “am not I an orphan, and dependent on you? If Uncle Derwent had not brought me here, I should have been very thankful to get admittance to Estcourt, for I suppose you bring them up for governesses?”

I was very much provoked, but it was vain to be angry. "When did you hear of Estcourt, Lucy?" I asked.

"Oh, from Mrs. Reginald, aunt. Poor papa was very ill then, and I knew I should soon be destitute; so I always thought, if nothing else appeared, that you would take me in there. It is so generous of you, Aunt! But I am grieved that you should think I would look down upon the Miss Harleys. How am I any better than they?"

But, in spite of Lucy's humility, I could not help feeling extremely annoyed. Was it possible that their education at Estcourt should put a charity-child reputation upon my dear girls?

CHAPTER V.

THIS last conversation with Lucy brought my house and family at Estcourt very much to my mind.

There were now twelve girls there. We did not profess to bring them up for governesses; but they were thoroughly well educated, whatever they might be hereafter. Alice Harley was eighteen, and had finished her education; she had nominally returned to her mother, but was still most of her time at Estcourt. Another of the older girls had become a teacher there; three had gone home, and three were now tutor scholars at my school. It was a school in every sense of the word. Miss Austin had the general charge and superintendence. There were two or three other teachers,

and occasional masters came from town. The children went home at their holidays, when they had homes to go to; when they had none, they remained with Miss Austin. They were well cared for in every way, and seemed very happy. So much for my educational institute. We had a homelier school in Estbourn, where a great many children got their education, and which cleared my conscience of the sin of bringing up the Estcourt girls too daintily, as some people said. My twelve were daughters of poor gentlemen. I wanted to treat them as if they were simply at school, and not recipients of charity; and I confess it cost me a pang—not to say a considerable flush of indignation and resentment—to find that Lucy Crofton had need to excuse herself from the imputation of “looking down upon” my young scholars, and became explanatory, and as near pathetic as it was her nature to be, to demonstrate that she herself was really no better than they were.

No better! No better than Alice Harley! It was, indeed, very easy to believe that.

I was a good deal occupied with these thoughts this afternoon, though nobody was aware of it. To tell the truth, Lucy's attentions put me in a very frequent fret, and made me very often rather ashamed of myself, as I indemnified myself by saying nothing about these unintentional but very irritating offences, and so began slowly to lose my character for good temper in the house. I was in my own dressing-room, considering on this matter of Estcourt, wondering if it could really hurt the girls in their future life, and half inclined to believe that I had done them more harm than good; for, after all, what is education? What does it matter to most women, or indeed to most men, if truth were told, that they have been taught ever so many things beyond the reading and writing, those gifts of nature, which are the true practical and primitive benefits of civilization? My girls

might easily have acquired these anywhere. Had I really injured, to a much greater degree than I had advantaged them, by bringing upon their names the stigma of a charity school?

Much perturbed by these thoughts, I stood leaning against my window, listlessly looking out, when I saw a very fine carriage coming up the hill: so fine a carriage that everybody near knew it nearly a mile off. It belonged to the Sedgewicks, of Waterflag, or rather to old Mrs. Sedgewick, a capital old lady, who had married the late Mr. Sedgewick when he was a poor discarded second son, herself of a very humble class, but had made him an excellent wife, and gained everybody's respect when she came to this kingdom. The only symptom of vulgar taste which the old lady showed was this same carriage, which was truly fine enough for a Lord Mayor. Wondering what could have brought the old lady a journey of twenty miles on a December

day, to call on me, I turned hastily to change my dressing-gown for a more dignified array. But this important matter was not completed when two soft taps came to my door. Before the door could be opened these two taps were repeated, running into a whispering succession of little taps, full of an eager, youthful impatience, as distinctly told as if the knocks had been words, and in came Alice and Clara Harley, skybright, blushing, confused, full of something to tell. Alice, who was most confused of the two, led her sister, while Clara came dropping in with a shy, noiseless step, holding down her head, and had dropped into my arms or ever I was aware, saying nothing, and looking as though it was everybody's duty to kiss her, and her own to droop her pretty head and submit to the same. What possible connexion there could be between the Harleys and old Mrs. Sedgewick's fine carriage, I could not guess for my life. I kissed Clara with very good

will, but I looked to Alice for an explanation. What did it mean?

“Oh, we came to tell you,” said Alice, all breathless with haste and excitement, “it is Clara, it is not me.”

“What is Clara?” said I, in amazement.

“Oh, dear Mrs. Crofton, listen! let me tell you,” said Alice, “Mrs. Sedgewick herself brought us. We came to tell you first, even before mamma; and then we are going to mamma; and I only heard of it the first time last night!”

“But what is it, Alice? am I never to hear?” said I, suspecting at last what this mighty secret must be, and full of anxiety. “Quick, tell me! who is it, Clara? but who is *he*?”

Then it came out in a burst—“Clara is going to be married. It is Mr. Sedgewick. We had met him such a great many times, but I never knew—and he is very very fond of her, Mrs. Crofton. Mr. Sedgewick—last night he said he was my brother, and made me call him Hugh.”

Hugh Sedgewick! he who had revenged himself on his father for marrying a wife beneath him, by turning out at once the finest gentleman and the most dutiful son in the county. Hugh Sedgewick! whose favourable verdict was fame, whose appearance was something scarcely to be hoped for. I held Clara fast, with a mingling of astonishment, pride, and affection which I could scarcely account for. Hugh Sedgewick! fastidious, critical, accomplished, an oracle, and an M.P. Was it to be believed?

“*Our* Clara! Oh, Mrs. Crofton, doesn’t it look like a story?” said Alice. “To think Clara should be married to Mr. Sedgewick; and she only a little girl, and he such a great man! and to be married directly. Can it ever come true?”

“But not unless you and mamma say so,” said Clara, gliding out of my arms to a stool at my feet. “Oh, not for the world unless you say so, and mamma.”

“I think mamma and I will say so, most likely,” said I. “Stay a moment, Alice; I

am too much astonished to speak. Hugh Sedgewick! but not directly; not directly, my dear child. It is too sudden; you must wait."

"Yes, I said so before, godmamma," said Clara, shaking her pretty head. As she did so, this childish movement struck me. Such a child! so tender, so young. Little Clara Harley, the poor widow's daughter, whom Lucy Crofton did not look down upon, because herself was no better! No better! I wonder what Hugh Sedgewick would say to that; and the contrast which this sudden and startling intelligence brought to my own previous thoughts; this instant and overwhelming proof that Estcourt had been no disadvantage to one, at least, of my children, moved to a womanish effusion of pride and pleasure. I raised Clara's blushing face in my hands, and discovered, as if for the first time, what a most lovely child's face it was. Little Clara! *our* Clara! The being married,

which was the astounding circumstance to Alice, did not strike me so much; but I confess, once for all, that I was proud, uplifted, not to say amazed, beyond measure, to find my little Clara Hugh Sedgewick's choice, and therefore cried over her—Alice, joining in with ready chorus, as if, instead of great personal exultation and pleasure, I was very near upon breaking my heart.

“But, Clara, dear child, are you sure; do you like him enough?” said I at last, as a sudden terror struck me. She was a great deal too young to know whether she liked him or not, and of course was startled and awed by the mystery of this love offered to herself. Clara, however, started at the words, raised herself up indignant, blushed scarlet, and exclaimed “Godmamma!” in a tone of offended wonder, like an insulted Titania. So I had nothing more to say on that point. She was safe to love him with her whole heart ere long, and she believed she did it now.

“ And Mrs. Sedgewick brought you : have you left her all this time downstairs? What will she think of us all, children?” said I. “ I suppose she is quite happy and pleased, or she would not have come with you. Come, let us go downstairs.”

“ She is a dear old lady,” said Clara, in a half whisper. “ She says it makes her quite happy. She says *he*—Mr. Sedgewick—has been so restless for a long time, she did not know what ailed him. Oh, godmamma!”

“ What, Clara?”

“ Do you think it is possible—could it be all about *me*?” cried the little girl, in the extremity of her wonder and awe. I could only kiss her by way of assurance. Clara, poor child, had evidently quite given herself up to be kissed this day, and expected nothing else from all to whom her tale was told.

“ And, godmamma,” she whispered again with a triumphant look, as we left the room, “ he says he will call me Clare. I have

always wished to be called Clare, but nobody would ever do it until now."

The poor child! the mingling of the child and the woman in her quite overpowered me. I was affected very near to crying again. If I had been her own very mother, I could scarcely have been more foolish. Well, but these were still my children after all.

Mrs. Sedgewick sat gay and bright, a lively old lady, in the drawing-room, talking to Lucy. When we entered the room, she too came up and kissed me.

"Well," she exclaimed, "what do you think of it? The little one has been acting for herself: are you pleased? They have been so anxious about your opinion, that they have made me anxious too."

"Are *you* pleased?" I asked in a low tone, leading her aside to put the question.

"Perfectly! heartily!" cried the old lady, in her loudest voice, scorning my artifice; "delighted! a sweet little matron whom it

is a pleasure to look at, and who is not too grand to be an old woman's pet and darling—of course I am pleased! And she shall be lady of the house, I can tell you, Mrs. Crofton; no old mothers in the way; and make my Hugh as happy as the day is long. I know she's very young—to be sure she's young; but she'll mend of that every day."

"She is a very good child," said I; "but you must pardon me for being much surprised. I never could have dreamt of Mr. Sedgewick making such a choice."

"There it is, you see," said his mother, with a lively gesture. "You all of you think of his outside appearance—none of you know what a simple heart he has—no one but me! But now we're going to Mrs. Harley's. Give us a glass of wine, please, Mrs. Crofton, and some cake for the poor children, and wish us good luck, and let us go. Simon has gone on to the village to put up the horses, and get post cattle; he'll be back for us directly. Now, my dear

child, take a glass of wine—you want it—and you, too, little Alice; and tie your bonnets and wipe your eyes, and let us be ready to go.”

The girls obeyed the commands of the royal and magnificent old lady, who rather prided herself upon “doing things handsomely,” with a blushing affectionateness which it was a pleasure to see. The fine carriage came for them very shortly, and I went with them to the door.

“I am afraid mamma will scarcely be pleased that you have come to me first,” I said as I bade Clara good-by.

“Oh yes!” said the betrothed, blushing and hanging down her head. “*He* went off to the cottage early this morning—I mean Mr. Sedgewick,” added poor little Clara, turning away her pretty glowing face, as if there was any other *he* in the world but Mr. Sedgewick; but she had not ventured yet to call him Hugh.

“Are these the Miss Harleys, aunt,” said

Lucy, when I came back to the drawing-room, "the same Miss Harleys that are coming here?"

"The very same," said I, and I almost fear I wished Lucy to look rather mortified. "I hope we may still get them to come. Clara is going to be married. I suppose you would guess what all her agitation meant?"

"I did not notice the agitation, but his mother told me. I hope he is a nice man; but is not he a great deal older than she is, aunt?"

"Who told you that?" said I, for I began to suspect that Lucy had some private means of knowing.

"His mother," said Lucy, quietly; "she did not know that I was a stranger. She talked to me as if I knew all about them, and called me Miss Margaret, and I had not time to undeceive her before you came downstairs."

"He *is* older," said I; "but he is a good son, and he will be a good husband."

I was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Derwent. "What's the matter, Clare?" said my husband. "The Lord Mayor's carriage going down the hill, and the little Harleys in it, looking as if the sky had fallen, and they had come to tell you—what is wrong?"

"Clara Harley," said I, very demurely, "is going to be married, Derwent, to Hugh Sedgewick, Esq., M.P., of Waterflag."

Derwent's amazement was comical to behold. He did not believe me, and said, nonsense, it was a poor joke. Then, when conviction forced itself upon him, he danced about the room with shouts of laughter, and at last checked himself and looked serious, just as I was about to be very angry.

"Well, he is not the first man whom a pretty face has made a fool of," said Derwent; "but of all men in the world, Sedgewick! That is always the way with your prigs."

"He is not a prig," said I, rather indig-

nant. "I think he has shown himself a very sensible man."

"Sensible!" echoed my husband; and it would take at least three notes of admiration to express the emphasis which Derwent put upon the word. "I suppose you think him a kind of son-in-law, Clare. Why, the fellow is as old as I am!"

"Well, it is easy to settle that," said I, feeling provoked. "Let us just calculate how old he is."

We both remembered him in our own youth, and that was easy enough, so by degrees the estimate assumed five-and-thirty! Derwent would not consent to a less age; but then, Hugh Sedgewick was only in petticoats when my lord and husband came home from Eton with *that* fever. Thirty, then! Why, he had been abroad no end of time. Derwent dare-said Lucy must have seen him. What was Lucy's opinion? Thirty, if he was a day!

“Eight-and-twenty,” said I, obstinately, “if so much; not a day more.”

Whereupon Derwent gave in. “Eight-and-twenty in years; fifty in profaneness; and little Clara Harley whole sixteen, I suppose. I wish you joy of your son-in-law, my dear Clare.”

But Clara Harley was seventeen, and a month or two over. After all, that was only eleven years.

CHAPTER VI.

CHRISTMAS! and all Hilfont bristled with holly, shone with bay leaves, trembled with mistletoe. Our decorations were profuse and florid, like Derwent's taste. Red winter berries gleamed at one everywhere, and festoons of every evergreen in existence covered the walls. There were so many fires in the house, that the air warmed you the moment you entered at the door; and the house was full of voices and footsteps, and many people, and glowed with hospitality, for which Mr. Crofton had a weakness. Mary Fortescue, with her two children; Robert Crofton and his wife, with their four; the Stoke Croftons, with their grown-up daughters, made a positive bewilderment and confusion of family names. There were two Mary Croftons, and two Mary

Fortescues, one of which latter had been Mary Crofton, too, in her youth. Then there were three Mr. and three Mrs. Croftons, only two of whom called each other by their Christian names, so that all the common mistakes of an assembled family party made merry our guests at Hilfont, when some one for whom it was not intended was always answering every observation. The old house was merry and alive with all these unusual sounds. There was always somebody playing, or somebody singing, somewhere; always a noise of the steps and voices of the Crofton boys, or Mary's little girls; most frequently audible indications that Derwent was romping with them. What a father he would have been; it used to bring the tears to my eyes.

Alice and Clara had also come to fulfil their engagement—Alice with her usual delight and affectionate pleasure, but Clara with a divided heart. Mr. Sedgewick was an impetuous lover, and accustomed to have

his own way. Mrs. Harley, who was doubtful and hesitating, and never knew her own mind, and Clara, a timid little girl, who did not pretend to an opinion of her own, but did what she was told, now no match for the authoritative man of the world, and lord of the manor, who proposed to ally himself with this fallen family. He had made up his mind that this very young bride was not to be talked over and wondered at, by all the county for a whole year, as we proposed. "When Sedgewick has determined to do a foolish thing, he will do it immediately," my husband had prophesied to me, and so it proved; and the longest respite which poor Clara could obtain was until Easter, when her impetuous lord had vowed to be married. So I fear Clara's thoughts, which were often with Mr. Sedgewick, were also sometimes with her *trousseau*, an overwhelming affair for such a child, and her marriage trip afterwards, which of itself was a promised

glory enough to upset a seventeen year old brain. For *he* was to take her abroad to France, and Switzerland, and Italy! No wonder Clara's thoughts wandered; and it was often only the outside and external presentment of her which sat quiet, with wistful eyes, in the drawing-room at Hilfont.

And then came Bertie Nugent, the crown of our Christmas party. Bertie was now a handsome young guardsman, greatly to his own delight, but not much to the satisfaction of "the governor" in India, who had already given me more than one hint that I ought to provide for the lad whom my lavish friendship had spoiled for work. These hints had given me a little trouble some time since, but now that was all over; there were no new heirs coming to disappoint these boys. Harry Crofton was to have Hilfont, and what better could I do than leave Estcourt to Bertie, who was a Nugent of my own blood, and after my own heart. And then he was such a fine fellow,

so handsome, so good, so true! Perhaps it was the mysterious link of blood—perhaps the thought long cherished, that he would one day fill my father's place and carry down the name—I cannot tell what it was, but Bertie was nearer to my heart than any of the other children; and if I must be candid, I will even now reveal a secret of my own, unknown to any one, but dating a long way back, before I was married, and while they were still children. I, too, had my favourite little project of match-making, which I manœuvred with the utmost anxiety, though I was, as Derwent said, almost less a match-maker than a married woman who was happy herself ought to be. I thought if I could but see Bertie Nugent married to Alice Harley I should be quite happy. I had, of course, never suggested such a thing to either of them, by the merest whisper, nor named it even to Derwent. I think it was almost the only secret I had in the world.

So here they were, altogether. The two whom Derwent wished to unite, and the two whom I wished to unite, meeting each other every day with the most perfect placidity, and the most provoking friendliness, totally unconscious of the plans laid about them; unless, indeed, it was Lucy, who was amazingly conscious of everything; had always her eyes about her, and was a great deal more knowing and experienced in the world than any of the rest.

Our drawing-room, usually so quiet, was rather a pretty sight in these long winter evenings. Mrs. Robert Crofton, and Mrs. Crofton, of Stoke, commonly fell into talk together; both of them had families, and both were learned in the sickness of children and the vagaries of young people. I almost think I can see them now, one on the sofa, one in a great easy-chair, with the little sofa-table and lamp between them, laying their heads, or rather their caps, together, over domestic economies and

family troubles. Mrs. Fortescue, who was not only my husband's sister, but my oldest friend, the Mary Crofton of my childhood, kept close to me by the same instinct. Her two little girls kept up quiet romps around her chair, if they were not with the little Croftons poring over the Indian puzzle boxes which Bertie had brought with him. Of the young ladies, one was at the piano, one looking over her, one working, and one sitting by the fire. The one who was working was Clara—I cannot say she was much addicted to work, as a general principle, but I dare say the poor child was only too thankful of such a gentle turn to her thoughts. The two at the piano were the two strangers—both Mary Croftons—who were not at all unlike each other, and both very good girls in their way, which way, however, does not concern this present history; and it was Lucy who was sitting by the fire, not meditative, but busy in explaining things to the children; sometimes

remarking upon the music, ready to strike in at any pause, into any conversation. She was still in black, but the black was silk, and not so doleful as her former apparel; and nothing could be prettier than her white neck and shoulders, which looked whiter in contrast with the black dress and the little chain of jet which encircled her neck. I could not help wondering where she had got it; but Lucy's mourning was so complete in all its ornaments and adjuncts that it was a standing wonder to me.

“When is Hugh Sedgewick coming?” said Mrs. Fortescue, in a half whisper, looking at Clara, who was too far off to hear us. “What is the child thinking of, Clare? Is it her finery, or her new dignity, or is it *him*?”

“The whole together,” said I; “but I wonder why you all judge so harshly of my son-in-law, as Derwent calls him; I have no doubt he will be a very happy man.”

Mrs. Fortescue once more looked at Clara,

and a smile came gradually brightening upon her face, then it broke into a little laugh. "Do you know, Clare," she said, "that Hugh is an old lover of mine? I believe he really once offered me his hand and heart, as the words say. That was just before I was married, when he was a tyro at home for the holidays. How I laughed! and how grand he looked! I really got quite ashamed of myself."

"They say boys always like women older than themselves," said I; "and I am sure men like Hugh Sedgewick, fastidious, critical, highly-refined men, very often choose as he had done. I don't know why—unless it is that they distrust all kind of art and education, knowing it so well, and are forced to fall back upon simple nature when their hearts are concerned."

"Poor little Clara is simple nature, certainly," said Mrs. Fortescue, who still laughed softly to herself over her old recollections; "but I trust that you do not mean to stigmatize me as Art?"

“I dare say Hugh found this a very easy wooing. No need to woo long before this lady of his love; the poor child must have given in at once, in very fright. Fancy Hugh Sedgewick with his rueful bow—I wonder she has not gone out of her wits with fear.”

“Hush, Mary, you must not speak so of my little girl,” said I; “she is very young. She has never had any occasion to act for herself; but I believe even now, at seventeen, if anything occurred to call for it, Clara is able to vindicate her womanliness—she has more in her than you believe.”

“Poor pretty child, she ought to live in fairy life,” said Mary; “she will never have any occasion to stand up for herself, I hope. I shall never forgive Hugh Sedgewick if he does not make her very happy—he can, if he will.”

With this the conversation dropped, for the gentlemen now came into the room; but I could not help observing Lucy as Mary spoke; she was seated near us, and could

hear a great proportion of what was said; she had a slight smile on her lips—a *listener's* smile, somewhat amused, somewhat interested, yet not very much concerned. Yet, I would rather she had not heard; not that I feared any mischief-making from Lucy, she was too good a girl to make mischief—still—but she *had* heard, and there was an end of it; and nothing had been said that could do any one any harm.

CHAPTER VII.

“ I WANT to have a peep at old Estcourt, cousin Clara, before I leave,” said Bertie, “ can’t you drive over some day?—it is not so very far.”

“ Fifteen miles,” said I, “ and back again ; and do you think I could take a dangerous fellow like you among so many girls ? ”

“ Dangerous ! I am their brother,” said Bertie, with a laugh and a blush, and a look of ingenuous gratitude and thanks. “ We’re all in the same boat, and have a right to be friends. Here’s to-day as bright as June, and nothing particular to do with it—let us all go ! ”

“ With the greatest of pleasure. I should like above all things to go over to Estcourt and see your arrangements, Clare. I am



told they are quite admirable," said Mrs. Robert Crofton.

"And no one is admitted! It will be quite a privilege," cried Mrs. Crofton of Stoke.

"May I be of the party, aunt?" said Lucy, quietly—so quietly, as if this gentle girl had no will of her own, but lived only at my pleasure, that it would have been barbarous to say no. I gave in at last against my will. We set out, the whole party of us, except the elder gentlemen, the three Mr. Croftons, who had no particular mind to follow their wives over the country on such an errand. Henry and Bertie were to ride. We elder ladies and the children filled two carriages, while Mary Crofton of Stoke, who was the least thing in the world of a hoyden, proposed riding with "the boys," as she was pleased to call them.

"And I can mount you, Lucy," said Derwent; "are you up to fifteen miles? Rather a long stretch for a lady. I expect you'll

both give in long before you reach Estcourt."

"Does Lucy ride?" asked I, in some surprise.

"The best horseman I know," said Derwent, laughing, while she with all the rest went to get ready. I was surprised—perhaps something more than surprised—for all Lucy's attainments came upon me unexpectedly. Modesty, perhaps, and humbleness of mind, a desire not to boast; but it was somewhat annoying to find out the gifts of one's inmate and companion so suddenly. Virtue so superior and out of the way somehow never gets the appreciation which it is supposed to deserve.

Alice, the other Mary Crofton, and the little Fortescues were in the other carriage. Alice was no horsewoman, and I saw with a momentary regret the young people cantering before us, Bertie keeping close by Lucy's rein. That, of course, was a mere accident; but still I should have preferred

that Alice had been there. Lucy seemed to manage her horse with as much quietness, and ease, and propriety as she did everything else, not exuberant like the Stoke Mary, who was wild with simple spirits and girlish gaiety. But then I was vexed and put out by discovering again, for the fifth or sixth time, that I knew nothing about Lucy, and that she did not choose to bestow any of her confidence on me. I could not help thinking over it as we drove along. Was it my fault? Yet why should she have hesitated to tell me that she rode and liked riding? To be sure she did not hesitate, she only said nothing about it. It was her way.

It was past noon when we reached Estcourt. There were no lessons going on then. The teachers had gone home, and half of the children, the other half, in that holiday time, were doing their own pleasure. This pleasure consisted in some secret and mysterious work, about which I, dropping

in by chance and alone to my old morning-room, found them clustering their heads as busy as possible. They were rather disturbed by my sudden entrance, and plunged the work instantly into a mighty work-table of Miss Austin's, one and all exclaiming in dismay, "If Alice should see it!" Then the secret was confided to me after I had taken an oath of strict silence. It was a wedding present for Clara—a magnificent tablecover worked in twelve squares, one by every girl in Estcourt—a mystery which the sisterhood were bound under grievous penalties not to divulge till the completion of the work. "But Mrs. Crofton will not tell?" said the least of the little embroiderers, looking doubtfully in my face. I repeated my vow with the greatest seriousness. "And oh, please, don't let Alice come here!" cried another. I could not promise that, but remained till Miss Austin's work-table was carefully locked up; then, surely, the secret was safe.

After this little adventure I returned to the drawing-room, where Miss Austin had received the party, and where the young people waited for luncheon with agreeable impatience. The two Mrs. Croftons and the two Miss Croftons looked about them with considerable amazement, especially the elder ladies, and Lucy cast quiet investigating looks at the door. But there was only plain, homely, iron-grey Miss Austin, who was now so confirmed and established in her authority as to be half resentful of the intrusion of visitors upon her quiet. Nothing to be seen! The astonishment burst forth at last.

“But this is not the establishment; we see none of Mrs. Crofton’s arrangements here,” said, in a tone of disappointment, my namesake of Stoke.

“Indeed, I do not think I promised to show you any,” said I. “I brought you to see Estcourt, which is a very cosy old house, and has a little picture gallery and chamber

of state, which strangers often ask to see; for otherwise we have no arrangements here."

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Robert; "but the institution—the asylum——"

"Mrs. Crofton means the rooms for the orphans, aunt," explained Lucy.

By this time Alice, blushing, yet looking somewhat indignant, had withdrawn behind Miss Austin's chair; and Bertie, generously troubled and uneasy for her, followed her there with a book in his hand, loudly calling her attention to it.

"Look here, Alice," cried Bertie, "here's a mark of old times; here's where you scribbled in the days of your youth, and spoiled the title-page, and caught a blowing up. Look here! and your name, written in my own admirable hand-writing as it was in those days; yet you leave such a valuable autograph lying about anywhere — for shame!"

Bertie's speech restored my good humour.

“Do you call Estcourt anywhere, you saucy boy?” said I. “Leave the memorial where it is; I like to see it. Come, luncheon is ready. The children are somewhere about; it is holiday time, and there is nothing to do. But as we are going to share their roast mutton, we shall see them at table. Come; but I am afraid there is only simple fare.”

With amazed faces, my visitors followed to the dining-room.

“I don’t understand it at all,” said Mrs. Robert Crofton to Mrs. Crofton of Stoke, in an audible whisper, which I could not help overhearing. “The arrangements here are those of a gentleman’s house; where are the children kept, do you suppose?”

The other lady shook her head; she was as much in the dark as my respectable sister-in-law.

“If this is charity, I only wish my children were as well off,” continued Mrs. Robert, who was a lawyer’s wife, and lived in

Russell-square, and they did not at all know how to treat the six little girls, who, though shy, were as frank in their speech, so far as I was concerned, as though they too had been Croftons. Mrs. Robert looked round the room, and held up her hands in telegraphic horror. She was shocked to think that my orphans were so well off, and in virtuous indignation was quite ready to suggest that scores of poor children might have been educated and clothed in blue frocks and white tippetts for the sum which supported in this luxury my unjustly favoured twelve. It might have been sold for so much, and given to the poor. I could read that ancient sentiment in my sister-in-law's face; but I fear she was thinking, not of the poor, but of her own Harry and Mary, Frank and Edward, who had no such gardens as those of Estcourt to luxuriate in. As for Lucy, she began to enter into conversation with the little girl next her, and asked how she liked to be here, and said how kind Mrs.

Crofton was, till the child was stricken mute with amazement, not knowing, till it was suggested to her, that there was anything so very remarkable in her lot. At all this Alice Harley looked on with a thoughtful face; she had ceased to speak to any of our party, and sat by herself among the little girls, with a certain air of pride and resentment which I never remember to have seen on her face before. And Bertie was not now by her side to speak of old times, and she could hear at the other side of the table Lucy quietly informing Mrs. Crofton of Stoke that she was an orphan, and "no better" than these children, and once thought she should have been very glad to be admitted to Estcourt.

"Where, I suppose, aunt qualifies them all for governesses," said Lucy. "So good of her! I thought I should have had to be a governess too."

It was an odd scene in its way, and not a very pleasant one, though I am very sure

there was nothing in the roast mutton and rice pudding, which my honest Bertie demolished to such an alarming extent, to make anybody envious. Yet I found the two Mrs. Croftons quite without interest in the picture gallery and the chamber of state. Lucy desired to be left behind to make acquaintance with the little girls whom she was so eager to show herself on an equality with; but of all the other incidents of that visit, I was most concerned by the sudden cloud which covered Alice Harley's face.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE morning after this expedition, I found Clara and Alice together in very close conversation in their own room. The rest of the party were all downstairs, discussing their plans for the day; but the two sisters had contrived to steal away immediately after breakfast. Alice was seated on the ottoman at the foot of the bed, while Clara half knelt, half sat on the floor before her, leaning on her sister's knee. Alice was the speaker, and Clara's earnest little face was gazing up to her with wistful wonder and distress. They both started, and looked a little confused as I entered.

“Why are you here, children?” said I.
“Have you no opinions or inclinations to add to the general council as to what is to be done to-day?”

“Oh, please, we would rather not go down; we would rather not go anywhere, Mrs. Crofton,” said Alice. “Nobody will ever miss us; we will stay here.”

“And how do you know nobody will miss you?” said I. “Am I nobody, and Mr. Crofton, and Bertie, and the children? Is Alice cross to-day, Clara, tell me?”

“Alice is never cross,” said my godchild, with some spirit; “but, oh, please speak to her; she says such dreadful things. She has been so low and dull ever since yesterday.”

“Low and dull? I do not understand that. Has any one vexed you, Alice?”

“No,” said Alice, with a certain youthful dignity; “only I have been thinking, if you please, Mrs. Crofton, I think I ought to go out as a governess.”

“Oh, godmamma, listen to her!” cried Clara, with a sudden burst of tears; “she has been going on so all the morning, and just when this has happened to me, and we

were all to be so happy. Speak to her, godmamma!"

"A governess!" said I; "indeed I do not please, Alice. What does the child mean?"

"Ah, we are not children now," said Alice, pathetically. "When we were children, it did not matter. We had no experience; we did not understand anything; but now!" and Alice ended with a profound sigh, and shook her head sorrowfully, as though all the troubles of existence were hanging heavy upon that pretty white brow.

I was sorry for the poor child, yet I could scarcely help laughing. "Do you know that one is always the better for telling one's troubles?" said I. "Come, open your heart, and let me know what they are."

"Mrs. Crofton," said Alice, solemnly, after a little pause, "I ought to go out as a governess; I know I ought. Clara is going to be married, and to be rich, and I hope she will be very, very happy; but I have read in books how gentlemen feel to their

wives' families, and I will not go with her to fret her husband; so Clara has no cause to be angry, nor grieved either, and that is one part of it quite settled and clear."

"Very well; now for the other," said I.

I rather think Alice was half offended that I received her "settled and clear" so quietly, and consented to it with so much readiness. She looked as if she would like to cry, but after another little pause, proceeded again.

"And, then, mamma has not very much for the rest at home. I could not go to make them poorer. I will go and be a governess, please!"

"Let us go into it quietly," said I, showing no sympathy for the sudden break-down which accompanied this exclamation. "Is it because mamma has told you she has very little, or because you have seen the other ones suffering from your presence, that you have come to this sudden resolution, Alice?"

“Mamma would do anything rather than let me think myself a burden,” said Alice, with indignation.

“It was some of the little ones, then,” said I.

“Oh, godmamma!” cried Clara, “you do not think so; you know better. It was what some one said yesterday, when you were at Estcourt, about the girls.”

“And I don’t mean to be ungrateful,” cried poor Alice through her tears; “but if mamma was too poor to bring us up at home, I ought to work for her, and help her now. I know it is all true. I should never have learned anything but for your kindness. I have no right to be proud, and say they were cruel to tell me so. I did not know indeed we were all brought up for governesses; but I must not be dependent on mamma, who is poor. I must do my duty now, I know.”

“I trust you will,” said I; “but do you think, Alice, Mrs. Robert Crofton is a much

better judge than I am, and than mamma, what your duty is?"

"Oh, it was not Mrs. Robert Crofton; it was every one," said Alice, turning away her face.

"Alice is naughty, Clara," said I, "and ill-tempered. She is punishing you and me for other people's faults; never mind! We are good, and don't deserve it. Now listen to me, you foolish little girl. Young ladies in novels go out as governesses when there is no necessity for it, to show that they are high-minded, and of an independent spirit, and to exhibit the cruelty of all those unfortunate people who employ governesses; but I had much rather my Alice did not do that. I had rather—now don't look astonished; you are a gentlewoman; you can't help being a gentlewoman, whatever you may do. I had rather, for my own part, see my Alice the housemaid at home."

"The housemaid!" They both looked at me with pale faces and dilated eyes.

“To be sure, the housemaid! Don't you think it would be delightful to be able to do everything all with your own hands and head, and nobody helping you, for mamma and the children at home?”

At which saying Alice suddenly got up and kissed me, and a bright blush of surprise and pleasure, shame and satisfaction, flew over her face. She perceived what I meant, but so did not Clara, whose little head was running on her own future grandeur, and who repeated that terrible name of housemaid with dismay.

“Yes, my dear child,” said I, delivering a little speech for the occasion (which was an indulgence, however, which I rarely permitted myself), “I don't agree with the working-women idea very much. I don't think any lady does an unbecoming office when she sweeps her own hearth and serves her own table. Serving one's own, even in menial offices, is a privilege, and does not lower in all ranks. I think they are happy

who can do it; but everything that is not necessary is unbecoming. Your mamma's income is a certain one, if it is not very large, and you can do your duty a great deal better by remaining at home. Look me up that text which speaks of voluntary humility and will worship, Alice, for a punishment. When I take to preach, I shall take that and harp upon it; but I hope my dear little girl has had her share of the lesson, and will not require any more."

Alice rose with a blush to do as I told her; but paused when she had taken a step or two towards the table.

"Did mamma ask you to take us, Mrs. Crofton," she said, with a little timidity. "I remember long ago something Lady Greenfield said about an Orphan Asylum, and it all came back again yesterday. Did mamma ask you to take us?"

"No," said I; "I took you because I wanted something which you had to give."

"And what was that? Oh, what was

that? Tell us," they cried both together, with the greatest eagerness.

"I was very solitary then," said I; "it was love!"

In a moment they were both clinging round me, twining their soft arms about my neck and my waist. My heart warmed. I felt the dull pain that was always there eased and relieved with a sudden sensation of happiness. I *had* children; I was not a dry tree.

"And I think I got a little of it," said I, "and comforted myself. So now, children, when Mrs. Robert Crofton, or anybody else, says anything stupid about Estcourt, tell them they do not know."

I left them after a while, looking even brighter than usual, and with all the cloud blown over; but still I was uneasy about the children. It was not Mrs. Robert; it was every one. They were tender little hearts, and they were at the most sensitive age. I should have been very glad to have

sent them away from Hilfont, to be out of trouble; but that was impossible. Then I could say to Mrs. Robert, "Do not say anything about an orphan asylum, please; Estcourt is not an orphan asylum, and the little Harleys are more highly connected than I am." But I could not condescend so far as to make any such request to Lucy. I know by instinct how obligingly she would consent, and what care she would take to "save the feelings" of Aunt Clara's young friends. But it was just this, I fear, which provoked me in anticipation, and made me perfectly silent on the subject as far as she was concerned. However, Lucy was fully occupied at present with her relations, the other Croftons, amongst all of whom she was very popular, and who one and all congratulated me on possessing her. It was delightful to see her unselfishness, her consideration for others, Mrs. Crofton of Stoke assured me that very night, and how she watched my every movement, and tried to

anticipate my wishes. I said "Yes," and I dare say my excellent kinswoman thought me very ungrateful.

However, the conclusion of my thoughts about Alice and Clara was twofold. First, that they must hear something of the kind sooner or later, and had better get it over now; and, second, that Mr. Sedgewick was coming to-morrow; Derwent had invited him to join our Christmas party. I was a little curious to see how he behaved to his little fiancée, and felt that his arrival would at least effect a diversion in any little schemes of annoyance towards my two girls.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. SEDGEWICK came next day. So far as local society could confer it, Hugh Sedgewick was a man of fame, and of course the position of the two girls, one of whom held so interesting a relationship to him, was immediately improved. Somehow, the countenance of her future brother-in-law, whom she had known for a short time only, gave Alice Harley more confidence in herself than my loving and motherly affection; and I understood why, and did not blame her. While Clara, wanting no confidence in herself, was content to look up to him with a girlish, all-believing faith which touched everybody's heart. Perhaps she was too dutiful and obedient for an engaged young lady; but then she was so young, and so pretty, and he looked so entirely delighted

with her blushing silence. I do not think anybody could have had the heart to vex Clara in her pretty happiness.

Mr. Sedgewick was to stay a week—a whole week—the third part of the time that they themselves were to stay at Hilfont; and he brought the prettiest Christmas presents for them, ornaments for his little Clara, such as she had never dreamed of before. Yet I was not entirely pleased with his manner towards her—though it was perfectly natural, and just what might have been expected—a tender, playful gallantry, always delicate, always considerate, and full of suppressed fondness; but still it was the behaviour of a man who had taken to his bosom, for plaything and personal pleasure, a pretty child. What was she else? Yet I did not think it quite a safe foundation on which to build the sober superstructure of marriage.

On the first evening our party was increased by several neighbours, and a very

cheerful-looking party it was. I could not but smile to myself when I remembered how I had half apologized to Lucy for our usual hospitalities. Lucy was the chief entertainer—the most pleased guest. She made no display, certainly, of her accomplishments, and did not do anything to attract special attention; but she was so perfectly at her ease, so free from any kind of shyness, so ready to contribute to everybody's amusement. Everybody, in due return of gratitude, was delighted with her; and again congratulations poured in upon her from all sides. In this company, where there were a good many pretty girls, she was not specially distinguished for her prettiness—but she was so “nice!”

The next morning we were by ourselves. When we came into the drawing-room after dinner, Lucy began to play. I am not much charmed myself by the cold voices of instruments; they say I don't understand fine music; at all events, I prefer it through a

human interpretation, and not through wood and ivory. But I was not ignorant enough to be unaware of the quality of Lucy's music; I had no inkling of it before. She practised certainly; but her practising was of polkas, and waltzes, and marches, like any other young lady, which she played well, but without any extraordinary skill. It was quite different to-night, and we all listened with surprise. She was evidently a first-rate pianist. Another discovery. I said, "Lucy, I had no idea you were so accomplished," as I stood by the piano, where lay all those waltzes and polkas. "No?" said Lucy, with a smiling interrogatory, looking up in my face; and I went to the other end of the room and sat down, really wishing, for the moment, that some servant would enter the room with some annoying message, to have a legitimate opportunity for the discharge of ill-humour. I am not a quarrelsome person in general; but I am human. I cannot keep at one level blank of pretty

behaviour; and my comfort was rather spoiled for that night.

When I looked towards the piano again, Hugh Sedgewick was standing behind Lucy's chair, turning the leaves of her music, his face quite glowing with interest and admiration, while all the people in the room were absolutely silent, listening, even the two Mrs. Croftons. No one was so pleased as Mr. Sedgewick. When Lucy had finished, he asked her for something else, and something else, till the surfeit of sweet sounds loosed everybody's tongue, and conversation was resumed again. Still, in defiance of the conversation, in defiance of the rising displeasure of the two Mary Croftons, who naturally concluded that they also ought to be asked to exhibit their gifts, and gain a share of the applause, Mr. Sedgewick still kept Lucy at the piano. All this time Clara stood close by, with her eyes sometimes bent upon Lucy, sometimes upon Sedgewick; on Lucy with the most genuine and simple

admiration, and on Hugh Sedgewick with a sincere and candid delight in seeing his pleasure, which was enough to beautify the whole scene.

“Look!” said Mrs. Fortescue, directing my attention to Clara’s face, “look, how pleased she is. But she wont be so pleased if it is repeated to-morrow.”

“Hush, Mary!” said I, “she will; she is as unsuspecting as a child.”

“She *is* a child, poor little thing,” said Mary. “But you need not speak so tragically, either; there is nothing to be suspicious about.”

And of course there was nothing. But when one finds out the tastes and acquirements of one’s companion by a series of sudden surprises, one learns to be suspicious whether one will or no.

“How she plays!” cried Bertie. “That’s what I call something like music—none of your school-girl’s stuff. There’s Alice, now, cousin Clara, has a pretty little voice; but

set her down to sing, and her hand tumbles on the keys like an old woman's. She can no more accompany herself than I can. There's no steadiness in most young ladies."

"When did you become a critic, Bertie?" asked I, not very much pleased by the comparison.

"Since I've been in town," said Bertie, honestly. "I've been at the opera, I can't tell how often. That's the sort of thing. Estcourt ought to go up bodily for one night, just to hear what music is. Let's have charge of them! Wouldn't it be a lark?"

"Go and ask Lucy if she can sing," said Mary Fortescue. "You mustn't talk of larks to a couple of old ladies. Can she, Clara?"

"Really, I do not know; I was not aware she could play after this fashion," said I. "Go, Bertie."

So Bertie went. "Oh, no, no," we heard Lucy answer, with a laugh; "but cousin

Mary can. No more, please, Mr. Sedgewick, no more! I shall be delighted to play for you to-morrow. Aunt Clara likes the voice best, and you are absolutely crazy about Beethoven—no, please. I am sure we have been quite selfish, forgetting everything—no more!”

And Lucy came tripping away, putting on her gloves, and looking half surprised, half ashamed, as if only that moment she had become conscious of her long occupation. She looked at her watch with a pretty shrug of her shoulders. . “Half-past ten! Indeed, I must ask you to forgive me, Aunt Clara,” said Lucy. “When I fairly sit down to the piano, I always forget myself; and Mr. Sedgewick seems quite an enthusiast, too. Poor little Miss Harley! how quiet she looks! I am afraid we have bored her to death with Beethoven. I am sure I ought to make an apology all round for forgetting what I was about, and keeping everybody occupied so long.”

“I was not at all bored,” said Clara, for whom Mr. Sedgewick at last had found a seat. “I enjoyed the music very much.”

“But she will not enjoy it so much another night,” said Mary Fortescue, in an aside.

“You have not kept everybody occupied, my dear; don’t reproach yourself,” said I, replying to Lucy. “*We* have been talking, and the two Marys have exhausted the picture books. But how is it you never told me you were so fond of music?”

“It did not matter, aunt,” said Lucy, quietly. “I never was troublesome all my life. I was quite willing to give it up. It did not matter.”

“Give it up?” cried I, really moved beyond my patience; “why in the world should you give it up?”

“Nay, aunt,” it is just as you please,” said Lucy. “*I* should be very glad to play half the day.”

And Lucy took out her crochet, and hooked

up her thread with the most perfect equanimity—a girl of the most wonderful sweetness and good-temper—never put out; but I really did not appreciate these miraculous qualities as the other people did.

Hugh Sedgewick had found a chair for Clara, and was leaning over it. “Forgive me!” he said in an undertone, which only I, sitting close to them, could hear; “I am a great lover of music.”

“Forgive you!” said Clara, looking up in his with her innocent eyes. “I was very glad indeed!”

And so she was. A thought of envy or of jealousy had never entered that innocent young head. He muttered something more, which seemed to me to sound very like that worn-out “angel!” which I had hoped was only used by lovers in story-books. Clara was evidently surprised by it, as well as I.

“Have I done anything very good?” said Clara, with a momentary gleam of girlish humour; “but I wish I could play like Miss Crofton.”

“By the bye, I have never heard you,” said Mr. Sedgewick. “I have no doubt you do. I must hear you soon. It is too late to-night?”

Which meant, I fear, that, after Lucy's performance, Mr. Sedgewick did not care about the school-girl playing of his little bride. I watched them both with some anxiety. He was fond of her, but he was only playing with her—very fond of her, ready to take her up in his arms, and run away with her any moment; but if it had not been for Lucy, this ridiculous suspiciousness certainly never could have entered into my head.

CHAPTER X.

MARY FORTESCUE was wrong in her prophecy. This music was repeated next night, and Clara was still pleased with it. Whatever other people might do, she never once compared herself with Lucy Crofton; and the tender quiet of her girlish love, which was not passion, was disturbed by no suspicions. She was pleased to see Mr. Sedgewick pleased, and admired to its fullest extent the superlative talent which produced that result; but she did not grumble that this talent was exercised by another than herself. Secure in her own true little heart, Clara sat working some little bits of embroidery, without agitation and without fear. I dare say it never occurred to her that an accomplishment or a talent could wile one heart away from another. These

were outside matters, and very independent of the love which bound this innocent child to the man of the world who stood beside her; and with a flush of womanly pride Clara would have shrunk from the idea of "a rival." I however watched them with less confiding feelings. I became less and less pleased with Sedgewick, more and more concerned about Clara; and I think Alice, who had remained slightly misanthropical ever since our visit to Estcourt, looked on also with a troubled eye.

There was also music through the day. It is always captivating to a party of young people to spend idle hours round a piano—consulting, "Do you know this?" "Can you take a part in that?" "Is not this magnificent?" Then to find out whose voices are suitable, and what everybody can do. It is as good a fashion of that idleness which is prone to fall in love, and as fruitful of foolish young engagements, as any method which boys and girls left to themselves ever

found out. But when in presence of the party which longs to have each a hand in the general pleasure, this business becomes a long musical monologue, I fear the finest music will not prevent the sitting from growing wearisome. The two Marys would rather have sung their own ballads, and made little runs into "tunes," and tempted Henry and Bertie to let loose the grumbling chorus of their adolescent voices, than listened hour after hour to Lucy's admirable playing. So they dropped off one by one to their own amusements, he who held out longest being generally Bertie, who displayed an interest in music for which I was quite unprepared. I confess I thought there was a great deal too much of it, for my own part, and by and by came with the most hearty ill-will to dislike, not only Beethoven, but all his tuneful brethren. I would rather have listened to a German band outside the window than to the delicate inspirations which came sweetly to my ear from a room

unused by us, where there was an organ and a number of other instruments, and which was called the music-room, so much so that I still hold in distaste from this circumstance, and always shall, some of the finest music in the world.

Clara, I suppose, was not present during that next day's music. The two had gone out to see some of my poor friends in the village—a kindly errand for which they both had a special vocation; but that night and the next night the music continued to be repeated. Mr. Sedgewick's engagement was known to, and not very highly approved by, the two Mrs. Croftons; but they both began to look at Lucy with disapproving looks, blaming *her* entirely, as is the wont of women; I suppose men are slow to notice anything of the kind. Derwent never found it out, could not perceive anything but comfort and satisfaction, and wondered audibly what the ladies were all so quiet about. To tell the truth, the ladies were

watching a kind of domestic interlude. Was it that the rash lover who had betrothed himself to a child had found in that child's very presence a more fit companion? Was it that the innocent, hapless romance was to die at a blow, and a different story end the record? Was Lucy contriving to displace the simple little girl who was no match for her? And how long would it be before Clara took fright and found out the reality of her position? These questions occupied us all without any communication passing between us. I know we had all the same feeling in different manifestations. The two Mrs. Croftons still talked to each other, and Mary Fortescue and I still kept up our usual conversation, but it was abstracted and languid; while we all watched, with an interest involuntary and womanish, the climax of this drama, which might possibly be a tragedy for anything we could tell.

Yet not a tragedy. Surely even if Mr. Sedgewick was thus unworthy, my dear little

Clara was too young for more than a passing heartbreak; but who could tell?

On the fourth evening there arose a further complication. I had resolved by this time to make myself one of Lucy's audience, that Sedgewick's fascination might at least be less apparent; and as I stood by listening, I saw him take up one of the pieces of music which lay on the piano. He read the name on it with an exclamation of surprise. It was that of a little out-of-the-way German town.

"Nobody ever goes there," said Mr. Sedgewick, repeating the name. "How is it possible I could have forgot? I met you there!"

"Met me. Oh, very likely," said Lucy quietly, having come to the end of her sonata. "We used to wander about everywhere while poor papa was alive; he was an invalid and fanciful. I dare say every Englishman who has travelled on the Continent must have seen me one time or

another; and so I am never surprised when I see a face which I remember again. I have thought I must have seen you somewhere since ever you came to Hilfont; your face was quite familiar to me."

"It is five years since I was there," said Mr. Sedgewick; "could it be you? You must have been a child then."

"I was a little old woman. I never was a child," said Lucy; "I always had to take care of papa. Oh, I have some drawings of his you should see; but I dare say you are an artist yourself. And they are chiefly of that dear old place. We did so enjoy the time we were there."

"No English!" said Mr. Sedgewick, significantly.

"No English!" said Lucy, clapping her hands at the joke. "Oh, it was delightful. I remember it as if it were yesterday. Have you ever been in Bavaria, Mr. Nugent?" she said, breaking off to address Bertie.

"Never anywhere but in Paris," said

Bertie, who was a little discouraged by having his homekeeping held up to the general observation, but who, notwithstanding, like all the rest of the young fools, thought it very grand and superior to be able to congratulate oneself on living in a place where there was "no English." I fear Bertie would not have enjoyed that felicity, however, for the poor boy had no gift of tongues.

"Oh, I *must* show you papa's drawings! I will run and get them; it is so pleasant to talk to some one who knows the place," cried Lucy, turning to Mr. Sedgewick once more. "And besides, I quite make a monopoly of the music, and cousin Mary sings so sweetly. I am going to get papa's drawings, Aunt Clare."

She went away immediately, and returned in a few minutes with the portfolio. Mary Crofton, after a little pause, half affronted yet half pleased, took her place, and dashed off into some noisy piece of soulless music,

under the influence of which everybody began to talk as if for a wager, and which was loud enough to cover a dozen secret conversations. Not that Lucy condescended to any such thing; on the contrary, she took her portfolio to a little table at Mrs. Robert Crofton's elbow, and spread it out there as though inviting anybody who pleased to come; and Mr. Sedgewick, passing by Clara with an affectionate nod and whispered word, went to join her in the sight of everybody. And there they remained talking and looking over the drawings, animated, interested, and evidently pleased with each other, till the party broke up for the night. There was nothing whatever clandestine in the whole affair; sometimes Derwent looked over Sedgewick's shoulder, sometimes Mrs. Robert asking to see one of the sketches; but Hugh Sedgewick turned over all, bending over them, recognizing the scenes, pointing out the particular beauties; while Lucy, on her part, ex-

plained and expounded—asking, “Don’t you remember this?” “Did you not go there?” with the liveliest interest. I think I never saw her so animated.

It was a second scene to our little drama, and insensibly every woman in the room kept casting dubious looks at Lucy and her companion. The action threatened to become more rapid every moment, and the interest deeper; while for the first time Clara, lifting her pretty head from her embroidery, grew a little pale, and wondered in her tender little heart. One could see the shade of that surprise growing upon her—surprise with a little involuntary pain in it—nothing as yet worth thinking of—and I, who knew her face so well, could read there how she reproached herself immediately for that momentary pain, and explained to herself how natural it was that he should look at Lucy’s drawings as well as listen to her music. And how bad, and unkind, and ungrateful it was of her, little

Clara, to feel pained! Yet she did glance towards them to-night with a changed look. It was no longer admiration for Lucy and pleasure in seeing Mr. Sedgewick pleased. In spite of herself she still wondered over it, and was a little, just a very little, chilled at her heart. I think, perhaps, if Hugh Sedgewick had said, "Forgive me!" that night, as he did the first night, he might have got a different answer; but I do not think he tried the experiment. I went in, as was my custom, to the bed-chamber of my two girls to bid them good night. I found them both very quiet; not exchanging confidences or anticipations, scarcely talking at all, preparing to go to sleep, and I went to my own bed with a sore heart.

CHAPTER XI.

THIS scene continued to go on still for a few days longer; Lucy was less liberal of her music, but quite ready to talk with anybody, and particularly with Mr. Sedgewick, and I cannot say that Mr. Sedgewick neglected Clara. When he spoke to her, the very tone of his voice was tender; I caught his eye following her light steps about the room many times, and he never passed by her chair without a caressing look or word. But this thing was certain, that he did not seek her society; that he chatted with Lucy by the hour, about subjects quite out of Clara's range, it is true, but by no means beyond her intelligence, looking very much as though the child belonged to him, and he was fond of her, yet never expected that there could be companionship between

them. And it is quite true that when the sisters burst into my dressing-room to tell me of the wonderful event which had startled their youth, Clara was quite a child; but these days were aging my little girl. This week would count for more in the history of her life than many years, and I do not think she was such a child now.

“Derwent,” said I, one morning, when my patience was near giving way, “do you think you have any influence with Lucy Crofton?”

Derwent, who was in his dressing-gown, came forward to me, swinging in his hands the tassels of his girdle. “Have I any influence with Lucy Crofton? A very odd question, Clare. Not so much as you have, I dare say. But why do you ask?”

“I have no influence whatever over her,” said I; “but she is making great unhappiness, or I am much deceived.”

My husband repeated over my words

again, in amazement. "Making great unhappiness? Good little Lucy Crofton! My love, what do you mean?"

"I mean *that*," said I; "she draws Hugh Sedgewick to her side constantly, they are never apart, and I tremble for my dear little girl."

Derwent opened his eyes wide, stared at me, and then laughed. "Do you think her artful and designing, Clare?" he said. "These are the words you ladies use when you suspect one of your number; come, don't be unjust. I dare say Lucy likes to talk with Sedgewick; he's a clever fellow, and has seen a great deal of the world. But what has that to do with your dear little girl?"

"Is it possible you can see what passes every night in your own house," said I, "and yet ask me that question?"

"Upon my word, it is quite possible; what passes every night in my own house *I* don't know," said Derwent. "I dare

say it is some invention of Mrs. Roberts. When little girls are so ambitious, Clare, they must take the risks. How can Sedgewick talk to *that* child?"

I had almost said "she is worth ten such as Lucy:" but paused in time; for Mr. Crofton had a warm heart to his own blood. So I did not say anything, but remained looking a little sullen, as I suppose Derwent thought.

"You ask if I have any influence with Lucy. Do you mean that I should use it to prevent her from talking to Mr. Sedgewick?" said Derwent, gravely.

"No; certainly that is not what I mean. There is nothing to be done, I perceive," said I. "It must be left to time and providence; you are quite right."

"I am very glad to hear it, Clare," said my husband, laughing, "though I am not aware that I said anything about time or providence. Come to breakfast. At any rate, there is not the slightest reason for being out of temper with me."

That was true, certainly, and no advantage to be got out of it either, for Derwent was imperturbable, and never gave one the least satisfaction in getting angry; so we went to breakfast, and Lucy kissed me, and we were all as harmonious and friendly as possible downstairs.

That day the young ladies chose to gather in a cluster round the fire in the breakfast-room. It was wet, and there was nothing to be done or seen out of doors. The gentlemen were playing billiards, or reading newspapers, or at least doing something which carried them out of our society; only Bertie lingered among the girls by the fire. Bertie displayed an unusual liking for female society just at present. I could not say that my matchmaking scheme made decided progress; but certainly Bertie kept most perseveringly in the vicinity of the young ladies, and I thought—hoped—began to address himself to Alice more than to any of the rest. But then, being anxious for this result, I believe I gave undue im-

portance to words which meant but little. Alice was unusually grave, as she had been for some time. Clara, on the contrary, was in high spirits, and I could not help thinking that if she ever had been troubled, something must have occurred this morning to reassure her heart.

Mary Crofton of Stoke had been reading a novel which she held open in her hand. She was inveighing against the hero, whom she could not tolerate. "If I had been Julia," cried this young lady, "I should never have married him!—never, if he had gone on his knees twenty times a day! And as for breaking his heart! A man who forgot his first love, and went and fell in love with a second lady, I don't believe he had a heart to break!"

"Some people," said the other Mary, sensibly, "not only fall in love twice, but many times. He was not so bad as that."

"But why should not he fall in love twice?" asked Lucy.

“Lucy Crofton! ah, I suppose it’s because you have lived so long abroad,” said the first speaker. “I only know that I should *never* marry a man who had been in love before. I should always suppose he was thinking of the other lady! I would not for all the world!”

“I think every man has been in love before,” said Lucy.

“Oh, how shocking! I never would marry anybody if I thought so,” cried the novel-reader. “Mr. Nugent, is it true?”

Now Bertie was generally bold enough of speech. In the present instance, however, whether it was that he stood alone, the sole representative of the lords of creation, whether it was the eyes of so many girls upon him that confused him, or whether it was some secret sentiment in the young gentleman’s heart, I cannot tell; but Bertie stammered, hesitated, blushed, and made final answer with a nervous laugh, that “really he had so little experience on the subject, he could not say.”

Whereupon my niece, Mary, a merry-hearted girl, began to "tease" Bertie, and under covert of this, to my utter amaze, I overheard Lucy say—"You know Mr. Sedgewick, Mary; he looks just like a hero, doesn't he? Do you know I heard a lady tell Aunt Clare that she had refused him? So he; you see, can fall in love again.'

"The more shame for the lady to say anything about it!" said Mary Crofton, indignantly, throwing an anxious glance back at Clara; "but perhaps *he* might even fall in love three times, and I hope nobody would care!"

And Mary rose and changed her seat, full of virtuous resentment, but comforted by the thought that she had discharged her last arrow smartly, and to the point. Had any one else overheard the aside but me?

I could not be sure. Clara was playing with the little Fortescues, cutting out pretty things in paper to amuse them. Her face was very much flushed, and she turned her

head away, but was so busy, and worked away so quickly with her scissors that I was rather at a loss to know. Yes, Alice had heard! Her cheek, too, was red, her eyes shining, her whole face beaming with indignation and pity. Lucy Crofton had meant it for their benefit, and not for Mary's. Had Clara heard it, too?

But I found it quite impossible to decide upon this. Clara sat between the two little girls, merrier than ever—talking to them, laughing with them, cutting out dogs and cats, children and flowers, to the intense admiration of the little ones—but never by any chance looking at me or at her sister, and, indeed, avoiding both eyes and speech of every one in the room. I was greatly distressed what to do. If I explained to her the real story, perhaps she had not heard Lucy's words, and would find in the explanation only an incomprehensible intention of giving her pain; and if she had heard it, what must the child think? Not that

Hugh Sedgewick's first love was a school-boy's fancy, but perhaps that it was a sad disappointment, out of which pique and wounded pride had driven him to seek her own innocent heart and make it sad. I was anxious to speak to Alice too, yet afraid to leave that poor child alone, perhaps to hear something further insinuated against her peace. At last, to my great comfort, little Mary Fortescue dragged Clara off in triumph to show mamma her achievements on paper, and I seized the opportunity to call Alice also out of the room. Alice followed with a proud step; she had always been a thoughtful and serious child. She felt herself outraged and insulted, as well as her sister; and Alice began to look stately and majestic, as she had never looked before, and as I did not think it was possible for her to look; she was rather tall, and her hair had darkened since she became a woman, and though there was a certain swell of youthful heroics in her demeanour,

it became her well enough. "What is wrong?" said Bertie, with a sudden perception of something which must have happened, as she passed him; but I hastened her out before she could answer. I could see that Alice was bitter in her own heart, and classing all those happier young people together; I did not choose she should reply to Bertie now.

"My dear, do you think she heard it?" cried I, anxiously, when we were out of the room. "I do not know," said Alice, slowly and sadly, "she never kept her face away from me before; but she had better know it. I do not think it can come too soon."

"It is entirely a misrepresentation," said I. "I might almost use strong words, and it was certainly said with malice and evil intention. Listen, Alice; the lady who refused Hugh Sedgewick was— But never mind who she was. It occurred when he was a boy at school."

To my utter amazement, Alice answered,

“Then it is really true—*you* say it? Ah, Clara ought to know, if she did not hear!”

“Alice,” I exclaimed, “it was a piece of nonsense on the part of a schoolboy—a boy of sixteen or seventeen; do you not understand what I mean?”

“Oh, please, Mrs. Crofton, do not be angry; I am very miserable. I would die to save her any pain,” said Alice; then gradually calming down to her dignified expression—“Clara is only seventeen,” she said, quietly.

Here was a pretty business! Clara was only seventeen, and Hugh Sedgewick’s boyish presumption was a serious love and disappointment in the eyes of Alice—doubtless in the eyes of Clara also. I could have laughed, and I am not sure that I could not have cried also, with sheer vexation and helplessness; for I might preach to them for ever without being able to move these children from the unreason of their youth.

“At all events, say nothing to Clara,” I

exclaimed at last, in despair. "I am not in the least afraid of Hugh Sedgewick's second love."

"But he might fall in love three times," said Alice with meaning. "Oh, Mrs. Crofton, I am very unhappy; I wish we had not come to Hilfont. I know very well what they all mean, and why he does not seek Clara *now*—and I almost think she knows too; but she will not speak to me. Oh it is cruel, cruel—Clara will die!"

"Hush, Alice!" I said, peremptorily, "not another word—it is mere fancy, and you must not tell her. If you do, I shall be very much displeased."

Alice consented with reluctance, and we had to separate hastily, as some one suddenly appeared. The sisters were scarcely seen again that day; even I could not find them in their own apartment. They came down to dinner arm-in-arm, both somewhat flushed, and both as stately as wounded pride and youthful spirit could make them.

But I could not help remarking that Clara, though she was the youngest, had less of the heroic and more of the real in her youthful assumption of dignity than Alice could boast. We ladies bestowed upon them both a good deal of secret observation; nothing was said, but one after another of the matrons among us pitied the poor child, and the two Marys took possession of her, and spent their whole impetuous, girlish energies in attempts to amuse her—everybody saw that a crisis approached.

Everybody but Mr. Sedgewick, who spoke to her with the same playfulness, and passed her by with the same affectionate, careless nod as usual, to hear Lucy's music, and join in Lucy's talk about foreign parts. I could not feel otherwise than out of patience with this man—a man who prided himself upon his knowledge of the world and of human nature, yet who was blind as a mole to the troubled heart and racking mind of the poor little girl whom he pro-

fessed to love. And looking at Clara's face and at his, I began to make up my mind that this brief engagement was to come to an end immediately, and had been nothing more than a fancy so far as he was concerned. Very well! Poor little Clara supposed it would break her heart; but, at all events, it would cover Hugh with contempt, and give everybody a right to despise him, with which thought I comforted myself.

That evening passed like the former evenings. Lucy played, and Hugh Sedgewick stood behind her chair. Lucy left the piano, and by-and-by, quite naturally and simply, it came about that Hugh Sedgewick was called to her table, laughingly appealed to about something which nobody else knew. But the drama by this time had become painfully interesting to the women present. None of us spoke to Lucy except in the slightest manner, and the two Mrs. Croftons, I could see, had even come so far as to confide to each other their disapproval

of her. But Bertie and Mr. Sedgewick, sometimes even Derwent, made up to Lucy for our withdrawal; and poor little Clara, out of sight, looked on and watched, with a strange change upon her child's face—perhaps as strange on her tender little heart.

CHAPTER XII.

NEXT morning, still somewhat excited and nervous about this matter, and having it much in my thoughts, I went to a little inner room within the library to write some letters. Both Clara and Alice knew me to be there, and I had given them some little matters to do for me, which I supposed would occupy them till I was at liberty, for I wished to keep them as much as possible out of the society of Lucy.

Knowing this, I was much surprised, a few minutes after, to hear Clara's voice in the library. My door was open, and I could hear what she said. I rose suddenly, that I might not be a clandestine listener, when I remembered that Clara knew where I was, and took my seat again. It was, I suppose, an innocent artifice of her own, poor child,

to let me know what she was about to do. But I started painfully when I heard the other voice.

“Clara, don’t run away, child,” said Mr. Sedgewick, in a tone of pleased surprise. “Submit, you little rebel, and tell me what you mean by keeping away from me. I did not see you all yesterday; you shall stay now.”

“I mean to stay,” said Clara’s soft young voice, trembling, yet strangely firm. “But please don’t speak, Mr. Sedgewick; *I* am going to speak, please.”

“And so you shall, sweetheart, as much and as long as you will; you could not please me better,” cried the lover, and certainly in a voice so lovelike that I could scarcely even be provoked with him for appearing so totally unconscious of his own misdeeds.

“No, no! Let me stand here,” said Clara, her voice trembling more and more. “Oh, don’t say anything! Let me speak. Oh,

Mr. Sedgewick, it is all a mistake. I would not believe it for a long, long time; but I see it plain now. Perhaps you were fond of me a little, for I know you would not say anything that was not true. You were fond of me, as if I were your little sister; but all the rest was wrong—all a mistake. Oh, do not say anything, Mr. Sedgewick! I know it now."

"What was all a mistake? Clara, you must not trifle with me," said Mr. Sedgewick, with the tone of a man injured and superior, who is determined to check at once an unwarrantable caprice.

"And you must not trifle with me," cried Clara, with a sudden inspiration. "You are a man, and you know everything better than I do; but you asked me to be with you all my life—you asked me to be your wife. You said you were happy when I was with you, and would be happy anywhere with me. You said so; it is not my fancy, though sometimes I almost think it

must have been. You said so, and because you said it I was sure it was true. That is only a month ago," said Clara, her voice breaking and falling once more. "But now we are both in the same house and in the same room, and whether you are happy or not I cannot tell; but you are not happy because of me."

"Clara, what does this mean?" cried Sedgewick; and for the first time there was a little of conscience in his voice.

"It means—oh, I am not angry—I am not surprised—not very, when I come to think," said Clara, one sudden sob interrupting her against her will. "It means—it is not anybody's fault, but just a mistake—all a mistake; and I cannot let it go on any longer. Though I am only seventeen," said Clara, with a pathetic girlish dignity, "I am a woman, and nobody must be fond of me and do me disrespect; nobody must want me for a wife, and somebody else for a companion. You think I am little and young,

and do not mind; but I do mind, and you would despise me if I did not. Oh, Mr. Sedgewick, I am not angry—I am not blaming anybody; but only it is all a mistake.”

There was a little silence—a time of great anxiety and trembling to me; for I knew that silence was the very thing to overpower Clara, by leaving her free to the recoil of her own feelings. I have no doubt it was to her also the hardest time of the whole interview, for I heard one sob and then another extorted from her by the violence of nature, while still her lover paused, and did not speak.

“Clara,” he said, after a time, “Clara, Clara! do you mean to cast me away and forsake me so? Clara! you whom I called my own!”

He to make such an appeal! as if the innocent child did it out of caprice and perverseness? But I dare say he knew it was good for his own end. She could not bear

it. The sobs came faster, and whether or not she yielded in resolution, she had beyond question yielded already to tears.

“ You did not expect me to be faultless,” he cried again. “ Yes, I am older than you ; I am stained with the world. But, Clara, Clara, is my angel to forsake me as soon as I do wrong?”

I rose from my chair in impatience, longing, I confess it, to interfere and convict him. Could Clara be satisfied with this?

“ Mr. Sedgewick,” she said, with a steadier voice, regaining courage, “ it is not proper to say ‘ when you do wrong.’ If you did wrong—real wrong—I should be very sorry—more sorry than for anything in the world ; but I never would forsake you. But oh, this is so different ! You are not doing wrong ; it was only a mistake. And please say good-bye to me now, and let me go.”

“ Good-bye?—I defy you,” said Hugh Sedgewick, suddenly adopting some violent means or other, which of course my eaves-

dropping concealment could not pry into. "Yes, go by all means, if you can—go! I shall let my life go sooner. Go! when I only begin to know, a dolt that I am, the treasure I have got. Don't speak—it is my turn! Yes, Clara, you are right, I have made a mistake; I looked to you only for love, comfort, the secret spring and joy of my life. I did not look to you for everything. It was all a mistake—but I too have found it out now——"

"Oh, Mr. Sedgewick, I don't understand you," said Clara; but she did not say, Let me go.

"Yes, you do," said this disrespectful lover. "You understand everything about it better than I can tell you. You understand that this ass thought himself wiser than you, and expected that only by-and-by, years after this, you would begin to care about his tastes and enter into his pleasures. Yes, Clara, you were right, my darling, but not as you suppose. It is all a

mistake. I was taking but the half of what God had given me—but now you shall find to your cost, you rash little girl, see if anything will content me that is a hair's-breadth less than the whole."

"Oh, Mr. Sedgewick, don't speak so—I do not know what you mean," cried poor Clara. Poor little Clara, she was a bad pretender; though she tried to keep it up and meant it, resolution and reality were faltering together out of her voice.

Then I bethought me of my concealment. Hugh Sedgewick was proceeding in a manner which was not adapted for the hearing of a third party, and I did not suppose that my known presence was any longer comfortable to Clara. Accordingly, with great boldness, I made a noise at the door, and issuing hence a minute or two after, found Mr. Sedgewick flushed with excitement, embarrassment, and momentary anger at this interruption, and Clara, trembling and tearful, trying to look as sad and as suffer-

ing and as resolute as she was this morning, but looking only a perfect little cheat and a sham—a masquerading happiness in tears.

“I must beg you to forgive me,” said I; “I thought Clara knew I was here in the first place, and then I found it impossible to interrupt you. I apologise to *you*, Mr. Sedgewick; Clara will forgive her oldest friend.”

He hesitated for a moment—only a moment—and then held out his hand frankly. “Congratulate me!” he said. “We have had a quarrel and found each other out.”

“I am very glad. Be merciful to my breach of honour for the sake of it,” said I; and stooping to kiss my poor Clara’s cheek, I was hastening away, when Mr. Sedgewick stopped me again.

“You are her oldest friend,” he said. “You give her to me heartily, do you not?”

For a moment I hesitated. Alas for

Clara's resolution! I saw her shy, wistful, deprecating look—the glance of a moment. She no longer thought it was all a mistake. Then I looked into Hugh Sedgewick's eyes—into his eyes; my reason was urgent. And then I said, heartily, "I do."

Yes, he had made a mistake; but, thanks to Clara's courage and his own candour, he had found it out; and I do not think he was likely ever to make such a mistake again.

In the drawing-room I found Alice, restless, wandering about, going from window to window, and from table to table. Nobody else was in the room. Her whole face grew crimson with anxiety and excitement as I entered. She made a choking pause, to command herself, evidently thinking that Clara would follow me; but when Clara did not follow me, and I sat down quietly in my usual seat, Alice could no longer control herself. She came to me, and dropped on her knees by my side. Clara, *our* Clara!"

cried Alice. "Oh, Mrs. Crofton, do you know——"

"Take comfort, my dear," said I; "Clara is very well and very happy. Don't be afraid."

"Do you mean it is all over?" cried Alice, gazing at me with her astonished eyes.

"It is all over," said I. "It was only partly his fault, at worst, and he sees his mistake."

Alice got up quietly from her knees when I said that, and went about the business I had committed to her. She was happy and pleased, and satisfied in her heart; but still a little, just a little, disappointed. Clara had been a sad and lofty heroine, "sacrificing" herself half an hour ago in the imagination of her sympathetic sister; now she was a happy little bride again, much beloved and better understood, and self-sacrifice of any kind was totally unnecessary. I am not sure that Clara, happy as she was, did not feel the downfall even in her own person.

Alice was extremely happy too, and very soon recovered her entire pride and pleasure in her sister's prospects; but she was beyond question disappointed when she rose from my side.

CHAPTER XIII.

IF those kind and painstaking spirits who instruct their disciples by means of raps, had, any of them, condescended that night to visit the drawing-room at Hilfont—and I suppose from what I hear that such imperceptible intruders are in everybody's drawing-room, so that we are often, when we are least aware of it, in very equivocal society—they must have found no small amusement in the scene. Everybody was prepared for something. It is possible that angelic spectators might not have appreciated the fun; but spirits who are not quite perfect in their grammar may be supposed still human enough to own a smile. When I say everybody, I mean of course everybody feminine—it is possible that the two Mrs. Croftons may have conveyed a spark of curiosity to

their respective husbands; but the rest of the gentlemen were certainly unenlightened. As for myself, my curiosity of course was quieted and set at rest; but Mrs. Fortescue, Mrs. Robert, and my namesake of Stoke, all beheld the entrance of the gentlemen after dinner with a sense of excitement, and disposed themselves to look on comfortably at the ripening of this drama. Lucy herself, perhaps, was the person present least disturbed. *She* knew well enough that Clara was aggravated to the point of doing something; like all very clever and acute people Lucy was wiser than her neighbours up to a certain point; but beyond that point duller than the simplest. Perhaps it might have been otherwise if her own heart had ever been concerned. She knew by intuition that poor little Clara would do or say something to relieve herself of her unusual suffering this day; but how easily honest love and real nature could dispose of those cobwebs, Lucy, straitened by her very

knowingness, did not know. Yet, I believe she perceived at a glance that her power was gone.

Hugh Sedgewick had too much good sense and discretion to make any remarkable difference, or, indeed, *any* difference which an indifferent spectator could have noticed; but *we* knew better, and so did Lucy. *She* behaved with the greatest cleverness and skill—so great that even I could almost have owned myself deceived. She talked to everybody just as usual—talked to Hugh Sedgewick just as usual; but she made no appeal to him as she had been in the habit of doing. This was the only symptom of consciousness. For the rest Lucy behaved herself exactly as she was wont to do, and was really much less like a convicted schemer and mischief-maker than I was, and of anything like the defection of an admirer made no sign. Then I began to perceive, and I do not doubt my companions perceived with me, how cautiously this

clever little girl had managed, and how little ground we had for accusing her of any desire to attract Mr. Sedgewick. Had she been so accused, I feel certain that Lucy's astonished and indignant virtue would have been edifying, and that her accuser must have retired utterly discomfited, yet not the less convinced that the indictment was a true one. She ought to have been a lawyer beyond controversy, so thoroughly was she aware of the difference between legal provable demonstration and moral proof.

And all this exciting night Clara kept in a corner, as if *she* had been the discomfited party. Once driven out of her hiding-place by the well-meant exertions of Mary Crofton, she disappeared again immediately under somebody else's shadow, and remained invisible except by glimpses that whole night. I do not think she addressed a single word all the time to her lover—certainly not one which anybody else could hear—and did not dare to look me in the

face — notwithstanding Clara was very happy. The shadow of her disquiet had floated entirely away. Yet though she was happy, and though the cloud was gone, the child was changed. I could not tell how, nor show where the difference was. Yet the difference was indisputable, and not to be gainsaid.

So the night wore to an end—strange secrecies of life! Here were a dozen people in one room, half of whom were breathlessly watching a supposed crisis which might have taken the light out of a young life, and broken (as people say) an innocent young heart, while the other half, totally unconscious of any particular interest, went on chatting carelessly about all sorts of superficial subjects, perfectly content that this was a mere country gentleman's drawing-room, and not a theatre of social mysteries. All the elements of our drama too were fully developed. The pair of lovers, the piquant circumstance of unequal years,

the contrast of the fresh-budding girl with the accomplished hero, and Lucy—what could one call her? She was not a coquette—she was not Clara's rival. I do not think she had any serious scheme in respect to Sedgewick. Lucy, so pretty, so agreeable, so winning, I suppose, for lack of a better name, I can only call her the villain of our piece. But lo! in a moment the drama was over—the curtain did not fall upon any tragical denouement—instead of that, the *dramatis personæ* melted out of that threatening combination, and peace came out of war like the transformation of a pantomime. It was very satisfactory certainly; but I doubt if the audience quite acquiesced in it. There was a little flutter of curiosity, a quiet exchange of surprised glances; but when it became apparent—as it did somehow, to all our feminine instincts, in some twenty minutes or so—that the evil was all over and the malignant influence harmless, it is astonishing how soon its interest flagged. I saw Mrs. Crof-

ton stifle a yawn in half an hour thereafter, and Mrs. Robert looked quite cheated of her evening's entertainment. It would have been more agreeable to have had some poetic justice, and a due and public termination of this comedy of real life.

I could not resist glancing for a moment into the chamber of the two girls when I went upstairs. They were seated both on the ottoman, laying their pretty heads together, no doubt talking over this eventful day, and that most eventful interview, which was, I doubt not, the real beginning from which Clara's life would hereafter count. When I entered, they started from their half-embrace with sudden blushes, and stood tremulous and shamefaced before me, feeling deeply, with natural delicacy, that the past trouble was not one to be spoken of even to me. Clara, indeed, turned quite away and would not meet my look. I dare say, in her happy revulsion of feeling, she was ashamed of her fears altogether, and

terrified to be suspected of jealousy, or even of that depth of affection which produces jealousy, and which girls are not fond of owning to. I could not but smile within myself at all that artless and involuntary self-revelation. Clara's innocent artifice, sadly planned, poor child! of making me a listener to her renunciation of her lover—then her dismay when that renunciation turned into something very different, and Hugh Sedgewick's words were no longer adapted for a third person's hearing—and now her extreme embarrassment about the whole matter, and reluctance so much as to meet my eye. It was all very natural, very innocent; it made me smile, for I was growing old; but it made me glad.

“I have not come to talk,” said I, “do not be afraid; but come and say good-night to me, Clara. I have not done anything naughty, have I? Come and say good-night.”

“Oh, godmamma! you are not angry?”

cried Clara, still avoiding my eye by the pretty trick of running into my arms.

“Angry! not exactly; very glad, though, if that will do as well,” said I; “and better satisfied than I quite hoped to be about the happiness of my dear child.”

This insinuation of want of confidence did not quite please Clara. She was quite ready now to defy all the world on the part of the immaculate Hugh.

“It was all a mistake,” she said hurriedly. “I was all wrong, and I saw it directly when I began to think. It was me.”

“What was you? Never mind,” said I, “it is all right now, Clara, and will be all right henceforth, I think, in spite of all the world; but do you know, I heard you say something to-day about a long, long time. It is only a week since Mr. Sedgewick came to Hilfont. Do you call that such a very long time?”

Clara looked at Alice with a little start, and Alice looked at Clara back again with

a sudden smile; but the contradictory chronology was quite true notwithstanding. It was only a week, and yet it was a long, long time, half as long as the whole previous sum of Clara's seventeen years.

When I left them and entered my own special domains, I found Derwent lounging over a novel in my dressing-room—a very bad practice, which my unlucky acquiescence at first made into a custom, for Mr. Crofton, I am bound to confess, is of a sluggish nature when he is not very strongly moved to the contrary, and once set down in his dressing-gown and an easy-chair, will not even exert himself so far as to go to rest until discomfort and the chill of the midnight drive him. Coming in somewhat exhilarated by Clara's pretty happiness, I could not do less than communicate my pleasure, so I tapped my sluggard on the shoulder and began to speak.

“Do not think any more of what I said in the morning, Derwent,” said I, “the

matter has righted itself. There is no harm done, and everything is just as it should be; better than I hoped."

"Eh! did you speak, Clare?" said Derwent, looking up at me after a moment with his mouth full of his novel. I really do not know any other word which would express that look.

I repeated my speech with variations, a little mortified. He really did not seem to comprehend me even then.

"What did you say to me this morning? Upon my honour I've forgotten," said my husband, with a comic look of penitence. "What was to be done with him?"

Oh, obtusity of man! For my part I only laughed, and left him to the enjoyment of his dressing-gown, his easy-chair, and his book.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE holiday season, after this, passed over very quietly, without, so far as I remember, anything occurring beyond the ordinary events of domestic life; and about the middle of January we were again left alone. Robert Crofton was a lawyer, and lived in London; they were not rich enough to be fashionable, and were too large a family to make a round of visits, so they returned, as was natural, to Russell-square. The other Croftons went back to Stoke. Bertie returned to his duty; and the Harleys went to their mother's cottage, to the all-absorbing and most attractive business of wedding preparations. Perhaps it was very unelevating, a poor way of looking at the subject; but I cannot help confessing that my heart went with Clara into all

the pretty mysteries of her *trousseau*, and I really loved her better among all those bright ribbons, and silks, and muslins, and the pleasant flutter of preparations, which took the solemnity off this dreadful accident of marriage, than if she had been thoughtfully studying her duty to her future husband, and ruminating on the undeveloped responsibilities of that unknown estate. I am afraid I am very vulgar in my ideas. I don't half sympathize with the extreme refinement which cries out against the show of a common wedding-day, and drops off to the country to be married in humility and solitude. For my own part, I admit that I was quite anxious to have my dear girl married at Hilfont, for the sole purpose of surrounding her with all the simple splendour I could manage to collect round our little bride. I was not disposed to miss a single nosegay or wedding favour, and was as pleased to think of the pretty train of bridesmaids, and the enormous cake, as Alice herself could be; for Clara,

I suspect, when things came that length, would have other matters to think of. This is the feminine view of the question, my lords and gentlemen. If *you* take an opposite position, it is because you are only the bridegrooms, being but needful accessories to the scene, whom nobody has any interest in. Sometimes, doubtless, there turns out very small occasion for rejoicing, and in all cases it is a serious and a doubtful business; but general nature goes beyond the individual. It is the primitive inalienable homage which the world owes to every bride.

However I am hastening on a long way in advance of my story. To be left alone with Lucy, after all that had passed, was rather trying to merely human temper and patience, as any one who considers the position of two ladies in a country house in the middle of winter, seeing very few people, and necessarily thrown upon each other's almost constant society, will appreciate. Unless I shut myself up in my own room—which I confess I did

sometimes—I could not possibly free myself from my close and most attentive companion, upon whose innocent unconsciousness these past scenes seemed to have made no impression. I could not help looking at her sometimes, as she sat placidly by me doing her crochet, and talking with an ease and calmness which astounded me. What was Lucy thinking? What did Lucy suppose I was thinking? Could she imagine that I had taken no note of her past behaviour? or had she herself been conscious of no particular intention in her conduct to Mr. Sedgewick? It was quite impossible to tell. That pretty face covered like a mask all the busy thoughts in Lucy's brain. Her eyes met mine with the most imperturbable composure; not a symptom of pique or mortification; not the smallest acknowledgment of defeat could any one extract from Lucy. She was as wary, as unconcerned, as animated when that little drama came to a conclusion as before it began.

And I confess her conduct has always remained a mystery to me. I cannot make out to this day why she wished to detach Mr. Sedgewick from Clara, or if she did wish it; nor why, if she was "artful and designing," as Derwent says we ladies call each other, or meant to marry anybody, she did not rather exercise her fascinations on Harry Crofton, whom she knew to be Derwent's heir, and who was a very likely person to fall in love with any pretty girl who gave him the chance. Harry, to be sure, was only her own age, and she possibly preferred Hugh Sedgewick; but then Hugh Sedgewick was *engaged!* Could that be the secret attraction, after all?—somebody else's property which Lucy had a mind to steal away for the mere pleasure of conquest and mischief, and doing something wrong? But Lucy was inscrutable. I cannot tell now, and I never could tell.

And of course I had nothing for it, after all, but to be patient, and do my best to

show full and natural kindness to the orphan who was our guest. What strange misnomers are in this life! It does not require a very bright imagination to build a whole story of pathetic solitude and patient sufferings upon the mere mention of Lucy's position at Hilfont. An orphan, without fortune and without friends, whom her host, who was related to her, liked and took an interest in, but whom her hostess, who was not her relation, did not like. Only fancy, young ladies, what a picture! The same girl spending her whole life in unappreciated services to that cold-hearted aunt; secretly resolving, in spite of all cruelties, to do good to everybody around her, and anxiously solicitous to show everybody a beneficial example. Think of her deep mourning, her paleness, her longing for that love which her hard-hearted connexions would not bestow upon her! But ah, if you could only have seen Lucy and me!

Parting with my dear children, Clara and

Alice—parting with Mary Fortescue, my old and tender friend—even parting from those two young Marys, who were commonplace girls enough, yet good girls in their way, to come back alone to the sole companionship of Lucy, was somewhat of a change. But of course we got on perfectly well; and when I felt disposed to be exasperated, I either made a general disturbance in the household and scolded the servants all round, or else I retired to my own room.

“I wonder, Aunt Clare, if *I* could be of any use to the Miss Harleys?” said Lucy to me one day. “I am sure I should be very glad. I meant to offer when they were here, but somehow I thought they did not seem to take to me.”

“Indeed, Lucy! how could that be?” asked I.

“Nay, I cannot tell. Likings and dislikings are not to be explained, especially, I rather think, among young ladies,” said Lucy, with a smile. “But I like them very

well. Will you mention next time you see them, please, aunt?"

"I am not aware what you could do to help them," said I, somewhat ungraciously.

"Perhaps not," said Lucy. "Of course they have plenty of money, and are able to have things done for them. I was rather thinking of what I should have wanted in such a case."

"But you know they have not plenty of money," said I.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Aunt Clare. Of course I meant—I did not mean—indeed," said Lucy, stammering a little—"I thought you would give it them, and do all their *trousseau* yourself; that is just what I thought."

"It is a mistake, then," said I. "I think you made a mistake altogether about Clara and Alice. Their mother is quite able to look after their interests. I do not feel myself called upon to interfere."

There was a little pause after that; then

Lucy suddenly laughed. As I looked to ascertain the cause of this mirth, I caught her eye, and she met my look entirely unabashed. "I could not help thinking how that poor little girl will feel when she finds herself mistress of Waterflag; it will be *such* a change to her! Is it an old place, aunt?"

"Middling," said I, rather grimly. "How should *you* like it, do you think?"

"I? I suppose I shall have to marry some day, like other people," said Lucy. "But I should not like to be wife to Mr. Sedgewick; he has exacting and tyrannical written in his very face."

"Indeed I never saw them," said I; "but I must beg of you not to speak to Clara of any such guess as this."

"I never tell tales, Aunt Clare," said Lucy.

"I heard you tell something about a prior engagement of Mr. Sedgewick's in this very room," said I.

"Ah, that was true; you have surely

not forgotten it. It was Aunt Mary Fortescue," said Lucy. "Did she hear it? Did she tell you? Was she vexed? Poor little girl! I should be so sorry if it made her jealous; and I am sure he would blaze up dreadfully if he thought any one was jealous of *him*."

"You seem to know him very well, Lucy," said I.

"Oh, I met him abroad," said Lucy; "we met everybody abroad. I recollect him quite well. I knew I had seen him before, the very first day he came here."

"But did not say so," said I.

"No, it was no good; and besides, if I came to tell you every silly thing that came into my head, I should bore you to death, Aunt Clare," said Lucy. "Half the things in life, I am sure, are not worth talking about."

"My dear," said I, "I wish you were not quite so wise and experienced. Girls are not expected to be philosophers at eighteen."

Lucy laughed. "It is all because of my upbringing," she said. "I suppose I talk

just as papa used to talk. I remember I used to be so provoked with him for saying such things, and I fear, Aunt Clare, you are sometimes as much provoked with me."

"Our positions are a little different," said I; "unless you think, Lucy, that you are as much wiser than me as he was wiser than you. But more years bring certain lessons with them in default of wisdom; and you must give me permission still to think you a girl of eighteen."

"Nay, I am sure I do not wish to be any older," said Lucy. "I often wonder what people in this country thought of poor papa. Everybody does something here, unless they happen to be rich like Uncle Derwent; but we were quite poor, and yet papa never did anything. I am sure Somers, his man, did nothing all day long but take care of him. I have not had a maid since I was ten years old, and I was obliged to learn to do a great many things for myself; but poor Somers never had an hour's rest away from papa. I often think of it now;

it was very odd. How do people get to be so helpless, Aunt Clare, when they are still poor?"

"Poor Mr. Crofton was in delicate health," said I.

"Yes; but he was not bad enough for that," said Lucy, with perfect calmness. "He used to say he had no energy, and could not bear the bustle of England. He said it would wear him out in a year; but that is all very well for rich people—we were poor."

"You had enough," I suggested, with diffidence.

"Yes, enough to spend to the last day of his life," said Lucy, still with entire composure, "but nothing over after for me; enough to get all his luxuries and pay Somers, whom he could not do without; but nothing for me. It is a very odd thing; I cannot make it out; for papa never had any great deal of money; he was always a younger son, and poor."

"But I have no doubt he was a very kind

father," said I, rather apologetically, as I could not but be aware.

"Oh, yes, very kind; and he thought he knew the world very well too," said Lucy. "Poor papa! Somers was a very good servant to him; he stayed till after the funeral, then he got another place, just before Uncle Derwent came. I saw you looking at some letters on the hall table the other day, Aunt Clare. One of mine was to poor Somers at Plantagenet Hall. He has gone to be servant to one of the gentlemen there. I thought you might be surprised at the address."

"I did not look at the address," said I. "Plantagenet Hall is the great manufacturer's house that there are such accounts of in the papers, I suppose. Is it in this neighbourhood? I don't recollect the name."

"Oh, I believe they have built it themselves; they are very, very rich," said Lucy, with more animation than usual. "Mr. Broom said he had a very good right to call his house Plantagenet. We used to know

the family a little. Somers is with Mr. Broom's son. People used to say they were made of money. There are two daughters, but only one son, and I suppose he is to have Plantagenet Hall; but it is near London; it is a long way off from here."

"Indeed," said I; and then I think the conversation dropped, for I had no particular interest in the family of Mr. Broom, though he was made of money, and could not understand how Somers, if he were ever so good a servant, should form a link of connexion between the daughter of his old master and his new one. Besides, it occurred to me just for a moment—for I *had* seen the letter, though I certainly did not *look* at it—that Somers was not the name which preceded that pompous Plantagenet Hall. However, the thought was momentary, and the matter perfectly unimportant. If Lucy had corresponded with the man, what was that to me?

CHAPTER XV.

BERTIE was the last to leave us of our Christmas party. He lingered on, going up to town for a day, and returning again, for nearly a fortnight after our other guests were gone. He was a very welcome visitor—perhaps the most welcome of all; for Derwent liked his frank young nature almost as much as I did, and had consented quite heartily that he should be my heir. Under Bertie's influence, I was drawn to many places where I seldom thought of going. He was not much of a drawing-room boy. He loved open air and much locomotion; and being at the same time most honestly attached to me, always managed, since he could not consent to my habits, to win me over to a mild travesty of his. Whatever I might be to Lucy, I was

really "a mother to" Bertie; and I dare say the very fact that I was not old enough to be his mother made us like each other all the better, interfusing something of an elderly sisterhood into the graver relationship. Bertie would have been glad to drive us about all day long if we could have submitted to that doubtful pleasure. He was perpetually persuading me that I had occasion to go to Simonburgh, and I fear recently suggested necessities which did not exist, to the uninventive brain of the housekeeper, who wanted a great many more domestic articles only obtainable in the town, than was at all usual with her. And Lucy always formed one of our party, sometimes not to my very great content, but I could not help it.

"Cousin Clare," said Bertie, one morning, "let me drive you over to the cottage; look here, such a morning! sunshine like July, and air as clear as any Italian atmosphere that ever was invented. It's disgraceful to

lounge in the chimney-corner on such a day."

"Sunshine like July, and icicles on all the trees," said I. "My boy, the chimney-corner is the best place for me; I am growing old."

"Oh, yes, I know," said Bertie—"very old; but let us go. Why, I want to see them, Clara, before she is married, and—Mrs. Harley—I must be off the day after to-morrow. Come, Cousin Clare!"

And—Mrs. Harley—a suspicion that Bertie meant somebody else than Mrs. Harley softened me at once.

"But, Bertie, if I go, Lucy must go. I cannot leave her by herself," said I, doubtfully.

At which Bertie's face grew rather red. I thought most likely he did not care to have Lucy's quick eyes upon his visit to his old playfellows; but he was too kind-hearted to express any reluctance.

"Why not?" he said. "All the better!"

pray ask her to get ready, and send me down no end of cloaks to wrap you all up with. We'll astonish the girls. Mr. Crofton, Cousin Clare is going to the cottage; will you come? but I am charioteer."

"Not I," said Derwent. "I have got something else to do than fly about the country with young fellows like you. Don't upset them, and I'll give you my blessing; but, upon my honour, Clare, I wish this guardsman would take himself away."

"The day after to-morrow," cried Bertie, laughing. "Cousin Clare would have no fresh air, I believe, but for me."

"I am an ill-used wife; my husband will not go out with me," said I. "That novel again! Derwent, I am ashamed of you! you grow idler every day!"

"I am very sorry," said my husband; "but I wish you'd go about your business, all of you. I'm booked for Quarter Sessions, and some pleasant poaching cases to-day. Let us have a quiet half hour before we get

into harness. Lucy, do you take charge of this roving boy?"

Lucy had just entered the room with her bonnet on, prepared for a walk, as she said, which was oddly opportune at the moment, and she went out with Bertie to stroll about the garden till I should be ready. In about half an hour we started, Derwent, after all his grumbling, riding half way by our side. It was a very fine day, though very cold; and I do not recollect anything more pleasant as a winterly sensation, than our rapid progress down the hill, with a little wind, fresh, but not violent, in our faces, and the sunshine gleaming over all the bare country, warming the fields, which were all achill with hoar-frost an hour ago, into a fresh green like the green of spring, melting off the ice till it dropped in great heavy drops from trees and house-tops, and unsealing little pools through all the marshy flat below, which were opaque enough this morning, but now reflected back the merry light, and crisped under the wind,

till night and frost should bind them fast again. We had a long drive; but Bertie's pleasant society, and the still more pleasant thought that his desire to visit the cottage showed well for the success of my own solitary project of matchmaking, made it a very agreeable one to me. Bertie was in great spirits. He was continually pointing out to Lucy the best aspects of the landscape, and challenging her to confess that England, in its most English aspect, was not to be equalled by any of the boasted beauties of the further world. He once carried his argument so far that I checked him gently, thinking she might feel it a little. But Lucy, I am bound to confess, made herself very pleasant, and bore the assault with extreme good humour. Thus we came pleasantly to Mrs. Harley's little house. I was somewhat disturbed in anticipation about the welcome they would give Lucy; but when we came in sight of the pretty little lane, with its trim, low holly-hedge and white paling, and

the pretty cottage shining in the sunshine, from which Alice, with all the children pursuing her, came running out to welcome us, I no longer thought of Lucy. Alice could not tell why I looked so unusually glad to see her. Her eyes returned to me after her first greeting with a gleam of mingled surprise and expectation, as if they inquired, what had I to tell?—which gleam recalled me to the consciousness that I had no clue either to Bertie's heart or hers; and had to be careful lest I should startle either of them before their time. In the pretty drawing-room, which was not large, but yet was very "nice," and as bright as a country sitting-room should be, we found Mrs. Harley and Clara. The widow gave me a tremulous, almost tearful embrace. She had not seen me since Clara's engagement; and had, of course, a hundred things to say. Presently, under pretence of showing me something, I was led away to Mrs. Harley's own room, while the little bride came gliding up

after us, to learn what I thought of the pretty things which were beginning to accumulate. Sitting in Mrs. Harley's easy-chair, with Clara hanging about me, and her mother, now bringing something to show me, now pausing to talk, now sitting down to enter into one of those consultations, often gone over and never exhausted, which women love, I had almost forgotten, for the moment, that other match which would have interested me even more than Clara's; but started with considerable disappointment when Alice, too, came upstairs, and lingered, evidently preferring our little private committee to the society below. This was a great damper to my hopes. Poor Bertie!—was he to be disappointed? I became quite unhappy and anxious about him; while my poor innocent Alice, unaware of the harm she was doing, wavered by the door, unwilling to go away.

“ Alice, Miss Crofton will think us very rude. My love, you must go downstairs,”

said Mrs. Harley. "Of course you want to be with Mrs. Crofton, but you must not leave Miss Crofton and Mr. Nugent by themselves. Run, my love, downstairs."

"They are not alone, mamma, all the children are with them," said Alice, rather discontentedly; and as Clara volunteered to take her place, the perverse girl established herself at my elbow, and would not move. I immediately lost my relish for the gossip, and by-and-by we went down to luncheon, to my great content. I was quite overcast in my pleasure. I had been rather too secure in my calculations as far as Alice was concerned, assuring myself that she had seen nobody else, and that she *must* like Bertie; but how could I tell? I never heard, until I heard of their engagement, that little Clara Harley had ever seen Hugh Sedgewick. Another Hugh Sedgewick might, for aught I knew, be hovering about the cottage now.

"Why did you leave them, Alice?" I

asked as we went downstairs. "Poor Bertie came over on purpose to say good-bye. It was ungrateful to come away."

When, to my surprise, Alice not only blushed a little, but looked the least thing angry. "Mr. Nugent was occupied—he did not miss me," she said, with a great deal of dignity, but would not add a word of explanation. What did she mean? I was completely puzzled. Certainly Bertie was not anxious to see Mrs. Harley, and if it was not Alice he came for, who else could it be?

Bertie was very merry among the children when we went into the dining-room. They were all very familiar with him, and called him by his Christian name, a friendly practice which Alice and Clara, in the reserve of their opening womanhood, had almost given up. Lucy sat smiling and pretty by Mrs. Harley. I could hear that she was making in person her offer of service, that the widow took it very kindly, but that Clara, on being appealed to, said no-

thing, at which Lucy smiled with an air of superiority and protection. Then Lucy began to be confidential with Mrs. Harley. I could hear something about so young—so very young! with a glance at Clara, as if she herself were as old as Clara's mother, which however Mrs. Harley took as mothers do, with great pretended dismay, but much secret pride; while Alice and Clara both looked on, sometimes exchanging glances, and keeping up an unwavering and jealous watch upon the movements of the enemy. But it was evident that they had not told their mother, a piece of reserve which somewhat astonished me; for though Mrs. Harley was rather a wavering, doubtful, and undecided person, she had a true mother's place in her children's hearts.

But when we returned home, my sanguine satisfaction was gone. I cannot say I found an unrevealed love on Alice's part, but she parted with Bertie with a mixture of pique and indifference which surprised

me. It did not trouble Bertie—*he* was just as gay, just as eager to entangle Lucy in fresh arguments. The evening was as fine as the morning had been, and the winter sunset, red and splendid, emblazoned all the sky before us as we went home. Yet I went home languidly, growing silent, returning, as I always did at any discouragement, to that one familiar grief which needed little invitation to come back to my thoughts. Yet I could not tell what disturbed me—the vague disappointment of a vague expectation—nothing more.

CHAPTER XVI.

NEXT day Bertie and I had a long conversation in the library. He began by confiding to me his determination to exchange into a marching regiment, and, if possible, to get to India. I was much surprised by this unlooked-for fancy, perversely opposite as it seemed to his former thoughts.

“You used to dislike the thought of India, and Indian service. Have you forgotten how you spoke to me at Estcourt,” said I, “when your father wished you to go to Addiscombe?”

“Yes, to be sure. I was only a boy then; but you know a fellow must live,” said Bertie, energetically.

“A fellow does live, and very much to the purpose, it appears to me,” said I, looking with pleasure at my young kinsman,

who was a handsome young Nugent, and most worthy representative of the name.

“It’s very kind of you to say so, Cousin Clare,” said Bertie, blushing red; “but you know, but for your allowance, I couldn’t, and you mustn’t keep it up. Now, I’m in earnest; you mustn’t; I’m not a boy now; I must get on by myself.”

“What has stimulated you to such valourous resolutions, Bertie?” said I.

At which question Bertie hesitated a long time. “You know, Cousin Clare,” he said at last, “I have always taken your money as heartily as if you had a right to give it me. You have always been so kind.” And the good fellow stammered and blushed over his thanks, and did not know what to say. “But by this time I ought to be sufficient for myself; and then suppose a fellow should marry, Cousin Clare?”

“Of course it is quite natural to suppose that, in such a case, he could live upon half of his usual income,” said I.

“It’s not that,” said Bertie, with another blush. “I can’t explain myself; but just look here. It occurs natural, somehow, to start upon one’s friends; I don’t know whether it’s right or not, but it’s natural. But to go right into life, and set up a house of one’s own, upon somebody else’s money, that’s what I can’t stand on any consideration. And I know a fellow can’t live on his pay *here*. If I went to India, I’d have a chance; so that’s what I’ve made up my mind to do.”

“For the sake of somebody?” said I.

Bertie laughed, and blushed, and nodded his head, but did not seem disposed to communicate further information.

“May I not hear who it is?” asked I; “or must I guess? I half think I could find you out.”

“Not yet, Cousin Clare,” cried Bertie. And I respected the delicacy which would not make me the *first* listener to his love-tale. But I felt entirely satisfied, and

lighter at heart than I had been for a long time; for who but Alice could be Bertie's somebody? They were so like each other—so good, so handsome, and so young; and this love was but the ripening touch to the kindness of years. Bertie had always been "fond" of Alice; indeed, had been less demonstrative of his regard on this occasion than on any former one; I supposed it must be the perverse shyness of a deeper feeling; and in spite of my little disappointment yesterday, was glad at my heart.

"Sit down, Bertie," said I, "and hear what I have got to say to you. My boy, I do not need to tell you that I have no heir."

Bertie looked at me with a great many emotions mingled in his face—sympathy, distress, eagerness to assure me that any contingency of the kind had never entered into his thoughts. Yet this last less than the others; for it was me my good Bertie thought of—not himself.

"A year ago," said I, "I might not have

thought myself justified in saying this; but it consoles me to feel how heartily I can trust the inheritance of your fathers in your hands. Bertie, of all the Nugents, you are the only one whom I have any pleasure in thinking of as the heir."

Bertie's face grew red, grew white, grew ashamed. He wanted to say something, and dared not. "Not me," he cried at last, with a plunge. "Not me! you must not think of it; there will be other heirs."

"Hush," said I, gravely. "I mean, and have meant for a long time, that you should have Estcourt, Bertie. I should not have sanctioned the position in which you now are but for that. Now, do not misunderstand me. I have thought of this since I first knew you. You have been the heir of Estcourt in my eyes for many years."

"That was before you were married, Cousin Clare," said Bertie, quickly.

"Being married has not made any difference," said I; "and as you are at a crisis of

your life, it is best you should know. I will not give you Estcourt when you marry, for you know what Estcourt is, and I must not give up my responsibilities; but you shall have the half of the yearly income and the house at Eastborne, near the rectory, and shall manage the estate for me, Bertie, and be acknowledged publicly as my heir and successor the same"—and I confess I said this with a falter—"the same as if you were my son."

I do not know why it was; but looking in my face, which was full of emotion, and perhaps seeing there some traces of that secret sorrow which nobody thought of now-a-days, Bertie seized my hands, and actually shed tears over them, saying I cannot tell what incoherent things in his excitement, and I fear I cried too. And somehow, out of his young joy and hope, both of us fell back, with a sharp pang of contrast, to the shadow of my life, his gratitude and affectionate regard springing up for a moment

in such a young gush of impatient regret that I had not all I wanted to make me happy, that I daresay Bertie would have shouted with joy to hear that, instead of being heirless, I had a dozen children, and Estcourt was lost to him for ever. But that, of course, was only for a moment. Then came his honest delight, his reluctance, his amazement; for I believe, indeed, the boy had never thought of it before; and, above all, that deepest and most pervading qualification, that I thought him the most worthy representative of the Nugents. It is no small matter to be raised at once to the head of one's house; and perhaps Bertie thought, with a sensation of triumph, what all the uncles and cousins would say to this most unlooked-for promotion. "I'm not even the eldest son of *our* family," cried Bertie, with an involuntary outburst of wondering exultation; and after he had exhausted himself of words, which was not hard to do, he went off out of doors and left me, to exhaust, if he

could, the wonder and triumph which were still too great to bear speaking of. The second son of a lieutenant-colonel in India, whom Providence had blessed with sixteen children, it was no very wonderful thing if Bertie was a little out of his wits when he was first made aware that Estcourt was to be his.

After he was gone, I sat pondering over this future so suddenly opened up to my imagination. No child of mine should ever fill my father's place; but when I thought of Estcourt restored at my death to the Nugents, and of Alice Harley's dear face shining there in the same rooms which had sheltered her childhood, my heart warmed to the thought. Perhaps the two would cherish my recollection more dearly, and hold my likings in greater reverence than even my own children might have done; for they were nearer to me in age, and had been my companions on a greater equality than can by nature exist between mother

and child. I scarcely think even Alice's mother could love her better than I did; and Bertie had no mother to share his affections with me. So the more I pondered, the more I was satisfied; and being a practical person, even in imagination, as I rather think most women are, I had already glanced over the courtship, the marriage, the fair youthful life of the young couple, and the preparations which, as I grew old, I meant to make at Estcourt for their reception, before the entrance of Derwent startled me from my dreams. My husband came in smiling, yet looking surprised, which surprise increased still more when he perceived that there were tears in my eyes.

“I met Bertie just now, half crazy with pleasure. You have been telling him your intentions, Clare,” said Derwent; “but, my love, what are these tears about? Are you not pleased now that you have had your will?”

“Perfectly pleased,” said I; “tears come through very different channels; they thrust themselves into every argument, you know, with us poor women.”

“Hum!” said Derwent, “you have been thinking. I cannot have you think, Clare. After all, we have a great many blessings. Why should you and I grumble? I had rather have thee, my pale Clare, than seven sons!”

“Don’t, Derwent!” I cried out. “Don’t! I cannot bear it!” and therewithal, surprised into a sudden weakness, my grief seized upon me as he had never seen it before. He was very much troubled and perplexed; he did not understand it; he comforted me, saying that he did not know I had taken it so much to heart, and said something in his innocence about the baby, which, God help me, the familiar name I never dared mention to myself, struck me with a pang which was beyond bearing. It dried up my tears. I could not cry any longer with

that sudden stroke tingling through my heart.

And my good Derwent caressed and soothed me. He thought he had done me good by speaking. "I must not let you keep all this to yourself any longer," he said. "Open your heart to me, Clare, and it will do you good. Is not this my grief as well as yours?"

And so it was; but no man in the world could hearken patiently to the iterations of a mother who has lost her child. I felt that, and said no more.

"And you are pleased that I have spoken to Bertie?" said I.

"Quite pleased that you have done your will," said Derwent, with a smile, "and heartily desirous you should find pleasure in it, my love; still, I must say, Clare, I think it rather harsh. Who can tell what may happen in these years?"

I was vexed by the suggestion, and went away, leaving him, to go to a little retire-

ment I had—a little room I only entered when I had to compose myself, and wanted the calm that only comes from the presence of God.

CHAPTER XVII.

RETURNING back, after the little episode which concerns Bertie, to the quietness of our succeeding life, when Bertie took himself away, I could not help observing that Lucy must have some very faithful correspondents. I am sure she got a letter every second day at least, and often more; and generally put her letters in her pocket, and kept them till she went upstairs. I had not taken to myself any authority over Lucy, nor attempted to interfere with her as if she was under my control. Perhaps at her years, and in her lonely condition, I ought to have inquired more particularly, but I did not "see my way;" so I made no inquiry about the letters, and feeling rather curious, I put restraint upon myself, and never looked again at those which were laid

upon the hall-table before gathering them into the post-bag. Once I met one of the maids coming downstairs, just as the bag was being closed, with Miss Crofton's letters. "Miss Crofton's never ready till the last minute," said the man, with a little ill-humour; and though my conversation with Lucy had not dwelt in my mind, I could not help recurring to it for a moment, and trying to recollect what she had told me. Her father's man, Somers, and the rich family of Mr. Broom—what was it? I had already forgotten, and could not be stimulated into recollection by so slight a pressure. Other events made me find my memory, but these were not now. Yet, was it possible that Lucy knew so little of me that she sent down her letters by a private emissary, for fear I should look at them while they lay on the table in the hall?

We went out but little for some weeks after that; the weather was severe, we were alone, and I was tired of my past exertions

in the way of company. Then it was drawing near the time of the election in the northern district of our big county, and I was extremely anxious to stir Derwent up to the point of offering himself as candidate. I made his life miserable, I am thankful to say. I gave him no rest—I left him no pleasure either in dressing-gown or novel—I made a perpetual succession of political speeches to him—all of which, however, I am obliged to confess, Derwent bore with a very great degree of placidity and non-resisting courage. When I drove him out of my dressing-room, out of the breakfast-room, out of even the exclusive personal ground of his own library, Derwent sustained the assault like a hero, but he was not to be moved. Though I myself took to the *Times* and read it sedulously—though I studied with devotion, and always in his presence, the interesting pages of the *Simon-burgh Chronicle*—though I gave hints to our gentlemen visitors, and wrote two different

but most elaborate secret epistles, one to our London solicitor, a man whom Derwent trusted greatly, and the other to Robert Crofton, urging them both to add their exertions to mine for this desirable object—I am grieved to say that I failed entirely; Derwent was not to be moved by any argument or endeavour of mine.

“Why should I make my life a trouble to myself and everybody else?” said Derwent; “do you want to write yourself M.P., you ambitious Clare? Franks are no longer possible, and nobody wants to arrest me—why should *I* go into Parliament?—I am very comfortable, thank you, here.”

“Derwent!” I exclaimed, indignantly, “you are of no use in the world.”

At which my husband only laughed. “Oh yes, I am,” he said. “I am not flighty, nor an innovator. I am the balance of the country, and preserve its equilibrium; the vessel wants ballast as well as sails, and I flatter myself, though you are so very far

from complimentary, that I am of some use to you."

"Oh, Derwent, how can you speak so?" said I, justly aggravated and out of patience. "Of course you are everything to me—and of course I am ambitious. I want you to serve your country—I want everybody to know what you are."

"The less we say about that the better," said Derwent, shaking his head. "Nobody will be very much the wiser for knowing what *I* am. Are you willing to shut yourself up in some dingy square in town from February to August? Are you content to lose sight of me altogether from ten o'clock to-day till two o'clock to-morrow morning; and to carry a poor gasping sinner home in September to get him alive again? Much obliged, but I'd rather not."

"I should be content with anything," said I, "that employed your life and your talents for the good of the world."

Derwent shrugged his shoulders. "The

short and the long of it is that you want to be a legislator, Clare. I daresay, if you assail him as you have done me, your son-in-law, Hugh Sedgewick, will vote as you bid him; but don't make any further plots, I beg of you, against my life. Do you suppose they superintend the good of the world in Parliament? I did not think you were quite so green a politician as that."

"Very well, never mind Parliament," said I; "but do something, Derwent—that is all I wish."

"Then you shall be satisfied instantly, Clare. I am going to read the paper," said my incorrigible husband, and I sighed and gave up the hopeless attempt. So the county elected, in room of old Mr. Drumlie, the brilliant lawyer, Mr. Phelim Pleader, who was an Irishman and an orator, and had no opinions to speak of; and I swallowed my disappointment as I best might, and became rather misanthropical about the House of Commons, in which I began to

fear, Derwent said, I should never have a seat.

And so the winter passed. Lent, which, instead of a season of mortification, was to Clara Harley and all her friends a season of considerable excitement, came on, and the number of weeks which lay between Clara and her marriage day lessened one by one. We had compromised our former proposal about her marriage. It was to take place at Estcourt, where, for that week, we were all to remove, and Clara was to be married in the old church where she had been christened, her father's church, which was dear to the family for his sake. I was pleased and touched by this arrangement, which was suggested by the two girls themselves, Alice being spokeswoman. "Estcourt has been our home so long, we have so many pleasant feelings connected with it," said Alice, with a sweet seriousness which meant more than it said. "If you will permit it, Mrs. Crofton; everything that has happened to us has led our thoughts there."

“And I trust many pleasant things may happen yet to turn your future thoughts in the same direction,” said I, fervently, and with a good deal of emphasis. Alice turned half round to look at me and discover what I meant. But of course I could not betray to her what I meant. She coloured a little, and turned away without a word. Perhaps Alice could guess without being told.

As the time progressed, messages went and came perpetually between the two houses. Miss Austin, somewhat disturbed in her grave superintendence of the Estcourt girls, and afraid of the effect upon these susceptible little personages which would be made by a wedding, became flurried, and was constantly sending to me for orders; and the marrying of Clara Harley seemed likely to be rather a troublesome business. We had arranged to leave Hilfont on the Tuesday of that Easter week, and were to be joined at Estcourt by Mrs. Harley and her family, and Thursday was the wedding-day.

On Monday I was in the village seeing some of my cottage friends, on my way home from church, and Lucy as usual was with me. It was one of Lucy's principles to be always with me. "It was so sad," she said, "for Aunt Clare to be so much alone," and the good girl devoted herself to me with unwavering assiduity. As we passed down the village street, I was much surprised to see a gentleman's cab standing before the door of the little inn—a very dashing equipage, unknown to these rural quarters. The horse stood trembling and smoking in the harness, evidently still suffering from the excitement of furious speed, and from the inn window a young man regarded the operations of the ostler who came forward to assist a tiny groom in attending to the wearied animal. I did not observe the young man much; but he was evidently the owner of the vehicle, a visitor unaccustomed to these parts.

"How very strange!" said I. "Lucy, do

you see that cab? Who can it be, I wonder? If the election had not been over, I should have supposed an electioneering agent: somebody with urgent news, I suppose. We are happier than most people; we have no one from whom despatches of life and death are likely to come."

But Lucy did not answer me. She gave a slight start, so slight that it was scarcely describable by that word, and grew pale over all her face, with a strange chill whiteness, as if of fear. I thought she looked towards the inn window, and raised her hand in a sudden slight signal to somebody. I became still more surprised.

"Do you know who it is? Do you expect any one?" I asked, in momentary anxiety and alarm.

"I!" said Lucy, turning her face to me with its usual smile and usual colour. "Dear Aunt Clare, how should *I* know who it is? I have no one to expect now, and, as you say, no one in the world who

would send to me despatches of life and death."

I was still puzzled, suspicious, curious, but her tone touched me. It sounded as if her loneliness was recalled to her by my inadvertent words.

"I beg your pardon, Lucy," said I, "I did not mean to wound you. I was thinking more of myself and Mr. Crofton than of you."

"It was natural, aunt," said Lucy; "and I am sure I do not expect people to think of me; but when you say *that*, I remember old times. When I left poor papa for a day, I used to tremble if I saw any one approach in a hurry. Pray forgive me, Aunt Clare. I feel quite sick and giddy, as if something was going to happen; but what can happen that would affect me? I have not another father to lose."

"My dear, I am very sorry. I fear you are ill," said I; "perhaps you ought to go home."

“I think I will, aunt,” said Lucy, “if you are sure you do not want me,” and after a few words more she did leave me, to return to Hilfont. Poor Lucy! she had feelings after all. Yet after I had returned myself, and had been for some time in the house, I encountered Lucy, still shawled and bonneted, entering by a side-door. She had been in the garden, she said, the air did her good, and certainly her cheeks bloomed into sudden colour as she met my eye. “I have been wandering about in the garden since ever I left you,” said Lucy; “it is very mild to-day, and now I feel quite well.”

She certainly looked quite well, and passed me to her own room with a quiet step, not caring to linger, as I thought. I had no time to make further inquiries, if any inquiries could have been made; but felt a vague suspicion of something hidden and clandestine which I could not explain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IT was early April, moist weather, balmy, showery, and spring-like. If anything, I think there was rather too much "taste" shown in the embellishment of Estcourt. All the early flowers which could be found or coaxed into bloom, or that could be stolen or begged from the florists round, adorned in profusion every room in the house, and the children were in a condition of excitement which I should find it difficult to describe. Clara could scarcely move anywhere without an admiring train of little girls after her, every one of whom had the list of our bride's wedding presents by heart, and knew what every one had given her, and every one of whom also throbbed with a mighty secret which Clara as yet did not know. We dined at Estcourt that

Tuesday, a very large party, including the bridegroom and sundry friends of his. Maurice Harley, who was now a Fellow of his college, and rather a great personage, sat by me. He had spent most of his time since his father's death with Mr. Harley's rich uncle. Now, his fellowship made the young man independent, but the habit of his previous life remained. He was but a little interested in, and not very much acquainted with, his own family, and was carelessly condescending to Clara and Alice, "mere pretty girls," whom, being his sisters, he could not fall in love with, and consequently treated with very trifling attention. I could not help looking at my girls with some triumph after half an hour of Mr. Maurice. I had the presumption to think I had beaten Alma Mater, and that my scholars were very much more natural and loveable human natures than hers.

That evening, when we ladies went into the drawing-room, we found everything

arranged for a grand ceremonial. The girls and the servants by joint and extraordinary exertions had manufactured a sort of dais, elevated a couple of steps above the level of the floor, at the upper end of the room. On this dais stood a grand old elbow chair, one of the antiquities of the house, supported by a gilt and velvet-covered footstool. Before the chair stood a small table, and spread over the table, falling down to the floor in heavy folds of needlework, was the mysterious work which had absorbed all Estcourt for three months past—the table-cover wrought in twelve squares, with the arms of the Harleys and of the Sedgewicks impaled in the middle (I suspect the rector did this kind bit of heraldry for them), which was the present of our children to the Estcourt bride. We were marshalled to seats with great solemnity by a young mistress of the ceremonies, who conducted me to the throne on the dais. Then the kind girl, the eldest of the twelve, stood up

before me to make a speech. But when the young spokeswoman cast her first glance on the audience, she became frightened. Old Mrs. Sedgewick clapped her hands, and struck on the floor with the foot, and cried "Hem!" in encouragement. Miss Austin, who was standing by, gave an admonishing and anxious look, and all the girls grew very red, and glanced in sympathy. But the speech would not come. After a moment's pause, the representative of the school rushed from her place to Clara's arms. "Oh, Clara, take it with all our loves!" cried the broken-down orator, and as all the remaining eleven rushed after her to echo the sentiment, the scene became rather tumultuous and irregular, till order was restored. Then we all admired and examined, to the heart's content of the young labourers, and dismissed them in the highest spirits to a refectory of cakes and fruit in Miss Austin's room. There never had been such a holiday in the children's

recollection; my own marriage was a very dull affair in comparison; and they had to try on and examine their white frocks, which arrived from London along with Clara's wedding-dress that night. But don't be indignant, charitable public; they were very pretty, but they were only white muslin; and what with letting down of tucks and altering of trimmings, they lasted for, I will not venture to say how many years; so I was strictly economical, as everybody must perceive.

Next day Bertie Nugent arrived quite unexpectedly at Estcourt. I had not looked for him, in consequence of his long visit at Christmas, but he protested he could not let little Clara be married without being near to help, and brought his present for her, which I daresay made a great hole in the poor boy's pocket-money, besides bringing a small hamper of *bouquets* from Covent Garden, which I am afraid some of the children must have made private application for. I

was very much pleased, on the whole, that Bertie had come, remembering, in my new *rôle* of matchmaker, that one marriage is apt to produce others. Alice and he, it is true, seemed rather reserved and distant to each other, and behaved in a manner very different from their old familiarity—Alice, in particular, who was as stately as a princess; but I rather hoped that this was the best possible sign.

In the meantime, Lucy made Nancy very useful. She could make up wedding favours with the greatest skill, it appeared, and had very tolerable taste in the arrangement of flowers; and then was never flurried nor hurried, nor thrown out of composure—a misfortune which everybody else in the house was somewhat subject to. As for Clara and her mother, they hardly appeared downstairs at all that day, and the household was full of excitement and agitation, greatly stimulated by the half-subdued riot of the children, who ran wild and forgot

their propriety, and kept the officers of the ceremonial in a state of perpetual fright and terror. The drawing-room, which was the only quiet room in the house, was preternaturally quiet in the midst of the bustle. Derwent sat yawning over his newspaper, and Mr. Sedgewick, pretending to be reading, waited with tantalized impatience for the appearance of the little bride, who was shut up with her mother, and had not the remotest intention of showing herself again to-night. I was too restless to do anything. I went wandering about the room, examining into all the odd corners, and I daresay adding to the discomfortable and excited quietness by my movements. The only other persons in the room were Bertie and Lucy, who whispered and laughed together at a table where Lucy was heaping up her wedding favours into a basket ready for use. They were merry enough, but talked under their breath, sometimes disturbing Mr. Sedgewick, who looked

at them half-angrily, sometimes attracting Derwent's attention for the moment. The group struck me once as I passed by them. Lucy dropping the white satin ribbons slowly out of her pretty fingers, one by one; Bertie leaning over in commenting on their manufacture; the two heads very close together, his bending down upon hers, by necessity of his superior height—a very pretty group, but I could not help thinking for the instant that Bertie looked rather too happy. Why was not he, too, watching the door, like Mr. Sedgewick? The thought pursued me even after I went to rest. Supposing anybody had made a picture of these two figures, what name should it have borne? Nonsense! I rejected the thought angrily, as a mere gratuitous vexation. Why should I permit myself, in the merest freak of fancy, to do Bertie so much wrong?

“Happy is the bride that the sun shines on,” I said to myself next morning. I went to Clara's room to find her dressed and

ready. Poor Mrs. Harley was endeavouring to swallow a cup of tea in somewhat hysterical gulps, and very like to be angry with Alice, who had brought her something more substantial by way of breakfast. She was a tender-hearted woman, irresolute and feeble-minded, but kind to the extreme of kindness, and cried, without very well knowing why, over her pretty child. I too, of course, was strongly disposed to cry, and said, "Poor Clara!" as I set her veil straight, and smoothed her hair; so did every woman in the house, down to the kitchen-maid. Why "poor Clara?" I am sure I cannot tell why, only it is nature. I am ready to say as much to-morrow to the very happiest of brides.

Mrs. Harley had never entered Eastbourn church since her husband's death; she said she could not bear it, and shrank from its neighbourhood. Last time she was there, poor Dr. Harley himself stood at the altar, in the prime of his strength, and the fulness of

his happiness. Now our procession trooped quietly by the square block of marble which poor Mrs. Harley had pinched and spared to set up, a groaning weight of unshapely stone, over his grave. They all thought of him as they went along the narrow path into the old choir. Poor happy Dr. Harley! who fell like a tree in the midst of his years—whom the first breath of trouble killed; the woman and the children, though they were all tender enough, heaven knows, had been stouter of heart than he.

So at last we got it over. Clara went past the marble name again, I fear this time without noticing it so much, and returned to Estcourt, white, trembling, and worn out, no longer Clara, but Mrs. Sedgewick. Then came the gay table, the crowds of guests, the different sounds of rejoicing, and then a rush to the door; a mist of embracing arms, and a perfect shout of good wishes. So good-bye to you, little Clara! You were the first who left Estcourt after this fashion

of the young generation. I wonder—I wonder who the next may be? and I returned to think of that Estcourt which should be when I was gone. The Estcourt of two young Nugents, builders up of the old house, dear familiar faces—two hearts at one—two lives after my own heart.

Mrs. Harley and Alice shut themselves up upstairs after our guests, and were invisible for the remainder of the day. Maurice Harley secured Derwent in the library, and tempted him with discussions of those philosophies which young men love, and men who have been young retain a hankering after. The children broke forth in legitimate riot into the garden, whither I followed, taking a sober walk with Miss Austin, to speak of the affairs of the school. Everything was very luxuriant and well-preserved, for I had not the heart to sacrifice to any economy the beauty of the Estcourt gardens; and the children were running to

me now and then with little knots of violets, gathered in shady places below the trees; and once a full procession bearing in triumph one faint lily of the valley, the very first that had been seen or heard of in these parts. Then we came to the terrace in front of the house, where we could see the park with all its trees stirring to the spring. It was a pretty scene—the very name of itself was full of suggestions; and one could not see these buds, greening faintly the bare branches of the trees, without thinking of all the summer wealth of foliage—the culmination of this beginning life. My thoughts were full of another life, which I hoped was at its beginning too. I almost thought I could see Alice Harley, when she was Alice Nugent, walking among these trees, and lingered on the terrace, smiling over my own thoughts.

And even at this moment, in the distance yonder towards the sunset, are two figures. And one of them is Bertie. Has Alice

Harley left comforting her mother? Is it she over whom he is bending—whom he leads among the limes which give no cover now—at that slow, lingering, pleasant pace? I suppose so—of course! So I had better return indoors, in case Bertie, when he comes back, may have something to say.

CHAPTER XIX.

I WAS not deceived. I went to my own old morning room, which was Miss Austin's room now, and where I had received Bertie's first advances towards a confidential friendship. It was somewhat changed. Miss Austin's work-table, which stood at the window, was twice as big as any work-table I ever saw, and full to overflowing with the performances of the girls. Music-books and school-books, which were perfectly orderly to the eye of Miss Austin, who knew exactly where to find what she wanted, but were nevertheless rather an uneasiness to me, whose eye did not understand the irregular lines, filled the bookshelves. Books of general reading were not in this academic retirement. The fireplace was guarded by a high fender, and the carpet was some-

what worn. Yet I felt a familiar pleasure in it, notwithstanding all these changes. It was still my room, where I used to have my private talks with all my friends; where my mother sat, and Derwent came. If it was a workshop, and they made shoes in it, it would still be my room.

I sat down there accordingly, not waiting—thinking it just possible that there might be something to tell—pretending to myself that it was premature, and that I really did not expect to hear anything, yet listening for Bertie's step all the same; and I confess, in the quietness and suspense, a single chill of apprehension stole over me. Was it Alice? Had she left her mother so soon? But of course it was Alice!—who but Alice could walk with Bertie Nugent after that fashion under the Estcourt trees?

Everything was quiet, languid, dull. I could not help returning to those days before my marriage when I knew nothing of Derwent, where he was, or what his senti-

ments were; when I used to sit in this same room by myself, hearing faintly all the sounds of life without, an isolated, lonely woman, thinking so to spend my life. And that day of Kate Crofton's marriage! But though I smiled, I trembled to think of it; and thanked God in my heart for the bright course that lay before their two children, whom God bless! Thus I waited by myself for Bertie's return.

And I was not deceived. Ere long I heard a quick, firm step outside, seeking from room to room for some one, and fancied I could hear a softer step steal upstairs. At last Bertie found me out, and plunged into the room with an exclamation of joy. His face was flushed—he was breathless with his great news—and came forward with such a swell of pride and happiness that I was touched to the heart.

“Cousin Clare,” he cried, “wish me joy! I am the happiest man alive!”

“Happier than Hugh Sedgewick?” said I.

“I wish you joy with all my heart, Bertie, for I suppose you can mean only one thing. God bless you, my dear boy!”

He came up and shook my hand, *wrung* it almost, so sincere was his grasp, and so fervent his happiness.

“I may own it to you now,” said I; “it has been the desire of my heart. I have wished for it so much that I began to dread that it never would come to pass. Derwent says I am no matchmaker, but I have both hoped and plotted this.”

“I thought so!” said Bertie. “I knew you wished it—I told her so, but she would not believe me.”

“I daresay she thought it was too soon after this marriage,” said I. “Why did not she come with you, Bertie? It must have been an agitating day for her, poor child.”

“I wanted her to come, but she would not,” said Bertie; “for it is strange what a settled idea Lucy has that you will not be pleased.”

“Lucy!” I gasped out the name with a sudden sensation—first of utter surprise, then of actual *rage* and disappointment, which horrified myself. “Lucy!” I could not say another word.

“Yes, Lucy.” Bertie looked at me, suddenly chilled and full of astonishment; then he continued in a tone of self-defence, half defiant, half apologetic—“Who should it be but Lucy, cousin Clare?”

I think I groaned aloud in the mere effort to relieve myself. Lucy!—the very surprise seemed to me a plan of malice to wound me the more deeply. Who should it be but Lucy? Oh, Bertie, innocent boy! I turned from him in pain and mortification to the window; then I turned, disgusted, from that part of Estcourt which was to be Lucy Crofton’s. For the moment I fell into the most unchristian and miserable emotions. Lucy! I kept my face away from him, and did not speak again.

And Bertie too kept silent. I have no

doubt he was hurt, and shocked, and grievously disappointed; shocked that I should show so much temper and unamiable feeling—disappointed that the crisis of his life had disappointed me. He stood looking at me wistfully, his face burning red, and troubled; not knowing whether to say anything, or what to say. I had entered so willingly into all his prior anticipations, that the poor boy had grown quite sanguine of my sympathy, and was totally unprepared for the change now. So he stood quite silent, watching me, following with his eyes every movement I made. At last he spoke—

“I am grieved to disappoint you, cousin Clare. I have not done anything which could in any way wound or mortify,” here Bertie paused, with a rising colour, “any one else. But as for my choice, I rejoice and glory in it, even while I grieve that you do not agree with me; and having said this, perhaps I had better go away.”

By this time I had come to myself. “You

must do no such thing, Bertie," said I. "I was disappointed. I should have chosen another bride for you; but it was not mine to choose. You have decided for yourself, and I hope you will be happy."

"Hope! There is very little fear of that," said Bertie; "but I should be happier if you gave me a less cold expression of your satisfaction, cousin Clare."

"My satisfaction!" I said. "Wait a little, Bertie; one cannot command one's wishes so suddenly. But it must have been a very short wooing which has been decided to-day."

"We were five weeks together at Christmas," said Bertie, recovering his spirits. "I contrived to be always as near her as possible; and a man can do a great deal in five weeks. Then there's nobody like her for that; she knows me better—what I prefer, and everything about me—than other people who have known me all my life."

There was another pause, and rather a

painful one. If it had been Alice, we could have mutually praised her, and been mutually delighted; but being Lucy, there was all the usual awkwardness of an hour's interview with a friend who does not appreciate the perfections of the lady, and is not to be convinced of them. Poor Bertie's rejoicing lips were sealed, and his enthusiasm met a full check. He could not say half, nor a tenth part, of what he meant to say; and yet there was tenfold greater reason for proving to me the excellences of Lucy than he had ever supposed.

"She has no guardian," I said, at last, in a tone which I felt to be chilling, but could not alter. "Her father left no will, and as she has no fortune, and Mr. Crofton undertook the care of her, none has been appointed. I do not know whether Lucy thought of referring you to anybody else. She has great prudence; perhaps she bade you see Mr. Crofton?"

"She knew I came to tell you, cousin,

which I thought was all that was necessary," said Bertie, in a mortified tone. "But of course I will see Mr. Crofton immediately. He who protects and cares for her has surely the best right to be consulted, and I trust soon she will want no other protection save mine."

"Then I presume you wish the necessary arrangements to be made soon?" said I. "But you are both very young, Bertie; it will be best to wait."

"The sooner the better, I think, especially now," said Bertie. Then there came another pause. I could see he was deeply mortified, and I was grieved at it, yet did not feel that I could do anything to mend the matter. "Then I will go to Mr. Crofton," he added, after a little, and looked wistfully at me, as if to see whether I had positively nothing more to say. He had almost reached the door before I spoke.

"Bertie," I said, calling him back, "I am sorry I cannot say anything to give you

pleasure. I am disappointed; that is the whole. I had other fancies. By and by, of course, I shall be quite pleased; and in the mean time you must just bear with me. But this, of course, does not in the least affect what I said to you in January about Estcourt. Do not stop me; the matter is important in your circumstances, and you understand that nothing can alter the settlement which we made then. In the mean time, on your marriage, the half of the rents, and at my death Estcourt is yours."

"That must be as you please, cousin," said Bertie, firmly and nobly. "I would rather have half-a-dozen kind words just now than Estcourt; but I have not anything to do with that; it is as you please."

And so he strutted forth majestically, closing the door behind him with punctilious politeness, and left me alone again with my card-castle all blown to pieces. I thought it over, and I could see more and more what a blind fool I had been. From the first day

they met, Bertie had sought her society; and though Lucy gave, or seemed to give, no part of her attention to him, otherwise occupied as she was at the time, I had no doubt *she* was conscious of it from the first. To think how easily I had been deceived!—how complaisantly lent my own assistance to deceive myself! When I began to go into particulars, and recalled that visit to the cottage which Bertie had persuaded me to, and which after all was not to visit Alice, but to be for a whole long day with Lucy, my whole heart rose against her. And if I turned to the future, remembering what pleasant dreams I entertained an hour ago, and how the entire scope of that future was changed, Estcourt itself grew painful to my eyes when I thought that henceforward its mistress should be Lucy Crofton; that she it was who should inhabit these familiar rooms, walk on that terrace, overlook that garden; that through her interpretation the next generation should learn the charitable

folly of my orphan school, and have to think of those happy children whose voices I could hear, as almost paupers. The idea stung me; for I could perceive beforehand how Lucy would do it, and how tenderly satirical she would be upon poor Aunt Clare. And yet, after all, that was a very secondary consideration. Was Bertie likely to be happy with Lucy Crofton for a wife? and what effect would this strange discovery have upon Alice? I was glad to try and forget this last view of the question. Till last Christmas, Bertie and Alice had always been together at every holiday time; but it was, of course, on the frankest footing of youthful acquaintance—the brother-and-sister kindnesses which I hoped to see grow into a more decided preference. But things had certainly changed at their last meeting. Alice was occupied with her sister. Had she observed that Bertie no longer took the same pains to ask her out and share her amusements? I could not tell; but I remembered with some comfort

her air of pique, her little blush of displeasure, and her unwillingness to leave my society for his. Yes; no doubt Alice had been clearer-sighted than I.

On my way upstairs—for it was drawing near the dinner hour—I encountered Lucy coming down. She was still in her white dress which she had worn at the marriage, and looked rather subdued and pale, but not so happy as one might have supposed from Bertie's happiness. For the first time Lucy faltered before me—hesitated, hung down her head, and changed colour. I kissed her gravely, and was the first to speak.

“Bertie has told me,” said I; “I confess I was surprised, Lucy; but I trust and hope you may both be very happy.”

“Thank you, Aunt Clare,” said Lucy. But she did not look up relieved, as I had expected she would; on the contrary, she avoided my eye, and stood by me with very evident disinclination for any further talk, waiting to hear if I had anything else to

say. I had nothing else to say. I shook her hand and let her go, as she seemed to wish, and so reached my own room more puzzled than before. I could not understand it. She was not triumphant; she was not rejoicing; she looked exhausted and overstrained, as if she had gone through some trial which was almost too much for her; and when I had closed my door I fancied I heard her softly return and shut herself into her own room. Perhaps Lucy had more heart than I gave her credit for; perhaps—but conjectures were vain in respect to so self-commanded a person, who took nobody into her confidence. I had half a mind to go to her, having a compunction in my mind, and try to win her to some degree of frankness; but my compassion of the moment was not strong enough to overcome my previous feelings. I began to quarrel with my uncomfortable thoughts—strangely different from those of the morning—and could not help remembering that on the other side

of the wall was Alice, who probably, like me, had sometimes thought of another conclusion to Bertie's youth. Well, well! disappointment is the one thing certain to every human creature; it might have been worse.

CHAPTER XX.

“So, Clare,” said Derwent, “Bertie has lost no time in acting upon your words. Do you know with what errand he came to me to-night?”

“Yes; I saw him first,” said I.

“And you don’t seem very much delighted, I am bound to say. Did you expect the young fellow to hang on to your skirts, Clare?” said Derwent. “It does not answer at his age.”

“I expected nothing unbecoming in Bertie,” said I, a little displeased, “which that would have been; but I confess I thought it sudden. They have seen very little of each other to make up their minds so soon.”

“For a youth of two-and-twenty he has chosen very discreetly,” said Derwent. “A better girl than Lucy is not possible. I

told him I thought he was in great luck, and he seems to be quite of my mind."

"Yes; he appears very happy," said I.

"Upon my honour, Clare, you take it very coolly. I expected to find you quite excited about 'the second marriage in the family,'" said Derwent, laughing. "I would rather it had been Henry Crofton; but as it is I am very well pleased. What is wrong? You are quite severe and stately to-night, Madame Clare."

"I would rather it had been Henry Crofton too," said I; "that is all."

"Ah, I perceive; odd enough now, I don't think you ever *have* taken to Lucy, Clare," said Derwent. "Why, I wonder? She's a very good girl, is she not?"

"A very good girl," said I, gravely.

"Then what have you got against her? She's particularly attentive to you. I like her for that," said my husband, with a glance of inquiry, from which I averted my face.

“And particularly attentive to me,” said I; “but sometimes people are too attentive and too good, Derwent. Poor human nature objects to be outdone.”

“Which means that you don’t intend to explain your objections to Lucy. As you will,” said my husband; “but I assure you I congratulated Bertie heartily, and I think he has done very well.”

With which words the conversation ended—ended with a kind of a ghost of a quarrel between my husband and myself, and a little restrained our cordiality for that night, which I am afraid did not improve the amiability of my sentiments towards Lucy. I lay awake pondering the whole matter for a long time, and the strange incident of the Easter Monday returned to my mind. Could Lucy have anything to do with the owner of that dashing cab and steaming thoroughbred? How was it that the sight of them overpowered her for the first time with such a consciousness of her or-

phanage that she was compelled to leave me, moved by feelings which had been quite quiescent and manageable hitherto, yet was still out walking in the garden when I returned? The circumstances were very suspicious, and became more and more so as I pondered over them, and in brief I was thoroughly discontented, and not to be satisfied by any exercise of reason. Lucy's calm was to me only an impenetrable and uncertain surface, which some unsuspected influence might break up under our feet at any moment. A person who is incomprehensible by ordinary rules of nature is generally more or less a suspicious person. This girl had been in my constant society for four or five months, and I knew no more about her wishes, her thoughts, and her loves than I did the first day. Every now and then I made a sudden discovery of something which she had no motive whatever for concealing, and yet "never mentioned," which was her form of

putting the matter. What would her power of concealment be if she really had something to conceal?

In the morning I came to the resolution of asking a year's delay from Bertie, a very common condition, which, considering the age of both, was also very reasonable, and to which Derwent fully consented. Bertie gave in after considerable persuasion, but could not end the discussion without affronting me by a hope that in the meantime I would be kind to Lucy, which, from him, I confess, wounded me more than it ought to have done. Kind! Perhaps he was right—for I certainly could not give love to my guest, nor, I fear, even esteem; but these things would not come on being commanded. Bertie and I accordingly, for the first time, parted rather coldly—another agreeable token of the influence of Lucy. They certainly took the very best method possible of making my negative dislike a positive enmity.


Mrs. Harley and her family left us next day. In present circumstances I thought it just as well to keep silent about this change of affairs. Alice was occupied with her brother, of whom, though I did not particularly admire him, she was very proud, and said good-bye to Bertie with such gay good humour and friendliness, that I took unwilling comfort from the thought that my intentions had as little force in her mind as in his. And Mrs. Harley could talk of nothing but Clara, wondering how far she was by this time, whether the dear child would like travelling, and if Mr. Sedgewick would be considerate enough to keep her well wrapt up. So there was really no occasion for introducing a new event, and, on the whole, it seemed wisest to say nothing about it. I will not positively answer for it that the wicked and worldly policy of those elderly people who snub the attachments of the young as a duty, did not whisper in my ear, "There is no telling

what may happen in a year;" but at all events I took the negative method of wisdom, and held my peace.

The end of the week found us once more at home, and all these much-expected festivities thrown back into the past. I confess I had almost forgotten Clara Harley's marriage already. The new incident was of so much greater importance, that it blotted out that other complete event which no longer left any room for imagination. Clara was married, and there was an end of her; but as for Lucy, she was close to me, by my side every day, and, strange aggravation, was Bertie's chosen, and the future mistress of Estcourt. I bent my mind to my duty as far as I was able. For Bertie's sake, and for necessity's, I tried very hard to find out some points of union between the veiled spirit by my side and my own. And Lucy replied to my efforts with the utmost sweetness—sat with me, walked with me, talked to me, was attentive to

every wish I expressed, and tried to anticipate those I said nothing about, but withal never once lifted that veil, never betrayed herself; and love, however solicited, would not come. But we preserved, as may be supposed, an appearance of the most perfect friendship. Lucy kissed me morning and evening as duly as she came down and went upstairs. She talked of Bertie as sensibly and quietly as if she had been his grandmother; but I am grieved to say she still continued, despite all my endeavours, to provoke and "aggravate" me.

My attention was roused, and my eyes jealous. I remembered her paleness and heavy look when I met her at Estcourt on the stairs; I remembered the incident of the cab on Easter Monday. I began to think and recall to my mind what she said about her father's servant, and the letter addressed to Plantagenet Hall, and I could not help observing that Lucy still got the same succession of letters, and that still the maid



brought down her share of the outward bound correspondence just as the post-bag was about to be closed. One other time I thought I caught a glimpse of the same cab dashing along the road below Hilfont, and a little later saw Lucy enter, looking agitated and distressed; but when I questioned her about it, she only asked, with the same open smile of surprise, "I, Aunt Clare? I do not know anybody who drives a cab and visits in the village." There was nothing to be got out of Lucy; but I watched her with involuntary eagerness, and kept her very close under my eye. When a young lady speaks very frankly about her betrothed lover, quotes his letters, and is quietly satirical over his opinions and weaknesses, and at the same time gets heaps of other letters, and seems to have some mysterious, unexplainable relationship with the Will-o'-the-wisp cab, which nobody knows anything about, one's curiosity becomes interested. I almost think I should have read the ad-

dresses of Lucy's letters had she placed them on the hall table now; and I confess I was under temptations to steal the old man's bag from him, and look over the correspondence clandestinely. Then there began to be faint indications, breaking even through Lucy's self-command, that all was not so calm with her as it used to be. Sometimes her eyes looked as though they had been crying; sometimes I was inclined to suppose she had not slept much the last night; and at such times Lucy quoted Bertie, and smiled at his simplicities with a positive bitterness, as if she owed him a grudge. I never studied the character of either man or woman before, but I did watch Lucy with an anxious and jealous regard. Nothing she did escaped me; and when she chose a book and read it, I used to read it after her, with some idea of catching a clue to her thoughts. But the books which Lucy read were all proper books, highly recommended for young ladies—the most of them loftily

superior to any human sympathy whatever. I listened to her music, but that was the music she always played; and on the whole, I could discover nothing about Lucy. We walked together as if there was a dark bridge between us; and I knew instinctively that all my knowledge of her, all my watching of her, all the time we had spent together, had not enabled, and never would enable me, to pronounce with certainty upon any one thing which Lucy was like, or was not like to do.

CHAPTER XXI.

TIME had gone on thus until autumn—the end of September—the first six months of Bertie's year. He had come down to Hilfont twice, for a day or two each time, and we had recovered our cordiality. Lucy managed him admirably; she subdued his frown, and kept him within bounds without the shadow of a quarrel, though he was hotheaded enough, and very exacting; and Bertie was fully convinced that there was not such another in the world, and most comfortably confident in her attachment to himself. I used to hear him singing as he went, out of the gladness of his heart, song of Burns, the burden of which celebrates, above all, a certain heroine's other qualities—the “kind love that's in her eye.” This song Bertie murdered. I cannot use

a milder expression, so far as other people are concerned — but it pleased himself mightily. I remember once, while he was doing something expressly for her, and singing, as usual, this favourite effusion of content, I saw Lucy cast at him, all at once, a sudden glance of contempt, of spite, of ridicule, so intense and bitter that I was startled. It was but a glance, and for a moment, yet it spoke, or seemed to speak, of an irritation and disdain which had been accumulated for months. Hearing me start, she turned another rapid glance to me—our eyes met, and for the moment I fancied I could read Lucy's heart. A whole world of restrained emotion lay in her eyes—dislike, reluctance, warm opposition, a desire to be quit of us all, and fly away—and that, too, was but a glance. I could not pass it over in silence—could I act upon it? I rose with a sudden excitement, which I could not subdue, and after a moment's consideration left the room. A momentary

look—a revelation made neither by words nor deeds, but by a single glance out of Lucy's eyes. What would any one say to me if I proposed to build upon that? Of course that it was mere malice, dislike, and enmity on my part; yet I was no less convinced that I had seen into Lucy's private thoughts, and that she knew I had. I was disturbed and troubled beyond description, angry, indignant, and anxious. Must I stand by and see my good Bertie rejoice as a bridegroom over a woman who scorned him? Must I bestow my inheritance only to secure the unhappiness of my kin? Or if I interfered, be content to hear, both from Bertie and my husband, an odious, unmerited accusation, and to see this clever Lucy triumphant over all? It was the hardest problem I had ever needed to solve.

The next time Lucy and I were alone I spoke to her. I had resolved to try, once for all, to set matters right, and in no un-

kindly spirit; for even to herself this wretched deceit would bring nothing but unhappiness.

“Lucy,” I said, “do you remember how you looked at me yesterday? Did you mean it?”

“Did I mean what, aunt?” said Lucy, lifting her eyes to me with the most innocent surprise in the world.

I expected this, and was not discouraged. “My dear,” I said, “you are still very young; I dare say you feel a certain pleasure in being able to keep everybody around you in the dark as to your real feelings, but this is a poor enjoyment at the best, and it will recoil chiefly upon yourself. Even now, at last, try to have confidence in me, Lucy. I begged you, when you first came here, not to restrain yourself unnaturally. I beg you not to conceal your real heart under a pretence, or to keep up those false appearances. In this house there is nothing but kindness

and good intention towards you—an honest affection and a true love. Even I, who love you least, mean you well, Lucy. I am a woman, and have had trials of my own; I can sympathize, perhaps I can help you. Try to have confidence in me.”

Lucy looked up again, with great calmness, into my face. “You are very kind, aunt Clare, but indeed it is quite unnecessary. You know quite as much of me as you will care to know. You heard of—of my engagement the very day it was made; what more can I have to tell?”

“You *have* more to tell!” cried I, anxiously.

Lucy neither spoke nor looked at me; she went on sedulously at her crochet, and I thought I could see her hands tremble, but she answered nothing.

“You cannot always keep up this guard,” said I; “sometimes for a moment nature will fail, and in that moment you will betray yourself. For your own sake, Lucy,

I appeal to you. After the look you gave me yesterday, I can no longer be deceived."

Again there was a momentary pause. "I am sorry you should think I wish to deceive you, aunt Clare," said Lucy, rather breathlessly. Then another silence. "I will explain my words, or my acts, whenever you please, aunt, as well as I can, but I cannot explain my *looks*; or at least I cannot explain things which other people may see in them."

"Then that is all?" said I.

"Yes, aunt," said Lucy, with some firmness; but she no longer ventured to look up to my face.

From that day, as is to be supposed, my vigilance increased, but mingled with this was a fluctuating background of anger and pity, according as I regarded ourselves or Lucy. I could not but feel confident that she wronged Bertie in her heart, and that idea kept me indignant. But this unfor-

tunate, untruthful girl—she, after all, was the person to be pitied.

If I was right—always with that condition, if I was right—for Derwent and Bertie were perfectly happy and satisfied, and had not a doubt of me. It was a strange position in which to stand. I do not think I ever felt so isolated, so separate from my friends during all my life.

One autumn day I had been by myself in the village, visiting the wife of our curate, who was a gentle hypochondriac. On my way home I met the wife of the village shopkeeper, who stopped to curtsy, and exhaust herself in inquiries after every member of our household. “I’ve seen Miss over again the stile this half-hour or moor,” said the woman, “and lookin’ ought but well. I thowt to mysel’, she’s after the ferns or the flowers, like the most of them young ladies, but I rayther think it’s a talk she’s having wi’ some un as pleases her. Young folks

will be young folks, i' the village or i' the hall."

"You must be mistaken, I think. Miss Crofton is not very well to-day; I left her at home," said I.

"Bless you, ma'am, I'm never mistaken," said my informant; "I've browt up three lasses mysel', and I knows the ways on 'em. I've gone to church, thinking my Mary was bad in bed, I have, and whenever my back's turned she's made hersel' as gay as a peacock, a purpose to see Raaf Smith—him as she's married to now-a-days. Bless you, I knows 'em well."

"You are wrong, however, about Miss Crofton; pray don't think of repeating it; it is quite a mistake," said I, endeavouring to pass, and anxious to see for myself.

"I ne'er was a story teller," said the woman, "but there's moor things talked of in the village; it's but them that's most concerned that ne'er hear what all the world knows."

“What do you mean?” cried I, in amazement.

“You look down by the wood, ma’am,” said the gossip, briskly; “there’s a kind of a carriage there that’s moor times than one been seen by the Hall; and him that cooms a driving of it you’ll see talking to Miss on toother side of the stile.”

I confess after this I hurried away without another word; and, anxious and in haste, took a byeway, which led, by a long detour, into the wood. I went very rapidly, finding roots of trees and broken branches no bar to my tremendous haste. Coming at last to a point which overlooked the high road, I looked carefully down from among the trees, and saw, within a few yards off, at the junction of two roads, the same cab which I saw on Easter Monday in the street of the village. The little groom held the horse’s bridle, and kept up a close supervision of the two roads; but either this by-way was unknown to him, or he

could not see me. I was standing on the top of a mound deeply wooded, to the summit of which this school-boy track led; underneath, but a long way about, from the crown of the slope, lay the stile where Lucy was said to be. I wound my way cautiously down, to reach it, if possible, unobserved; and before I reached it I could perceive enough to confirm the gossip's tale. Close by the stile, ready to plunge into the other side of the wood, and gain his vehicle unperceived, stood a young man, of whom I could only say that he was not Bertie, and leaning upon him, with her arm in his, stood Lucy Crofton. They were absorbed, apparently, in an anxious, half-whispered conversation, in which frequent pauses were made, to permit the stranger to look anxiously out into the road, to see if any one was coming. They did not suppose any one was coming by that concealed by-way. I almost felt it unfair to steal upon them so entirely unsuspected, and made a rustling

among the branches before I reached them, to give them warning. At the sound they both looked round. Lucy thrust her companion away, with an imperative—"Go!" and the young man sprang across the path, but, finding me close upon him, and himself discovered, paused and turned round to her with an eager, vacillating look, as if for further orders. There was no escape. Lucy turned round upon me darkly, with a trembling lip, which still curled in a strange travesty of her usual smile, and met my eye with defiance. "Were you hiding among the bushes, Aunt Clare?" she said, with a tone of insult which was indescribable. I remembered it after, but was not cool enough to notice it at the time.

"It does not matter," said I; "I must have an explanation of this, and immediately. Who is this whom you steal out secretly to meet—you, Lucy Crofton, who are bound to another?"

Lucy did not answer me. She turned,

and cried, "Go, Reginald—go!" with an eager gesture of her hand.

"Nay," said I, "do not go. If it is you who have persuaded this young lady to place herself in so unbecoming a position, stay, and tell me, her natural guardian, what this means."

"Eh! ah! What am I to say?" said the youth, looking at Lucy. "I wanted to tell you, upon my honour I did—but you see it's all my father. Eh! what the deuce is a man to say?"

"Say nothing—but good morning," said Lucy. "Go away—go! Do you hear me? Will you do what I tell you? Go!"

"By George, but I wont this time, though," cried the young man. "See here, ma'am—it's none of her doing. I *will* come to see her somehow, if there were a dozen fathers between us; and if you choose to forbid me your place, I don't mind—but I will see her. I am fond of her—and she's fond of me. I wont be put off any longer,

by George. It's all my old rogue of a father, and nothing else, upon my honour. Lucy, I'm not going to hold my tongue any more."

She did not speak, only looked at him with a significant look and gesture, which somehow changed his mood. He stopped, gazed at her, grumbled "Good bye, then," and with a half-sullen nod at me, plunged through the trees, and Lucy and I stood alone, looking at each other. I was very angry, I confess, but I was also deeply grieved.

"You would have found it better policy to tell me frankly when I asked you," said I. "Now let us get home; and I trust you will be ready to explain everything there."

She followed me home with a look of dark, immovable obstinacy which I could not have believed possible to that smiling face; keeping a step behind me all the way; walking with a conscious air of mock humility and disdain, which was of itself a

tacit insult. It was rather a rough road, interrupted by branches of trees and heaps of fagots, cut down and piled on the way-side for the winter's fuel. I went on quickly, stumbling sometimes with my excitement and nervous haste. "You do not find it very pleasant walking here, Aunt Clare," said Lucy; "it might be better, perhaps, to take the proper way."

Did she mean to exasperate me? I made no answer, but went on quietly; it seemed a week before we reached Hilfont. When we got there at last, I led her into the library, where I knew Derwent to be. We came in so hastily, I excited and angry, Lucy pale and obstinate, that he perceived at once something had gone wrong. He pushed away the letter he was writing, and stood up astonished to look at us. I could scarcely pause to take breath before I spoke.

"Derwent," said I, "you have put the fullest, most unlimited confidence in this girl; you have given her the place of a

child in your house; you have even wished that it should be she who should share the inheritance with your heir after us. You sanctioned her engagement to Bertie Nugent, and gave her your blessing. Did she ever tell you—nay, did she ever give you the slightest ground to believe that her engagement with Bertie was all a fiction, and that she has been pledged otherwise, and to another person, all the time?"

Derwent looked from me to Lucy, and from Lucy to me again. He saw me excited quite beyond all ordinary self-control; he saw her dark and down-looked, yet preserving her manner of tranquillity; and I believe in his heart he sided with her quietness, and thought so much self-possession could not belong to one who was in the wrong.

"What do you mean, Clare?" he exclaimed in great trouble and annoyance, and with an impatient, half-angry tone.

"I do not say anything about what *I* have done; for I have neither felt nor pro-

fessed confidence in her," said I; "but you have; she owes nothing but kindness to you. Tell me that she has disclosed the truth to you, and I will acquit her of all the rest."

"What truth? Pray, speak plainly; you amaze me, Clare," said my husband; "what has Lucy done?"

"I have only met and spoken a few words to an old friend, Uncle Derwent," said Lucy steadily; "one whom I knew years ago, and have always known. Aunt Clare does not love me; she wishes to separate me from Bertie; she watched me speaking to my friend, who happens to be a young man, and she has brought me here like a culprit to convict me of ingratitude to you."

"Indeed, Clare," cried Derwent hastily, "I am much surprised. I did not suppose you would let your feelings carry you so far. I must interfere to protect Lucy now, for I cannot but fear that you have been very unjust to her."

I looked at him, scarcely believing my ears. But he had averted his face, and was placing a chair for Lucy, and bidding her sit down; he would take care of her. I said nothing. I was thoroughly wounded and mortified; too indignant to defend myself. I left the room hastily, and went to my own. Then, fearful of interruption, I went to a little inner chamber I had, and fell upon my knees, in the great tumult and pain of my thoughts. The matter was changed; it was no longer Lucy; it was personal injustice, cruel and biting—the first pang of discord and alienation of heart between Derwent and me.

CHAPTER XXII.

I WAS in my own private sanctuary, a place which no one ever entered save myself; where I did, with tears and prayers, like a sacramental work, the homeliest needful offices. I was there, and my heart calmed within me; secondary troubles could not touch me there.

I remember well the first time I fled for refuge and soothing to that room. It was when, glancing listlessly over a newspaper, I saw, and, being fascinated, somehow could not help but read, one of those horrors of moral crime—a baby killed by its mother. I could not bear it. I came here with the great sob of intolerable anguish gasping in my throat. Why, why, oh compassionate God, give the living child to *her* who dared the boldest act of crime to make

herself free of that burden? and to me, alas! to me, nothing but a little grave! Oh, thou terrible life that art but for a while! who within thy limits dare answer such a question as this?

And here I had come many a day since, —many a day—my heart always more or less throbbing with that pang which never went away. A little cradle, where once, for an hour of that sweet life which was counted by hours, my child slept; a little basket on the table, with the little garments laid in it; a low chair, where some one had once sat holding him; and nothing more but the Bible, which laid a solemn calm upon my heartache when I read it there. I dropped on my knees, with my head upon the chair—then I rose up, and took my seat there, and hid my face in my hands—and God knows, when one has a sharp stroke of this world's common trouble, and has no secret happiness to fall back upon, it is well to have a sacred grief, where one can clear

one's soul from the dust of the ignoble overthrow. It calmed me like the touch of God.

I could not think of Lucy here. I could scarcely think of Derwent's unkind tone and averted face. I escaped from all, to wander longing to the verge of that heaven where the heart of my heart, and soul of my soul, born for God and not for me, fulfilled the dear life ordained for him at the Lord's feet. O sweetest choristers, O holiest innocents, how many hearts break for you, and yearn for you, night and day, and hour and year, when no man knows thereof! I think the Lord himself could not bear it, if it were not that that hereafter which shall put the children again into the mother's arms is even *now* with Him.

Thinking of these things, with my head bowed down in my hands, and my heart far away—having escaped out of the troubles which sent me here, and growing calm in the sadness of my heart, I heard all at once a

sound that startled me. For the first time, I had left the door unlocked when I came into my secret place, and when I looked up with a sudden start and cry, Derwent stood before me—stood at first amazed, wondering to find himself here; then he looked round with a troubled, astonished eye. Unaware of what all this meant, and having long ago ceased to dwell upon the trouble which was never absent from my thoughts, it was some time before Derwent realized what those things were. When he did realize it, he fell down by my side, and threw his arms round me, and, touched by a sudden touch of grief and pity, and tender consciousness of what this loss was, fell into a sudden, brief, involuntary weeping, which touched my very heart. I was far past crying, for my own part, and I was partly frightened by his tears, as women always are, and tried to soothe him instantly, and discharge this from his thoughts; but I was comforted by the sight of the grief, which showed me

that I did not mourn alone. After a while he rose up, and held me close, forgetting too, as I did, everything that had occurred out of this sacred room. I did not know, and did not think what he had come to say, and neither did he. He looked round with wistful, pitying eyes, full of a great tenderness. He saw my Bible on the table, the only other thing in the room, and he knew in a moment my secret—the only secret I had ever had from him—the secret of a year.

“How long has this been, Clare?” he said softly in my ear.

“Ever since——” How could he ask—he must have known.

And once more he looked round the room, the water glittering in his eyes. “And this has been in your heart all this time; and you have come here every day,” he said, slowly and sadly. “Poor mother! poor Clare!”

I could have cried then; but he led me away, and locked and closed the door reve-

rently and silently. Then he brought me into my own dressing-room, and set me down on a sofa. "Clare," he said, "I came to ask if you would pardon me. I was very wrong, but I do not fear that you will pardon me now, and I am glad I found you as I did."

Then there was a little pause. When he resumed, it was in a different tone. "Lucy says," said Derwent, "that the person whom you found her talking to is an old friend, but will not give me any further information. I want to hear all that you know. I have tried to be content with the explanation she gives, but it is not easy. I daresay he is an old friend; still Bertie would not much like it, I daresay, and it seems our duty to understand all the circumstances. If it is not too much exertion for you, my love, tell me what you know."

I did tell him simply and without reserve; the letters, and Lucy's half-explanation, and the precautions she had taken that I should

not see those she sent away; the repeated visits of the cab; the warning of the shop-keeper's wife; the declaration of the young man himself, and Lucy's authority over him. Derwent listened with great attention, and shook his head. He was shaken in his confidence, and now distrusted her more than I did, leaping from one extreme to another; for I knew that Lucy never would do anything to compromise herself really in the eyes of the world.

“Who is he?—that seems the first question. Do you not think, Clare,” said Derwent, “that if you really made an appeal to her, and endeavoured to win her confidence, she would tell *you*?”

“I have already tried,” said I.

“But try again, for everybody's sake; try to ascertain who he is,” said Derwent. “If it should happen to be an honest difficulty in the course of true love, why, you and I know enough of that, Clare, to be able to sympathize with them. I shall give her

something, of course, when she marries, and I dare say neither of us would mind a little over-expenditure to secure her happiness. Tell her so, and she'll surely confide in you. Anything, so long as it's honest; it may be only a blunder of their youth."

"But Bertie?" said I.

"Ah, Bertie!" said my husband, uneasily; "that's the sting of the whole affair. Could she accept Bertie, and yet correspond with this other fellow? Impossible! Let's hope they had a quarrel, at least, and parted in heroics, and that poor Bertie, for his sins, came in at the critical moment, and got accepted in pique. Bad enough, Clare; but such things have happened. Poor Bertie! *I'll* have the delightful task of informing him, I suppose. Pleasant work! But, Clare, you must try again to persuade her to confide in you."

"But what can I say, or what must we do if she persists in saying it was only a friend?" said I.

Derwent shrugged his shoulders, rose up, and began to pace about the room in troubled consideration. "Take clandestine means, I suppose," he said; "either she must tell us who he is, and how he happened by accident to come here, and meet her at that stile, or else I must trust to my wits, and find it out for myself."

"But she did not say he came by accident," I exclaimed.

Derwent thought she did, but I dare say he was wrong. Lucy would not have committed herself to a falsehood so easily found out. I got up at length to go upon my unpleasant and undesirable errand. My rising startled Derwent; he came and led me to the door, where he paused again, looking rather anxiously into my face.

"Clare, I want you to do me a favour," he said.

I knew by instinct what it was, and held up my hands, begging him to spare me; but he only took my hands in his affectionately,

with great gravity and seriousness, and continued what he had to say.

“I want a promise from you, Clare. I know you will do it if you promise,” said Derwent. “I want you to send these things away. My love, think! is it right? It is an idol’s shrine at which you worship there.”

“No,” I cried, out of my very heart. “No; it is at the feet of the Lord.”

But Derwent only shook his head. There is a difference between men and women. Into that retirement of my soul he would not go with me. “Promise,” he said again, with the tenderest pity and affection in his eyes.

And I did promise; but while he returned well pleased and satisfied, I went away with a pang in my heart. He did not understand. He thought I would be comforted, and forget, if these tokens were gone. Forget! I would rather have died.

So I went away very slowly, collecting

my thoughts, to go to Lucy, much calmed and tranquillized in my mind by the near touch of my sorrow, strengthened by coming near it, composed out of my angry thoughts. I felt that I could go to her now with a milder manner and kinder intentions, and began almost to hope that she could not resist me any longer. I wished no longer to vindicate myself, and justify my suspicions, but to do the best I could for us, and for us all.

But when I came to the door of the room, Lucy suddenly encountered me coming out with a little basket, which contained her crochet, in her hand. She went quietly down before me to the drawing-room, and sitting down, began to work just as usual, with calm nerves and enviable self-control. I sat down by her, and begged her once more to open her heart to me. I told her, if she would be frank, that Derwent would exert himself to set her affairs right, and that candour now should wipe out the

secrecies of the past. Lucy considered over it gravely for some time, bending her head over her work. At length she let me know her decision.

“Thank you, Aunt Clare; I am much obliged to you for your gentleness and forbearance. I dare say I provoke a great deal. Wait, please, till to-morrow.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

THAT was one of the most uncomfortable nights I ever spent. I accepted Lucy's proposal, and was content to wait till to-morrow; but Derwent, though he agreed to this, did not by any means do it gracefully. So he left us for most part of the evening, which he spent alone in the library, on pretence of being busy. Lucy and I sat near each other, both working, and keeping up a very restrained and uncomfortable conversation—not Lucy's fault; but I could not assume even the common kindness of our usual intercourse, in full consciousness of the secret which lay between us. More than that, my mind was full; I could not help discussing with myself the events of this day, and the contingencies which hung upon them. It was impossible, sitting quietly

there, in presence of that quiet, pretty figure seated opposite, intent upon the trifling work which made so distinct and vivid the impression of house-dwelling and settled life, to avoid speculating upon all the changes which within a few days might be made upon various LIVES through the agency of this same little person. I am obliged to confess that I was not so much grieved for Bertie's share of the trouble as I might have been. I was distressed for him, but the sting of my distress was the fear that Bertie, in spite of this, would cling to Lucy, and receiving her ready explanation of the whole affair, would still give his warm heart lavishly, and throw his love away upon a woman who did not care for him, and could maintain a clandestine correspondence with another person while affianced to himself. Then, did Lucy prefer this other person? He was well-looking enough, but vacant and boyish, and not at all to be compared to my Bertie. On this

last, the whole question hinged; for if Lucy threw off her unknown lover, and “explained” her conduct, and preferred Bertie, Bertie, I knew, would not be moved from her side by the arguments of all the world. If there did flutter in my mind the possibility that Lucy would choose the other way—that Bertie would be free, and that still my scheme might come to pass—I smothered the hope in a corner, and would not venture to look in its face. All depended upon to-morrow—and to-morrow! Who can look forward with confidence to the solving of an uncertainty upon another day?

At last she rose, gathered her work together, and held out her hand to bid me good-night. Looking in her face, I saw that, instead of being humbled and downcast, it was flushed with an excitement which had no appearance of pain, and that her eyes shone with a half-saucy triumph. I had meant to say a parting word of serious counsel, which should send her to her rest

full of thought, and bring fully before her the importance of the crisis, but the words were checked on my lips by Lucy's look; she bade me good-night almost gaily. "Good-night, Aunt Clare; you shall know all about it to-morrow," she said; and so went off as lightly as though we had been each other's dearest friends, and she had never caused either uneasiness or displeasure to any one in the world. I could not forget her look all night. It was the first thing that occurred to me when I woke in the morning. It certainly did not seem the fitting herald of a confession of deceit and simulation such as Lucy must have to make; and I could not help feeling certain that something quite different from our expectation awaited us in the morning. When I told Derwent so, he replied with an exclamation of impatience.

"What she has to say had better be satisfactory," he said; "but why do you suppose so, Clare?"

“From her look,” said I.

“Her *look!* ah, there’s no trusting to looks,” said Derwent, who I dare say thought himself wiser than I in that point; and so we went downstairs to breakfast. I think that was the only morning since she came to Hilfont that Lucy had not been first in the breakfast-room; and this startled me to begin with; but it was perfectly natural, and might quite well be understood. She might be agitated, and not strong enough to meet us both from the earliest, and go through all the usual punctilios of the meal. But we commenced breakfast, and still Lucy did not appear; finished, and there was no word of her. Then I went upstairs to inquire whether she had breakfasted in her own room, or meant to do so. But Lucy was not in her room. My own maid came down in consternation to tell me so. Then we became alarmed, and sought through the house in a little dismay. When that was unavailing, Derwent began to examine

the servants. Miss Crofton had left her room very early this morning, one of them said, just after daylight, and had gone out to walk, as he supposed. Then my maid returned to whisper to me with solemnity that one of the female servants who specially attended to Lucy was also a-missing. We sent out messengers immediately through the grounds and gardens, but Lucy was gone. Both Derwent and myself became very anxious. There was no note, no explanation, to be found anywhere. At last Derwent picked up a letter from the hall-table, as people much excited do pick up and notice the most trifling things. "This letter had better have a stamp," he said to me; and I remember wondering that he should observe it at such a time. In another moment his face flushed. He cried, "Ah, Clare, here it is," held it up to me, and ran into the breakfast-room, where he gave me the letter. It was from Lucy, and doubtless, as a last little stroke of her

wit upon me, was placed on that table in the hall.

And this is how Lucy explained her secret to the guardians of *her* orphanage:—

“DEAR AUNT CLARE,—Before you receive this I shall be gone from Hilfont, but gone, I trust, for my own happiness, and at my own will, and not because I have offended anybody. I have never been very happy while with you; I had begun to fear I never should be; but I trust that is changed now. The gentleman whom you met with me yesterday was Reginald Broom, the only son of Mr. Broom, of Plantagenet Hall. We have been engaged to each other since before papa died; and when I came to your house it was with the hope, as they were then in this quarter of the country, that perhaps I might meet them, and do what I could to win over the old gentleman to our side. I dare say you will think me quite inexcusable for suffering Bertie to suppose that

I liked him. I cannot enter just now into my reasons for doing so, though it was entirely his fault, and not mine, because I believe that *you*, Aunt Clare, when you find I am entirely out of your way and married, will forgive me for *this*. Reginald has been down at Hilfont only three times. The sole reason why we were not married before is that Mr. Broom is opposed to it, because I have no fortune; and as Uncle Derwent could not, however liberal, have given me such a fortune as would please Mr. Broom, we have at last made up our minds to run the risk, and will be on our way to Scotland when you find this. Good-bye, dear aunt. I am very much obliged to you for all your *kindness*, and hope you may soon get another companion who may suit you better than I did; and I trust Uncle Derwent will stand our friend with Mr. Broom when we come home.

“LUCY CROFTON.”

“So there is an end of Lucy Crofton,” cried I. “She has eloped; she has left Bertie!” And I confess, in spite of my indignation, my resentment, my consciousness of the cruel blow which it would be to him, a spark of exhilaration unknown to it for months sprung up in my heart.

Derwent said nothing for the moment. He took the letter in his hand, looked over it, and set his teeth. “The little witch!” he exclaimed; then tossed the letter into the fire, and then picked it out again, burning his fingers. This touch of pain recalled him to himself.

“Keep it, Clare,” he said; “we may want it before we are done. The little jilt! To think she has taken us in so long! However, she is a Crofton, and my cousin’s daughter. I’ll start at once and see this Mr. Broom.”

“I think really you will give yourself a great deal of unnecessary trouble,” said I, somewhat stiffly; for I had no idea of having Lucy brought back to me, and restored to Bertie whether she would or no.

Derwent looked at me closely. "She has never pleased you, Clare, and you have been right," he said. "You women understand each other; she knows, too, that you never wanted her to be Bertie's wife. Take comfort; I am not going after Lucy. She has chosen her own lot, and I will not interfere; but I shall go to the father, and if I can, make terms for her; and I must go to Bertie, Clare."

"My poor boy!" I said, with involuntary sympathy, as if I had only felt for the first time what an awaking that would be for the young heart which believed in everybody, and knew neither falsehood nor dishonour in all the world.

"Leave him to me," said Derwent. "I am off, Clare; take care of your strength, and remember your promise. You shall hear from me to-morrow. Send William after me to town with some things. I shall start at once; and in the mean time inquire as you can, and ascertain what has been known among the servants. You can do it

quietly by your maid, and send me the particulars; it will satisfy Bertie, if nothing more."

"But why so hasty, Derwent? There is time enough," said I.

"There is never time enough," cried my husband, who had already called for his horse, and whom one of his rare fits of action had seized upon. "Rumour is always first on the road. If I get there in time, I may effect a compromise with old Broom. The ungrateful little witch! This house turned upside down on account of her, and an ache preparing for poor Bertie's unsuspecting heart, not to speak of the inevitable commotion in Plantagenet Hall! I tell you what she deserves, Clare; she deserves that this young fellow should cast her off on the way."

"It is civil to suppose she has done it all for his sake," said I; "but if he did cast her off on the way, what should you do?"

Derwent gave a short, angry laugh.

“Shoot him, I suppose. I am not at all disinclined even now,” said my husband, rather firmly, and so went away galloping to the nearest railway to get the train for town. I knew, though he had not told me, exactly what Derwent would do. I knew that he would make his proposals to the elder Mr. Broom as carefully as though this had been a mere extravagance of youthful fervour—the true love which would not run smooth. I knew how he would represent Lucy’s good qualities and good connexions, to soften the exasperation of the father, without revealing, by the most distant inference, how little respect she had shown to us; and being confident in the powers of my husband, as a good wife should, I had no fear that he would ultimately succeed. If he did, here was a reward for domestic deceit, for open falsehood, and secret scheming! Lucy, who had deceived us, who had injured Bertie so heartlessly—Lucy, whose whole life had been a cheat for this past year, would by

and by, as if nothing had happened, drop quietly into the queenship of Plantagenet Hall—the golden prize on which all this time, doubtless, her eyes had been fixed; for the elder Mr. Broom had lost his wife, and his daughters were still young. So much we found it easy to learn.

After Derwent had gone I went through the excited house, which thrilled throughout every corner of it with the strange event of this morning, and which somehow looked unnaturally empty and silent, with no one in it but the servants and myself, and proceeded to Lucy's room to see what she had left behind her. I found all her trunks locked and placed in a row, ready for removal, all her dresses removed from the wardrobe; her dressing-case and everything else belonging to her gone. All that remained on her table was a card which bore the name of Mr. Reginald Broom, and for address the Albany. While I looked about the deserted room, so well-arranged

and orderly that it was easy to perceive Lucy had not made a sudden flight, but had fully considered her intentions, the housekeeper came to me overbrimming with a fresh piece of news. A young groom, on discovering what had happened, owned to having taken a note yesterday afternoon to a little road-side inn at some distance, to the hero of the cab. The lad had to wait a prodigious time for an answer, but brought it back at last, and delivered it to Lucy's confidential maid, who had disappeared along with her, just before Miss Crofton came down to dinner. This, doubtless, accounted for the change in her demeanour from the serious tone in which she first bade me wait till to-morrow, to the triumph with which she said her good-night. Further disclosures followed; as usual, the servants knew, or professed to know, a great deal more than we did, and my maid and the housekeeper were quite aware, to take their own words for it, that Miss Crofton

had a clandestine visitor whom nobody knew anything about. Mr. Reginald Broom was too notable an individual to have been three times in the village without attracting everybody's attention. Nobody, however, had thought it any part of their duty to disclose his presence to us; everybody having as much sympathy with everything that savours of romance, as to look with unfavourable eyes upon tellers of such tales. So the story went on unsuspected save by myself, and might have gone unsuspected even by me, but for the unlucky chance which led me on Easter Monday, when Lucy supposed I should have been fully occupied at home, into the village street.

A long, persistent, unwavering, carefully-concealed plot. I walked about her room after I had dismissed the housekeeper, thinking over it with amazement. She had it all in her heart when I brought her into this very room on that snowy December night, and warned her to put no unnatural

constraint upon her feelings. Her feelings! As I said so, half aloud, with an involuntary exclamation, I stooped to pick up a crumpled piece of paper. It was covered with writing, the torn half of a letter, and by and by I sat down to examine it more carefully. So far as I could make it out, it was the very note which had been brought to her last night from Reginald Broom. It was badly written and badly spelt, and was to the effect that if she could not stay any longer in Hilfont without being compelled to marry a fellow she hated, why he, the writer, could not stand that. Nobody else should marry her, by George! while he was alive; so she had better pack up her traps, and meet him at six to-morrow morning at the old place. "We'll have a jolly race to Scotland," wrote the lively Reginald, "and the old fellow will have to give in when he can't help himself." And here the epistle broke off abruptly with something about "that muff Nugent," which I

could not make out. My first impulse was to tear it in pieces, my second to preserve it for Derwent's inspection. Poor Lucy! poor fool! I left her room with, it is true, a flush of indignation, yet at the same time a resentful, scornful pity. She was not even carried away by the vehemence of her lover; her very elopement was part of a scheme for the conquest of Plantagenet Hall.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE next two days were inconceivably long and weary—they dragged like so many weeks, save only that hour or two of hard and painful business which I had alone in my little room, fulfilling my promise to Derwent. I did it, though it broke my heart to do it. I kissed the dear little robes that had clothed him, and the little bed where he had once slept, in that one hour of glory and of joy, the crown of my life, and then packed them all tenderly, no one knowing anything of what I did, to send them away. When the room was all bare and desolate, and I had carried away with my own hands those precious packages, I fell down upon the floor where the cradle had been, and hid my face; and perhaps, then I saw for the first time that Derwent

was right; for when I sent these relics away I felt as if I had been bereaved again. It was the shrine of an idol, though God was there.

Nothing happened on those two days—no letters came—some three words from Derwent, telling me he had arrived—no visitors came, for our nearest neighbours, though doubtless full of curiosity, did not yet disturb me; not even one, who sent over a long, sympathizing letter, deeply underlined, begging to know if she could do anything for her dear Mrs. Crofton in this *distressing calamity*. I was slow to write to any one on my own part, or tell what had happened, until I heard something more, for even to myself the whole matter was so hurried and unreal that it seemed to want confirmation, and I could scarcely believe that all the arrangements of the last six months were nullified and overthrown—that Bertie was free from his engagement, and that Lucy Crofton could never now be mistress of

Estcourt. It seemed too good news to be true, and I could scarcely help having a little private dread that, after all, something would come in the way to prevent so satisfactory a conclusion, and that Derwent would bring Lucy home with him, unlikely as that was. The very fact of being alone, which I had not been since my husband went to bring this very Lucy from Germany, puzzled and embarrassed my thoughts; and it seemed impossible to realize what had passed, and the change of circumstances, so far as she was concerned, since that time.

On the third morning I had letters, the first from Bertie, which I opened with breathless anxiety, and which ran thus:—

“Mr. Crofton has brought me word of what has happened. I want confirmation from herself. I am not a man to force my suit upon any woman, but I want to hear from herself before I have anything to say. You will think me unreasonable, Cousin

Clare; can you think it strange that I should believe in her still, having loved her? If she has done me this wrong, then it is clear I have never known her, and there is an end of everything; but I believe in her still. She has withdrawn from your house for reasons which she thought sufficient, but she has not fled from me. Thank you for your sympathy, your regard and tenderness to myself, but I wait to hear from one who is more to me than myself. She is mine, and will be mine; nothing in the world but herself can part Lucy and me, and I believe in her still."

This was signed with a great slurred "H. Nugent," which I suppose was Bertie's solemn signature. He had always called himself by his familiar name hitherto to me. And this was from the boy to whom I had given so much of my heart, to cast me off for the sake of this girl who had deceived him. He thought I had been cruel

to her, and driven her to the length of running away. He thought, or else tried to persuade himself to think, that I was now misrepresenting her flight, in the hope of disuniting them. This from Bertie! but I was not angry—I made allowance for his young vehemence and undoubting faith in her—I knew it was but the first angry phase of a tottering trust. Poor boy! I could not afford to be angry with him. I should have gone and cried over him rather, if I might.

The next letter I had overlooked. When I saw the writing, I tore it open with still greater eagerness. It was from Lucy. It was written with a levity and lightness of tone, assumed, doubtless, to show how little sense of wrong she had; perhaps, too, the natural expression of relief from her long dissimulation. She was married, and they were going to spend a few weeks in a cottage on one of the lakes. “Neither Reginald nor I am at all romantic,” wrote

this calm bride. "If I had by chance married Bertie instead, this would have been much more congenial to him than it is to us; but we cannot go to old Mr. Broom directly, and so have made up our minds to wait here. I have not written to Bertie, and I dare say he would not care to hear from me now. I should be much obliged if you would convey my good wishes to him, and say that I am really grieved to have given him any pain. I never should have done it, I assure you, Aunt Clare, but that he was very urgent, and I was very much embarrassed about Reginald, whom you had seen by chance in the village, and did not know how in the world to direct your attention from him. I knew we should have been *ruined* if you had found us out then, and I thought it was sure to please Bertie for the time, if I accepted him, and he would perhaps bear my marrying somebody else better at another time than just then. So, all things considered, I thought

I was justified in what I did, though it was a great vexation to me to be obliged to do it. If you will explain this to Bertie, as much as you think proper, I shall be so pleased."

This letter was signed with Lucy's new name. It was a hard but a salutary stroke; such a stroke as seemed needful to bring Bertie to his senses. I enclosed it to him without a word, though my own heart ached with the thought of the ache I was conveying to my poor boy. But better he should get it over and know it all at once. He had never sought, he had never known the Lucy who wrote that letter; but I groaned within myself to think that it was my hand which should bring this sad disenchantment to Bertie's eyes.

That evening Derwent came home; he was in great vigour and considerable excitement, and for the first time seemed unable to subside into the easy-chair condition of existence. He had seen old Mr. Broom,

whom he found in a great ferment, having just received an intimation of the sudden extinction of his ambitious hopes for his graceless son. But Mr. Broom knew Lucy only as the daughter of a selfish, poor gentleman, who had nothing to leave her, and who was supposed to have thrown her upon the charity of her friends. When Derwent, whose name the rich man knew well enough as that of a considerable landed proprietor and man of influence, appeared on Lucy's behalf, to deplore the elopement, yet to make, if possible, friendly arrangements, the affair assumed a different aspect. Mr. Broom confessed he had other intentions for his heir, yet, when his first passion was over, seemed not unwilling to make the best of a bad business. After long discussion, and Derwent's statement of the fortune which he meant to give his young relative, which Mr. Broom loftily smiled at, the old gentleman consented under certain conditions to forgive his son, and receive

the young couple into a certain degree of favour. These conditions were that they should come to him first at his house in town, and make their submission with the humility which became naughty children; that they should spend the next three years abroad; and that they should neither enter nor entertain any pretensions to the heirship of Plantagenet Hall. "He shall have plenty, Sir," said Mr. Broom; "but he shall not have my family estate. My money is my own; I'm not bound by any entail; thank heaven; and I'll give it to his sister. They shall never set foot within Plantagenet Hall!"

"And what did you answer?" I asked.

"I answered," said Derwent, laughing, "that I had a great curiosity to see so famous a place; that I understood it was quite unique in this country. On which Mr. Broom insisted on driving me down and showing me over the whole place this morning. You should see it, Clare! I can tell

you that young fellow has really made a sacrifice. I hope Lucy will make it up to him."

"Do you suppose Lucy will lose such a prize if she can help it?" said I, with some innocent scorn of Derwent's simplicity; "if she is not doing the honours there within six months, never trust me again."

"And shall you call that justice?" said Derwent, laughing.

"It is the way of the world," said I; "but Bertie, what of him?"

"Bertie very nearly succeeded in quarrelling with me," said Derwent, with a serious face; "yet I can't blame him either. I dare say I should have done just the same. He would not believe me. He gave me to understand that we had not been kind to her, and that she had run away anywhere in the world but to Gretna Green."

"Poor Bertie!" said I; and then I told Derwent of his letter, and of Lucy's letter, and of the means I had taken to undeceive

him. Derwent was not quite like himself all that day; he was more like the old Derwent of those forgotten youthful years before any bar had been placed between him and me; before he had gone abroad and fallen into the aimless *dilettante* life, out of his vigorous English youth. That very night he wrote to Lucy a short, forcible letter, which, if anything could penetrate her self-regarding calmness, must have done so, telling her the steps he had taken, and what her husband must do to regain his father's favour. Then he came to me to know if I had fulfilled my promise to him; and then, to my great surprise, while my heart was still aching with these questions, began to tell me of projects and intentions such as a week ago would have sounded impossible for Derwent. Was he at last about to vindicate his powers and my hopes?

The next afternoon I was by myself in my flower-garden, superintending some alterations. I had just turned from the

gardener, who was at work, into a little green alley of holly and laurel, which led to another part of the garden, when I heard a rapid step making after me, and looking round suddenly met Bertie face to face. The poor boy was agitated almost beyond power of speech. He threw himself suddenly on his knees before me, grasped my hands, and cried out with a choking voice for pardon. Pardon! as if I judged him severely at such a time. I raised him up, and led him hastily into the house, into the library, where no one was at present, and which was the only room in Hilfont unconnected with Lucy in Bertie's mind, and then he poured out his sorrows into my ear. Yet not sorrows either; rather his disgust with everything, his distaste for everything, his desire to go away to the ends of the world—the natural thought of every young mind in its first trouble. Nothing about Lucy. He had been convinced bitterly and beyond further question by her

own letter. Yet he proudly forbore to allude to her—would not blame her—had not a word to say of that other man's wife who never had been the Lucy of Bertie's imagination. But with all his sore troubled heart, he wanted to go away.

When Derwent understood the whole matter, he thoroughly concurred in Bertie's own desire, which was to go to India, where he had many friends. Even I acquiesced, and agreed that this would be better than to go away for a year's listless wandering on the Continent, which was very likely to injure so simple, and, if I must say so, un-intellectual a mind as Bertie's, for his after-life. For Bertie was not likely to be inspired with a real and elevating love for the great in art, and the beautiful in nature. He had too much life and animation to fall into peddling antiquarianism or sham enthusiasm; and the chances were that the vulgar dangers of foreign society might entrap Bertie in his present mood. So we agreed to

his own wish. He stayed at Hilfont till I saw that the place became intolerable to him; then I persuaded him to go to Fenosiers, to visit his aunt, Lady Greenfield. When he was gone, with Derwent's full approval I had the needful steps taken to carry out our intentions about Estcourt. Bertie was to sell his commission, and to enter immediately into his rights as my heir. I wished him to go among his Indian relatives an independent man. All this was done, though Bertie took no great interest in it; and a week after, taking leave of us all, and this time riding over, all alone, a solitary day's journey, to bid his old playfellows farewell at the cottage. Bertie set out for India. He told, with a little surprise, that Mrs. Sedgewick cried when she said good-bye to him, and that he almost thought Alice cried too. "They have known me all their lives," said Bertie, philosophically, and with a very serious face, and the explanation, I have no doubt, was entirely satisfactory. I said

nothing about it, and built nothing upon it. I had learned better by this time; and Bertie was as silent as I was, and so he went away.

The heir of Estcourt, beyond doubt, or controversy, or power of altering. "But it is just possible you may have been rash, Clare," said Derwent, with a smile. He said it without the slightest meaning, for he had gone with me in all my arrangements with the most perfect and cordial satisfaction; but that he should say it was always a slight vexation to me.

CHAPTER XXV.

BUT before Bertie had been very long away, it proved—ought I to say to my confusion and dismay?—that I had been rather premature; and by-and-by it could no longer be said of Derwent that he had no heir.

The blessing of God came to Hilfont one summer day. A child on earth to stand in the earthly stead of the child in heaven—a child of old age, a perilous joy, to strain our hearts with the exceeding love which there was no one to share. Such a child as in the first years of our marriage I had found to love, thinking of my own youth; but God knows with what thanks, beyond thanks, I received this gift of his goodness now.

A boy. Fathers and mothers do not lay such jealous grips of love upon a boy as upon the sole daughter of their declining

years; and could Derwent and I, think you, even by the wildest chance of human thought, stand between that child and his happiness? Sooner, bit by bit, and hour by hour, give up every vestige of our own.

But there he lies, happy as the sweetest majesty of infant rest can make him, and Derwent, standing by his side, looking at his son. When I looked at the two, I was afraid of myself, lest I should not be able to carry the cross of this joy. But yet the joy is the easiest. Oh mournful soul! is not this the explanation of those words that are writ in tears, "Whom he loveth, he chasteneth?" Whoso bears his sorrow bravely, tenderly, whoso, rising up, goes on from it with an undiscouraged heart, is victor over all life and all its trials, and is able for the joy.

That night, when the child had added a name to the number of the church and the nation, we sat talking over our great gladness together. "And Bertie?" I said,

with a sudden start. I had scarcely even thought of Bertie for many a day.

“Is not Hilfont enough for your son, Clare?” said my husband. “Nay, we are very well able to provide for our own; and I may as well tell you, that, knowing your intentions, I should have insisted on having them carried out, even had this happened before. A Crofton for Hilfont, and a Nugent for Estcourt. I am not to be deluded into covetousness because I have an heir.”

I need not enter into the conversation that followed. I had been urging upon Derwent the necessity of doing something to further the interests of Harry Crofton, who was now no longer heir of Hilfont. Mrs. Robert had, of course, sent me sisterly congratulations, but I am not sure that this event was hailed with much delight in Russell Square.

“So, after all, Lucy has done much better for herself than if she had adopted my plan,” said Derwent. “Yes, certainly,

I shall look after Harry; but I suppose Lucy longs for the unattainable splendour, and does not enjoy the good she has. Are they still in Westmoreland, Clare?"

At that moment a letter was brought to me. When I had read it, I threw it to Derwent, clapping my hands. "I told you so!" I cried, pleased to magnify my own wisdom; but Derwent, of course, did not find out the occasion of my triumph till he had plodded through the whole of the epistle. It was from Mrs. Reginald Broom, full of congratulations, and it was dated, in a flush of triumphant self-felicitation still more urgent, from Plantagenet Hall.

Lucy had made good her point at last. It was longer than six months, but it was not a full year; in that time she had managed to pay her husband's debts, to make that fast young gentleman quite a moralist and improved character (I do not know if she had mended his spelling), to become tenderly intimate by correspondence with his young sisters, and to captivate

every friend of Mr. Broom's whom she could obtain access to; and at last, the climax and culmination of all, Lucy had overcome her unwilling father-in-law, and out of the Lakeland, and the romance, and the cottage which she did not appreciate, had carried the lucky Reginald home in triumph to the undisputed kingship of Plantagenet Hall.

"I wish her joy," said Derwent, laughing; "but really the little witch has got everything she wished for. There is no poetic justice in this world."

Which is admirably true, as everybody knows. I do not remember from that time to this that Lucy has had anything which can really be called trouble. Sorrow has never troubled her. She is rather more fortunate indeed in everything than her neighbours. Can I or any one tell why it is so? or why, too, people equal in all respects should one have all the blessings of the human lot, and one be a mark for all the arrows? It is so, that is all; and by-

and-by we shall know that "why" which we all seek after so vainly here.

Alice Harley is not married, but is at the cottage with her mother, not finding it quite necessary to be the housemaid, but doing her duty better than if she had gone out for a governess. And, notwithstanding that I do not train them for governesses, several members of that profession have gone out of Estcourt—more have gone to poor homes, where some of them show an understanding of my sentiment, and are not ashamed to be housemaids, and serve with their own hands their own people; and Clara Harley's is not the only marriage which has gone from those doors. The house is still full of children, for whom, perhaps, I have even more patience now than I used to have, and who would smother my little Derwent with kisses, and make him a shapeless mass of embroidery, with garnishings of knitting, netting, and crochet, if they had their will. Once I was rash enough to suggest that a ball was a safe toy for his babyhood, and he

had twenty-four balls directly, of all varieties of juvenile manufacture; but they are very good children, and so much part of my life, that I think even Derwent would miss them did any chance scatter these pleasant birds from the old house.

Bertie is still in India, and I think he has got over that first disenchantment—got over it, too, without having to suspect everybody—without doubting the honesty and questioning the truth of all the men and women he chances to meet. I dare say his version of it has come to be that he never knew the real Lucy Crofton, and that the Lucy of his imagination, who must now have another name, waits for him somewhere still, if he could but find her out. I think I could tell him where to find her out, if he consulted me. I think I could give my boy most excellent counsel, if he were once safely home again. I think I should not say a word on the subject to him, but leave him to Providence, his good eyes, and his honest heart, which latter, after all, is seldom

permanently deceived; and that being so, I begin to let the old fancies wander as they will about my own mind, and see again visionary scenes of the Estcourt that is to be—the Estcourt of the young Nugents who will restore again to its original name and honour my father's house.

For I beg all my excellent friends to understand that there is but one heir, and that my boy will be Derwent Crofton, of Hilfont, like his father, the master of better lands and a richer inheritance than mine. The young gentleman begins to grow up to a sense of the grandeur of his position. Though he is very young to suffer from feminine worship, I begin to see the propriety of restricting his visits to Estcourt; a circle of female adorers is not good for any man, and I do not mean to surround with that snare and danger the first uncertain footsteps of my son.

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