NEIGHBOURS ON THE GREEN

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

"Old wives' tales."

IN THREE VOLUMES

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NEIGHBOURS ON THE GREEN

Neighbours on the Green

MRS. MERRIDEW'S FORTUNE.

Chapter I.

There are two houses in my neighbourhood which illustrate so curiously two phases of life, that everybody on the green, as well as myself, has been led into the habit of classing them together. The first reason of this of course is, that they stand together; the second, that they are as unlike in every way as it is possible to conceive. They are about the same size, with the same aspect, the same green circle of garden surrounding them; and yet as dissimilar as if they had been brought out of two different worlds. They are not on the green, though

they are undeniably a part of Dinglefield, but stand on the Mercot Road, a broad country road with a verdant border of turf and fine trees shadowing over the hedge-rows. The Merridews live in the one, and in the other are Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella. The house of the two ladies, which has been already described, is as perfect in all its arrangements as if it were a palace: a silent, soft, fragrant, dainty place, surrounded by lawns like velvet; full of flowers in perfect bloom, the finest kinds, succeeding each other as the seasons change. Even in autumn, when the winds are blowing, you never see a fallen leaf about, or the least symptom of untidiness. They have enough servants for everything that is wanted, and the servants are as perfect as the flowers—noiseless maids and soft-voiced men. Everything goes like machinery, with an infallible regularity; but like machinery oiled and deadened, which emits no creak nor groan. This is one of

the things upon which Mrs. Spencer specially prides herself.

And just across two green luxuriant hedges, over a lawn which is not like velvet, you come to the Merridews'. It is possible if you passed it on a summer day that, notwithstanding the amazing superiority of the other, you would pause longer, and be more amused with a glance into the enclosure of the latter house. The lawn is not the least like velvet; probably it has not been mown for three weeks at least, and the daisies are irrepressible. But there, tumbled down in the midst of it, are a bunch of little children in pinafores—"*all* the little ones," as Janet Merridew, the eldest daughter, expresses herself, with a certain soft exasperation. I would rather not undertake to number them or record their names, but there they are, a knot of rosy, round-limbed, bright-eyed, living things, some dark and some fair, with an amazing impartiality; but all chattering as best they can in

nursery language, with rings of baby laughter, and baby quarrels, and musings of infinite solemnity. Once tumbled out here, where no harm can come to them, nobody takes any notice of the little ones. Nurse, sitting by serenely under a tree, works all the morning through, and there is so much going on indoors to occupy the rest.

Mr. and Mrs. Merridew, I need not add, had a large family—so large that their house overflowed, and when the big boys were at home from school, was scarcely habitable. Janet, indeed, did not hesitate to express her sentiments very plainly on the subject. She was just sixteen, and a good child, but full of the restless longing for something, she did not know what, and visionary discontent with her surroundings, which is not uncommon at her age. She had a way of paying me visits, especially during the holidays, and speaking more frankly on domestic subjects than was at all expedient. She would come in, in summer, with a tap on

the glass which always startled me, through the open window, and sink down on a sofa and utter a long sigh of relief. "Oh, Mrs. Mulgrave!" she would say, "what a good thing you never had any children!" taking off, as she spoke, the large hat which it was one of her grievances to be compelled to wear.

"Is that because you have too many at home?" I said.

"Oh, yes, far too many; fancy, ten! Why should poor papa be burdened with ten of us? and so little money to keep us all on. And then a house gets so untidy with so many about. Mamma does all she can, and I do all I can; but how is it possible to keep it in order? When I look across the hedges to Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella's and see everything so nice and so neat I could die of envy. And you are always so shady, and so cool, and so pleasant here."

"It is easy to be neat and nice when

there is nobody to put things out of order," said I; "but when you are as old as I am, Janet, you will get to think that one may buy one's neatness too dear."

"Oh, I delight in it!" cried the girl. "I should like to have everything nice, like you; all the books and papers just where one wants them, and paper-knives on every table, and ink in the ink-bottles, and no dust anywhere. You are not so dreadfully particular as Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella. I think I should like to see some litter on the carpet or on the lawn now and then for a change. But oh, if you could only see our house! And then our things are so shabby: the drawing-room carpet is all faded with the sun, and mamma will never have the blinds properly pulled down. And Selina, the housemaid, has so much to do. When I scold her, mamma always stops me, and bids me recollect we can't be as nice as you other people, were we to try ever so much. There is so much to do

in our house. And then those dreadful big boys!"

"My dear," said I, "ring the bell, and we will have some tea; and you can tell Jane to bring you some of that strawberry jam you are so fond of—and forget the boys."

"As if one could!" said Janet, "when they are all over the place—into one's very room, if one did not mind; their boots always either dusty or muddy, and oh, the noise they make! Mamma won't make them dress in the evenings, as I am sure she should. How are they ever to learn to behave like Christians, Mrs. Mulgrave, if they are not obliged to dress and come into the drawing-room at night?"

"I dare say they would run out again and spoil their evening clothes, my dear," I said.

"That is just what mamma says," cried Janet; "but isn't it dreadful to have always to consider everything like that? Poor mamma, too—often I am quite angry, and

then I think—perhaps she would like a house like Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella's as well as I should, if we had money enough. I suppose in a nice big house with heaps of maids and heaps of money, and everything kept tidy for you, one would not mind even the big boys."

"I think under those circumstances most people would be glad to have them," said I.

"I don't understand how anybody can like boys," said Janet, with reflective yet contemptuous emphasis. "A baby-boy is different. When they are just the age of little Harry, I adore them; but those great long-legged creatures, in their big boots! And yet, when they're nicely dressed in their evening things," she went on, suddenly changing her tone, "and with a flower in their coats—Jack has actually got an evening-coat, Mrs. Mulgrave, he is so tall for his age—they look quite nice; they look such gentlemen," Janet concluded, with a little

sisterly enthusiasm. "Oh, how dreadful it is to be so poor!"

"I am sure you are very fond of them all the same," said I, "and would break your heart if anything should happen to them."

"Oh, well, of course, now they are there one would not wish anything to happen," said Janet. "What did you say I was to tell Jane, Mrs. Mulgrave, about the tea? There now! Selina has never the time to be as nice as that—and Richards, you know, our man—— Don't you think, really, it would be better to have a nice clean parlour-maid than a man that looks like a cobbler? Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella are always going on about servants,—that you should send them away directly when they do anything wrong. But, you know, it makes a great difference having a separate servant for everything. Mamma always says, 'They are good to the children, Janet,' or, 'They are so useful and don't mind what they do.' We put up with Selina because, though she's

not a good housemaid, she is quite willing to help in the nursery; and we put up with nurse because she gets through so much sewing; and even the cook—— Oh, dear, dear! it is so disagreeable. I wish I were—anybody but myself."

Just at this moment my maid ushered in Mrs. Merridew, hastily attired in a hat she wore in the garden, and a light shawl wrapped round her. There was an anxious look in her face, which indeed was not very unusual there. She was a little flushed, either by walking in the sunshine or by something on her mind.

"You here, Janet," she said, when she had shaken hands with me, "when you promised me to practise an hour after luncheon? Go, my dear, and do it now."

"It is so hot. I never can play in the middle of the day; and oh, mamma, please it is so pleasant here," pleaded Janet, nestling herself close into the corner of the sofa.

"Let her stay till we have had some tea,"

I said. "I know she likes my strawberry jam."

Mrs. Merridew consented, but with a sigh; and then it was that I saw clearly she must have something on her mind. She did not smile, as usual, with the indulgent mother's smile, half disapproving, yet unwilling to thwart the child. On the contrary, there was a little constraint in her air as she sat down, and Janet's enjoyment of the jam vexed her, and brought a little wrinkle to her brow. "One would think you had not eaten anything all day," she said with a vexed tone, and evidently was impatient of her daughter's presence, and wished her away.

"Nothing so nice as this," said Janet, with the frank satisfaction of her age; and she went on eating her bread and jam quite composedly, until Mrs. Merridew's patience was exhausted.

"I cannot have you stay any longer," she said at length. "Go and practise now, while there is no one in the house."

"Oh, mamma!" said Janet, beginning to expostulate; but was stopped short by a look in her mother's eye. Then she gathered herself up reluctantly, and left the paradise of my little tea-table with the jam. She went out pouting, trailing her great hat after her; and had to be stopped as she stepped into the blazing sunshine, and commanded to put it on. "It is only a step," said the provoking girl, pouting more and more. And poor Mrs. Merridew looked so worried, and heated, and uncomfortable as she went out and said a few energetic words to her naughty child. Poor soul! Ten different wills to manage and keep in subjection to her own, besides all the other cares she had upon her shoulders. And that big girl who should have been a help to her, standing pouting and disobedient between the piano she did not care for, and the jam she loved.—Sometimes such a little altercation gives one a glimpse into an entire life.

"She is such a child," Mrs. Merridew said,

coming in with an apologetic, anxious smile on her face. She had been fretted and vexed, and yet she would not show it to lessen my opinion of her girl. Then she sank down wearily into that corner of the sofa from which Janet had been so unwillingly expelled. "The truth is, I wanted to speak to you," she said, "and could not while she was here. Poor Janet! I am afraid I was cross, but I could not help it. Something has occurred to-day which has put me out."

"I hope it is something I can help you in," I said.

"That is why I have come: you are always so kind; but it is a strange thing I am going to ask you this time," she said, with a wistful glance at me. "I want to go to town for a day on business of my own; and I want it to be supposed that it is business of yours."

The fact was, it did startle me for the moment—and then I reflected like lightning, so quick was the process (I say this that

nobody may think my first feeling hard), what kind of woman she was, and how impossible that she should want to do anything that one need be ashamed of. "That is very simple," I said.

Then she rose hastily, and came up to me and gave me a sudden kiss, though she was not a demonstrative woman. "You are always so understanding," she said, with the tears in her eyes; and thus I was committed to stand by her, whatever her difficulty might be.

"But you sha'n't do it in the dark," she went on; "I am going to tell you all about it. I don't want Mr. Merridew to know, and in our house it is quite impossible to keep anything secret. He is on circuit now; but he would hear of 'the day mamma went to town' before he had been five minutes in the house. And so I want you to go with me, you dear soul, and to let me say I went with you."

"That is quite simple," I said again; but

I did feel that I should like to know what the object of the expedition was.

"It is a long story," she said, "and I must go back and tell you ever so much about myself before you will understand. I have had the most dreadful temptation put before me to-day. Oh, such a temptation! resisting it is like tearing one's heart in two; and yet I know I ought to resist. Think of our large family, and poor Charles's many disappointments, and then, dear Mrs. Mulgrave, read that."

It was a letter written on a large square sheet of thin paper which she thrust into my hand: one of those letters one knows a mile off, and recognizes as lawyers' letters, painful or pleasant, as the case may be; but more painful than pleasant generally. I read it, and you may judge of my astonishment to find that it ran thus:—

"Dear Madam,—We have the pleasure to inform you that our late client, Mr. John

Babington, deceased on the 10th of May last, has appointed you by his will his residuary legatee. After all his special bequests are paid, including an annuity of a hundred a year to his mother, with remainder to Miss Babington, his only surviving sister, there will remain a sum of about £10,000, at present excellently invested on landed security, and bearing interest at four and a half per cent. By Mr. Babington's desire, precautions have been taken to bind it strictly to your separate use, so that you may dispose of it by will or otherwise, according to your pleasure, for which purpose we have accepted the office of your trustees, and will be happy to enter fully into the subject, and put you in possession of all details, as soon as you can favour us with a private interview.

"We are, madam,

"Your obedient servants,

"FOGEY, FEATHERHEAD & DOWN."

"A temptation!" I cried; "but, my dear,

it is a fortune; and it is delightful: it will make you quite comfortable. Why, it will be nearly five hundred a year."

I feel always safe in the way of calculating interest when it is anything approaching five per cent.; five per cent. is so easily counted. This great news took away my breath.

But Mrs. Merridew shook her head. "It looks so at the first glance," she said; "but when you hear my story you will think differently." And then she made a little uncomfortable pause. "I don't know whether you ever guessed it," she added, looking down, and doubling a new hem upon her handkerchief, "but I was not Charles's equal when we married: perhaps you may have heard——?"

Of course I had heard: but the expression of her countenance was such that I put on a look of great amazement, and pretended to be much astonished, which I could see was a comfort to her mind.

"I am glad of that," she said, "for you

know—I could not speak so plainly to you if I did not feel that, though you are so quiet now, you must have seen a great deal of the world—you know what a man is. He may be capable of marrying you, if he loves you, whatever your condition is—but afterwards he does not like people to know. I don't mean I was his inferior in education, or anything of that sort," she added, looking up at me with a sudden uneasy blush.

"You need not tell me that," I said; and then another uneasiness took possession of her, lest I should think less highly than was right of her husband.

"Poor Charles!" she said; "it is scarcely fair to judge him as he is now. We have had so many cares and disappointments, and he has had to deny himself so many things—and you may say, Here is his wife, whom he has been so good to, plotting to take away from him what might give him a little ease. But oh, dear Mrs. Mulgrave, you must hear before you judge!"

"I do not judge," I said; "I am sure you must have some very good reason; tell me what it is."

Then she paused, and gave a long sigh. She must have been about forty, I think, a comely, simple woman, not in any way a heroine of romance; and yet she was as interesting to me as if she had been only half the age, and deep in some pretty crisis of romantic distress. I don't object to the love stories either: but middle age has its romances too.

"When I was a girl," said Mrs. Merridew, "I went to the Babingtons as Ellen's governess. She was about fifteen and I was not more than twenty, and I believe people thought me pretty. You will laugh at me, but I declare I have always been so busy all my life, that I have never had any time to think whether it was true: but one thing I know, that I was a very good governess. I often wish," she added, pausing, with a half comic look amid her trouble, "that I could

find as good a governess as I was for the girls. There was one brother, John, and one other sister, Matilda; and Mr. Merridew was one of the visitors at the house, and was supposed to be paying *her* attention. I never could see it, for my part, and Charles declares he never had any such idea; but *they* thought so, I know. It is quite a long story. John had just come home from the University, and was pretending to read for the bar, and was always about the house; and the end was that he fell in love with me."

"Of course," said I.

"I don't know that it was of course. I was so very shy, and dreaded the sound of my own voice; but he used to come after us everywhere by way of talking to Ellen, and so got to know me. Poor John! he was the nicest, faithful fellow—the sort of man one would trust everything to, and believe in and respect, and be fond of—but not love. Of course Charles was there too. It went on for about a year, such a curious, confused, pleasant,

painful——— I cannot describe it to you—but you know what I mean. The Babingtons had always been kind to me; of course they were angry when they found out about John, but then when they knew I would not marry him, they were kinder than ever, and said I had behaved so very well about it. I was a very lonely poor girl; my mother was dead, and I had nowhere to go; and instead of sending me away, Mrs. Babington sent *him* away—her own son, which was very good of her you know. To be sure I was a good governess, and they never suspected Charles of coming for me, nor did I. Suddenly, all at once, without the least warning, he found me by myself one day, and told me. I was a little shocked, thinking of Matilda Babington! but then he declared he had meant nothing. And so——— When the Babingtons heard of it, they were all furious; even Ellen, my pupil, turned against me. They sent me away as if I had done something wicked. It was very, very hard upon

me ; but yet I scarcely wonder, now I think of it. That was why we married so early and so imprudently. Mrs. Mulgrave, I dare say you have often wondered why it was ? "

I had to put on such looks of wonder and satisfied curiosity as I could ; for the truth was, I had known the outlines of the story for years, just as every one knows the outlines of every one else's story ; especially such parts of it as people might like to be concealed. I cannot understand how anybody, at least in society, or on the verge of society, can for a moment hope to have any secrets. Charles Merridew was a cousin of Mr. Justice Merridew, and very well connected, and of course it was known that he married a governess ; which was one reason why people were so shy of them at first when they came to the green.

" I begin to perceive now why this letter should be a temptation to you," I said ; " you think Mr. Merridew would not like——"

"Oh, it is not that," she said. "Poor Charles! I don't think he would mind. The world is so hard, and one makes so little head against it. No, it is because of Mrs. Babington. I heard she lost all her money some years ago, and was dependent on her son. And what can she do on a hundred a year? A hundred a year! Only think of it, for an old lady always accustomed to have her own way. It is horribly unjust, you know, to take it from her, his mother, who was always so good to him; and to give it to me, whom he has not seen for nearly twenty years, and who gave him a sore heart when he did know me. I could not take advantage of it. It is a great temptation, but it would be a great sin. And that is why," she added, with a sudden flush on her face, looking at me, "I should rather—manage it myself—under cover of you—and—not let Charles know."

She looked at me, and held me with her eye, demanding of me that I should understand her, and yet defying me to think any

the worse of Charles. She was afraid of her husband—afraid that he would clutch at the money without any consideration of the wrong—afraid to trust him with the decision. She would have me understand her without words, and yet she would not have me blame Mr. Merridew. She insisted on the one and defied me to the other; an inconsistent, unreasonable woman! But I did my best to look as if I saw, and yet did not see.

"Then you want to see the lawyers?" I said."

"I want to see Mrs. Babington," was her answer. "I must go to them and explain. They are proud people, and probably would resist—or they may be otherwise provided for. If that was the case I should not hesitate to take it. Oh, Mrs. Mulgrave, when I look at all the children, and Janet there murmuring and grumbling, don't you think it wrings my heart to put away this chance of comfort? And poor Charles working himself out. But

it could not bring a blessing. It would bring a curse; I cannot take the bread out of the mouth of the old woman who was good to me, even to put it into that of my own child."

And here two tears fell out of Mrs. Merridew's eyes. At her age people do not weep abundantly. She gave a little start as they fell, and brushed them off her dress, with, I don't doubt, a sensation of shame. She to cry like a baby, who had so much to do! She left shortly after, with an engagement to meet me at the station for the twelve o'clock train next day. I was going to town on business, and had asked her to go with me—this was what was to be said to all the world. I explained myself elaborately that very evening to Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella, when I met them taking their walk after dinner.

"Mrs. Merridew is so kind as to go with me," I said; "she knows so much more about business than I do." And I made up

my mind that I would go to the Bank and leave my book to be made up, that it might not be quite untrue.

"Fancy Mrs. Mulgrave having any business!" said Lady Isabella. "Why don't you write to some man, and make him do it, instead of all the trouble of going to town?"

"But Mrs. Merridew is going with me, my dear," I said; and nobody doubted that the barrister's wife, with so much experience as she had, and so many things to do, would be an efficient help to me in my little affairs.

MRS. MERRIDEW'S FORTUNE.

CHAPTER II.

THE house we went to was a house in St. John's Wood. Everybody knows the kind of place. A garden wall, with lilacs and laburnums, all out of blossom by this time, and beginning to look brown and dusty, waving over it ; inside, a little bright suburban garden, full of scarlet geraniums, divided by a white line of pavement, dazzlingly clean, from the door in the wall to the door of the house ; and a stand full of more scarlet geraniums in the little square hall. Mrs. Merridew became very much agitated as we approached. It was all that I could do to keep her up when we had rung the bell at the door. I think she would have

turned and gone back even then had it been possible, but, fortunately, we were admitted without delay.

We were shown into a pretty shady drawing-room, full of old furniture, which looked like the remnants of something greater, and at which she gazed with eyes of almost wild recognition, unconsciously pressing my arm, which she still held. Everything surrounding her woke afresh the tumult of recollections. She was not able to speak when the maid asked our names, and I was about to give them simply, and had already named my own, when she pressed my arm closer to her, and interposed all at once—

"Say two ladies from the country anxious to speak with her about business. She might not—know—our names."

"Is it business about the house, ma'am?" said the maid with some eagerness.

"Yes, yes; it is about the house," said Mrs. Merridew hastily. And then the door closed, and we sat waiting, listening to the

soft, subdued sounds in the quiet house, and the rustle of the leaves in the garden. "She must be going to let it," my companion said hoarsely; and then rose from the chair on which she had placed herself, and began to move about the room with agitation, looking at everything, touching the things with her hands, with now and then a stifled exclamation. "There is where we used to sit, Ellen and I," she said, standing by a sofa, before which a small table was placed, "when there was company in the evenings. And there Matilda—oh, what ghosts there are about! Matilda is married, thank heaven! but if Ellen comes, I shall never be able to face her. Oh, Mrs. Mulgrave, if you would but speak for me!"

At this moment the door was opened. Mrs. Merridew shrank back instinctively, and sat down, resting her hand on the table she had just pointed out to me. The new comer was a tall, full figure, in deep mourning, a handsome woman of five-and-thirty,

or thereabouts, with bright hair, which looked all the brighter from comparison with the black depths of her dress, and a colourless, clear complexion. All the colour about her was in her hair. Though she had no appearance of unhealthiness, her very lips were pale, and she came in with a noiseless quiet dignity, and the air of one who felt she had pain to encounter, yet felt able to bear it.

"Pardon me for keeping you waiting," she said; and then, with a somewhat startled glance, "I understood you wanted to see—the house."

My companion was trembling violently; and I cleared my throat, and tried to clear up my ideas (which was less easy) to say something in reply. But before I had stammered out half-a-dozen words Mrs. Merridew rose, and made one or two unsteady steps towards the stranger.

"Ellen," she cried, "don't you know me?" and stopped there, standing in the

centre of the room, holding out appealing hands.

Miss Babington's face changed in the strangest way. I could see that she recognized her in a moment, and then that she pretended to herself not to recognize her. There was the first startled, vivid, indignant glance, and then a voluntary mist came over her eyes. She gazed at the agitated woman with an obstinately blank gaze, and then turned to me with a little bow.

"Your friend has the advantage of me," she said; "but you were saying something? I should be glad, if that was what you wanted, to show you over the house."

It would be hard to imagine a more difficult position than that in which I found myself; seated between two people who were thus strangely connected with each other by bonds of mutual injury, and appealed to for something meaningless and tranquillizing, to make the intercourse possible. I did the best I could on the spur of the moment.

"It is not so much the house," I said, "though, if you wish to let it, I have a friend who is looking for a house; but I think there was some other business Mrs. Merridew had; something to say——"

"Mrs. Merridew!" said Miss Babington, suffering the light once more to come into her eyes; and then she gave her an indignant look. "I think this might have been spared us at least."

"Ellen," said Mrs. Merridew, speaking very low and humbly—"Ellen, I have never done anything to you to make you so hard against me. If I injured your sister, it was unwittingly. She is better off than I am now. You were once fond of me, as I was of you. Why should you have turned so completely against me? I have come in desperation to ask a hearing from you, and from your mother, Ellen. God knows I mean nothing but good. And oh, what have I ever done?—what harm?"

Miss Babington had seated herself, still

preserving her air of dignity, but without an invitation by look or gesture to her visitor to be seated; and in the silent room, all so dainty and so sweet with flowers, with the old furniture in it, which reminded her of the past, the culprit of twenty years ago stood pleading between one of those whom she was supposed to have wronged and myself, a most ignorant and uneasy spectator. Twenty years ago! In the meantime youth had passed, and the hard burdens of middle age had come doubled and manifold upon her shoulders. Had she done nothing in the meantime that would tell more heavily against her than that girlish inadvertence of the past? Yet here she stood—not knowing, I believe, for the moment, whether she was the young governess in her first trouble, or the mother of all those children, acquainted with troubles so much more bitter—among the ghosts of the past.

"I would much rather not discuss the question," said Miss Babington, still seated,

and struggling hard to preserve her calm. "All the grief and vexation we have owed to you in this house cannot be summed up in a moment. The only policy, I think, is to be silent. Your very presence here is an offence to us. What else could it be?"

"I should never have come," said Mrs. Merridew, moved by a natural prick of resentment, "but for what I have just heard —— I should never have returned to ask for pardon where I had done no wrong—had it not been for this—this that I feel to be unjust. Your poor brother John——"

"Stop!" cried the other, her reserve failing. "Stop, oh! stop, you cruel woman! He was nothing to you but a toy to be played with—but he was my brother, my only brother; and you have made him an undutiful son in his very grave."

The tears were in her eyes, her colourless face had flushed, her soft voice was raised; and Mrs. Merridew, still standing, listened

to her with looks as agitated—when all at once the door was again opened softly. The aspect of affairs changed in a moment. To my utter amazement, Mrs. Merridew, who was standing with her face to the door, made a quick, imperative, familiar gesture to her antagonist, and looked towards an easy-chair which stood near the open window. Miss Babington rose quickly to her feet, and composed herself into a sudden appearance of calm.

"Mamma," she said, going forward to meet the old lady, who came slowly in, "here are some ladies come upon business. This is—Mrs. Merridew." She said the name very low, as Mrs. Babington made her way to her chair, and Mrs. Merridew sank trembling into her seat, unable, I think, to bear up longer. The old lady seated herself before she spoke. She was a little old woman, with a pretty, softly-coloured old face, and had the air of having been petted and cared for all her life. The sudden

change of her daughter's manner; the accumulation of every kind of convenience and prettiness, as I now remarked, round that chair; the careful way in which it had been placed out of the sun and the draught, yet in the air and in sight of the garden, told a whole history of themselves. And now Mrs. Merridew's passionate sense that the alienation of the son's fortune from the mother was a thing impossible, was made clear to me at once.

"Whom did you say, Ellen?" said the old lady, when she was comfortably settled in her chair. "Mrs. ——? I never catch names. I hope you have explained to the ladies that I am rather infirm, and can't stand. What did you say was your friend's name, my dear?"

Her friend's name! Ellen Babington's face lightened all over as with a pale light of indignation.

"I said—Mrs. Merridew," she repeated, with a little emphasis on the name. Then

there was a pause; and the culprit who was at the bar trembled visibly, and hid her face in her hands.

"Mrs. Merridew!—— Do you mean ——? Turn me round, Ellen, and let me look at her," said the old lady with a curious catching of her breath.

It was a change which could not be done in a moment. While the daughter turned the mother's chair, poor Mrs. Merridew must have gone through the torture of an age; her hands trembled, in which she had hidden herself. But as the chair creaked and turned slowly round, and all was silent again, she raised her white face, and uncovered herself, as it were, to meet the inquisitor's eye. It might have been a different woman, so changed was she: her eyes withdrawn into caves, the lines of her mouth drawn down, two hollows clearly marked in her cheeks, and every particle of her usual colour gone. She looked up appalled and overcome, confronting, but not

meeting, the keen, critical look which old Mrs. Babington fixed upon her; and then there was again a pause; and the leaves fluttered outside, and the white curtains within, and a gay child's voice, passing in the road without, suddenly fell among us like a bird.

"Ah!" said the old lady, "that creature! Do you mean to tell me, Ellen, that she has had the assurance to come here? Now look at her and tell me what a man's sense is worth. That woman's face turned my poor boy's head, and drove Charles Merridew out of his wits. Only look at her: is there anything there to turn anybody's head now? She has lost her figure too; to be sure that is not so wonderful, for she is forty if she is a day. But there are you, my dear, as straight as a rush, and your sister Matilda as well. So that is Janet Singleton, our governess: I wonder what Charles thinks of his bargain now? I never saw a woman so gone off. Oh, Ellen, Ellen, why didn't she come

and show herself, such a figure as she is, before my poor dear boy was taken from us? My poor boy! And to think he should have gone to his grave in such a delusion! Ellen, I would rather now that you sent her away."

"Oh, mamma, don't speak like this," cried Ellen, red with shame and distress; "what does it matter about her figure? if that were all!—but she is going away."

"Yes, yes, send her away," said the old lady. "You liked her once, but I don't suppose even you can think there could be any intercourse now. My son left all his money to her," she added, turning to me—"past his mother and his sister. You will admit that was a strange thing to do. I don't know who the other lady is, Ellen, but I conclude she is a friend of yours. He left everything past us, everything but some poor pittance. Perhaps you may know some one who wants a house in this neighbourhood? It is a very nice little house,

and much better furnished than most. I should be very glad to let it, now that I can't afford to occupy it myself, by the year."

"Mamma, the other lady is with Mrs. Merridew," said Ellen; "I do not know her——" and she cast a glance at me, almost appealing to my pity. I rose up, not knowing what to do.

"Perhaps, my dear," I said, I confess with timidity, "we had better go away."

"Unless you will stay to luncheon," said the old lady. "But I forgot—I don't want to look at that woman any more, Ellen. She has done us enough of harm to satisfy any one. Turn me round again to my usual place, and send her away."

Mrs. Merridew had risen to her feet too. She had regained her senses after the first frightful shock. She was still ghastly pale, but she was herself. She went up firmly and swiftly to the old lady, put Ellen aside by a movement which she

was unconscious of in her agitation, and replaced the chair in its former place with the air of one to whom such an office was habitual. "You used to say I always did it best," she said. "Oh, is it possible you can have forgotten everything! Did not I give him up when you asked me, and do you think I will take his money now? Oh, never, never! It ought to be yours, and it shall be. Oh, take it back, and forgive me, and say, 'God bless you' once again."

"Eh, what was that you said? Ellen, what does she say?" said the old woman. "I have always heard the Merridews were very poor. Poor John's fortune will be a godsend to them. Go away! I suppose you mean to mock me after all the rest you have done. I don't understand what you say."

Yet she looked up with a certain eagerness on her pretty old face—a certain sharp look of greed and longing came into

the blue eyes, which retained their colour as pure as that of youth. Her daughter towered above her, pale with emotion, but still indignant, yielding not a jot.

"Mamma, pay no attention," she said; "Mrs. Merridew may pity us, but what is that? surely we can take back nothing from her hands."

"Pity! I don't see how Janet Merridew can pity *me*. But I should like," Mrs. Babington went on, with a little tremble of eagerness, "to know at least what she means."

"This is what I mean," said Mrs. Merridew, sinking on her knees by the old lady's chair: "that I will not take your money. It *is* your money. We are poor, as you say; but we can struggle on as we have done for twenty years; and poor John's money is yours, and not mine. It is not mine. I will not take it. It must have been some mistake. If he had known what he was doing he never would have left it to any one but you."

"So I think myself," said the old lady, musing; and then was silent, taking no notice of any one—looking into the air.

"Mamma," said Ellen, behind her chair, "I can work for you, and Matilda will help us. It cannot be. It may be kind of—her—but it cannot, cannot be. Are we to take charity?—to live on charity? Mamma she has no right to disturb you."

"She is not disturbing me, my dear," said the old lady; "on the contrary. Whatever I might think of her, she used to be a girl of sense. And Matilda always carried things with a very high hand, and I never was fond of her husband. But I am very fond of my house," she added, after a pause; "it is such a nice house, Ellen. I think I should die if we were to leave it. I shall die very soon, most likely, and be a burden on nobody; but still, Ellen, if she meant it, you know——"

"Mamma, what does it matter what she

means? you never can think of accepting charity. It will break my heart."

"That is all very well to say," said Mrs. Babington. "But I have lived a great deal longer than you have done, my dear, and I know that hearts are not broken so easily. It would break my heart to leave my nice house. Janet, come here, and look me in the face. I don't think you were true to us in the old times. Matilda did carry things with a very high hand. I told her so at the time, and I have often told her so since; but I don't think you were true to us, all the same."

"I did not know—I did not mean——" faltered Mrs. Merridew, leaning her head on the arm of the old lady's chair.

It was clear to me that the story had two sides, and that my friend was perhaps not so innocent as she had made herself out to be. But there was something very pitiful in the comparison between the passion of anxiety in her half-hidden face, and the

calm of the old woman who was thus deciding on her fate.

"My dear, I am afraid you knew," said Mrs. Babington. "You accepted my poor boy, and then, when I spoke to you, you gave him up, and took Charles Merridew instead. If I had not interfered, perhaps it would have been better; though, to be sure, I don't know what we should have done with a heap of children. And as for poor John's money, you know you have no more real right to it, no more than that other lady, who never saw him in her life."

"She has the best possible right to it, mamma—he left it to her," said Ellen anxiously, over her shoulder. "Oh, why did you come here to vex us, when we were not interfering with you? I beg of you not to trouble my mother any more, but go away."

Then there was a moment of hesitation. Mrs. Merridew rose slowly from her knees. She turned round to me, not looking me

in the face. She said, in a hoarse voice, "Let us go," and made a step towards the door. She was shaking as if she had a fever; but she was glad. Was that possible? She had delivered her conscience —and now might not she go and keep the money which would make her children happy? But she could not look me in the face. She moved as slowly as a funeral. And yet she would have flown, if she could, to get safely away.

"Janet, my dear," said the old lady, "come back, and let us end our talk."

Mrs. Merridew stopped short, with a start, as if a shot had arrested her. This time she looked me full in the face. Her momentary hope was over, and now she felt for the first time the poignancy of the sacrifice which it had been her own will to make.

"Come back, Janet," said Mrs. Babington. "As you say, it is not your money. Nothing could make it your money. You were always right-feeling when you were not

aggravated. I am much obliged to you, my dear. Come and sit down here, and tell me all about yourself. Now poor John is dead," she went on, falling suddenly into soft weeping, like a child, "we ought to be friends. To think he should die before me, and I should be heir to my own boy—isn't it sad? And such a fine young fellow as he was! You remember when he came back from the University? What a nice colour he had! And always so straight and slim, like a rush. All my children have a good carriage. You have lost your figure, Janet; and you used to have a nice little figure. When a girl is so round and plump, she is apt to get stout as she gets older. Look at Ellen, how nice she is. But then, to be sure, children make a difference. Sit down by me here, and tell me how many you have. And, Ellen, send word to the house-agent, and tell him we don't want now to let the house; and tell Parker to get luncheon ready a little earlier. You must want something, if you

have come from the country. Where are you living now? and how is Charles Merridew? Dear, dear, to think I should not have seen either of you for nearly twenty years!"

"But, mamma, surely, surely," cried Ellen Babington, "you don't think things can be settled like this?"

"Don't speak nonsense, Ellen; everything *is* settled," said the old lady. "You know I always had the greatest confidence in Janet's good sense. Now, my dear, hold your tongue. A girl like you has no right to meddle. I always manage my own business. Go and look after luncheon—that is your affair."

I do not remember ever to have seen a more curious group in my life. There was the old lady in the centre, quite calm, and sweet, and pleasant. A tear was still lingering on her eyelash; but it represented nothing more than a child's transitory grief, and underneath there was nothing but

smiles, and satisfaction, and content. She looked so pretty, so pleased, so glad to find that her comforts were not to be impaired, and yet took it all so lightly, as a matter of course, as completely unconscious of the struggle going on in the mind of her benefactress as if she had been a creature from a different world. As for Mrs. Merridew, she stood speechless, choked by feelings that were too bitter and conflicting for words. I am sure that all the advantages this money could have procured for her children were surging up before her as she stood and listened. She held her hands helplessly half stretched out, as if something had been taken out of them. Her eyes were blank with thinking, seeing nothing that we saw, but a whole world of the invisible. Her breast heaved with a breath half drawn, which seemed suspended half way, as if dismay and disappointment hindered its completion. It was all over then—her sacrifice made and accepted, and

no more about it; and herself sent back to the monotonous struggle of life. On the other side of the pretty old lady stood Ellen Babington, pale and miserable, struggling with shame and pride, casting sudden glances at Mrs. Merridew, and then appealing looks at me, who had nothing to do with it.

"Tell her, oh, tell her it can't be!" she cried at last, coming to me. "Tell her the lawyers will not permit it. It cannot be."

And Mrs. Merridew, too, gave me one pitiful look—not repenting, but yet—— Then she went forward, and laid her hand upon the old lady's hand, which was like ivory, with all the veins delicately carved upon it.

"Say, God bless us, at least. Say, 'God bless you and your children,' once before I go."

"To be sure," said the old lady cheerfully. "God bless you, my dear, and all the children. Matilda has no children, you

know. I should like to see them, if you think it would not be too much for me. But you are not going, Janet, when it is the first time we have met for nearly twenty years?"

"I must go," said Mrs. Merridew.

She could not trust herself to speak, I could see. She put down her face and kissed the ivory hand, and then she turned and went past me to the door, without another word. I think she had forgotten my very existence. When she had reached the door she turned round suddenly, and fixed her eyes upon Ellen. She was going away, having given them back their living, without so much acknowledgment as if she had brought a nosegay. There was in her look a mute remonstrance and appeal and protest. Ellen Babington trembled all over; her lips quivered as if with words which pride or pain would not permit her to say; but she held, with both hands immovable, to the back of her mother's

chair, who, for her part, was kissing her hand to the departing visitor. "Good-bye; come and see us soon again," the old lady was saying cheerfully. And Ellen gazed, and trembled, and said nothing. Thus this strangest of visits came to an end.

She had forgotten me, as I thought; but when I came to her side and my arm was within her reach, she clutched at it and tottered so that it was all I could do to support her. I was very thankful to get her into the cab, for I thought she would have fainted on the way. But yet she roused herself when I told the man to drive back to the station.

"We must go to the lawyer's first," she said; and then we turned and drove through the busy London streets, towards the City. The clerks looked nearly baked in the office when we reached it, and the crowd crowded on, indiscriminate and monotonous. One feels one has no right to go to such a place and take any of the air

away, of which they have so little. And to think of the sweet air blowing over our lawns and lanes, and all the unoccupied, silent, shady places we had left behind us! Such vain thoughts were not in Mrs. Merridew's head. She was turning over and over instead a very different kind of vision. She was counting up all she had sacrificed, and how little she had got by it; and yet was going to complete the sacrifice, unmoved even by her thoughts.

I confess I was surprised at the tone she took with the lawyer. She said "Mr. Merridew and myself" with a composure which made me, who knew Mr. Merridew had no hand in it, absolutely speechless. The lawyer remonstrated as he was in duty bound, and spoke about his client's will; but Mrs. Merridew made very little account of the will. She quoted her husband with a confidence so assured that even I, though I knew better, began to be persuaded that she had communicated with

him. And thus the business was finally settled. She had recovered herself by the time we got into the cab again. It is true that her face was worn and livid with the exertions of the day, but still, pale and weary as she was, she was herself.

"But, my dear," I said, "you quoted Mr. Merridew, as if he knew all about it; and what if he should not approve?"

"You must not think I have no confidence in my husband," she said quickly; "far from that. Perhaps he would not see as I do now. He would think of our own wants first. But if it comes to his ears afterwards, Charles is not the man to disown his wife's actions. Oh, no, no; we have gone through a great deal together, and he would no more bring shame upon me, as if I acted when I had no right to act—than—I would bring shame upon him; and I think that is as much as could be said."

And then we made our way back to the

station ; but she said nothing more till we got into the railway-carriage, which was not quite so noisy as our cab.

"It would have been such a thing for us," she said then, half to herself. "Poor Charles! Oh, if I could but have said to him, 'Don't be so anxious ; here is so much a year for the children.' And Jack should have gone to the University. And there would have been Will's premium at once," (*i.e.*, to Mr. Willoughby, the engineer). "The only thing that I am glad of is that they don't know. And then Janet ; she breaks my heart when she talks. It is so bad for her, knowing the Fortises and all those girls who have everything that heart can desire. I never had that to worry me when I was young. I was only the governess. Janet's talk will be the worst of all. I could have made the house so nice too, and everything. Well !—but then I never should have had a moment's peace."

"You don't regret?" I said.

"No," said Mrs. Merridew with a long sigh. And then, "Do you think I have been a traitor to the children?" she cried suddenly, "taking away their money from them in the dark? Would Charles think me a traitor, as *they* do? Is it always to be my part?—always to be my part?"

"No, no," I said, soothing her as best I could; but I was very glad to find my pony-carriage at the station, and to drive her home to my house and give her some tea, and strengthen her for her duties. Thus poor John Babington's fortune was disposed of, and no one was the wiser, except, indeed, the old lady and her daughter, who were not likely to talk much on the subject. And Mrs. Merridew walked calmly across to her house in the dusk as if this strange episode of agitation and passion had been nothing more solid than a dream.

MRS. MERRIDEW'S FORTUNE.

CHAPTER III.

WE did not meet again for some days after this, and next time I saw her, which was on Sunday at church with her children, it seemed impossible to me to believe in the reality of the strange scene we had so recently passed through together. The calm curtain of ordinary decorums and ordinary friendliness had risen for a moment from Mrs. Merridew's unexcited existence, revealing a woman distracted by a primitive sense of justice, rending her own soul, as it were, in sunder, and doing, in spite of herself and all her best instincts, what she felt was right. That she should have any existence separate from her children had

never occurred to anybody before. Yet, for one day, I had seen her resist and ignore the claims of her children, and act like an independent being. When I saw her again she was once more the mother and nothing more, casting her eyes over her little flock, cognizant, one could see, of the perfection or imperfection of every fold and line in their dresses, keeping her attention upon each, from little Matty, who was restless and could not be kept quiet, up to Janet, who sat demure, and already caught the eye of visitors as one of the prettiest girls of Dinglefield. Mrs. Merridew remarked all with a vigilant mother's eye, and as I gazed across at her in her pew, it was all but impossible for me to believe that this was the same woman who had clung so convulsively to my arm, whose face had been so worn and hollowed out with suffering. How could it be the same woman? She who had suffered poor John Babington to love her—and then had cast him off, and

married her friend's lover instead; who had established so firm an empire over a man's heart, that, after twenty years, he had remembered her still with such intensity of feeling. How Janet would have opened her big eyes had it been suggested to her that her mother could have any power over men's hearts; or, indeed, could be occupied with anything more touching or important than her children's frocks or her butcher's bills! I fear I did not pay much attention to the service that morning. I could not but gaze at them, and wonder whether, for instance, Mr. Merridew himself, who had come back from circuit, and was seated respectably with his family in church, yawning discreetly over Mr. Damerel's sermon, remembered anything at all, for his part, of Matilda Babington or her brother. Probably he preferred to ignore the subject altogether—or, perhaps, would laugh with a sense of gratified vanity that there had been "a row," when the transference of

his affections was discovered. And there she sat by his side, who had—had she betrayed his confidence? was she untrue to him in being this time true to her friends? The question bewildered me so that my mind went groping about it and about it. Once, I fear, she had been false to those whose bread she ate, and chosen love instead of friendship. Now was she false to the nearest of ties, the closest of all relationships, sitting calmly there beside him with a secret in her mind of which he knew nothing? "Falsely true!"—was that what the woman was who looked to the outside world a mere pattern of all domestic virtues, without any special interest about her, a wife devoted to her husband's interest, a mother wrapt up, as people say, in her children? I could not make up my mind what to think.

"I hope you got through your business comfortably," Mrs. Spencer said to me as we walked home from church.

"With Mrs. Merridew's assistance," said Lady Isabella, who was rather satirical. And the Merridews heard their own name, and stopped to join in the conversation.

"What is that about my wife?" he said. "Did Mrs. Mulgrave have Mrs. Merridew's assistance about something? I hope it was only shopping. When you have business you should consult me. She is a goose, and knows nothing about it."

"I don't think she is a goose," said I.

"No, perhaps not in her own way," said the serene husband, laughing; "but every woman is a goose about business—I beg your pardon, ladies, but I assure you I mean it as a compliment. I hate a woman of business. Shopping is quite a different matter," he added, and laughed. Good heavens! if he had only known what a fool he looked, beside the silent woman, who gave me a little warning glance and coloured a little, and turned away her head to speak to little Matty, who was clinging to her

skirts. A perfect mother! thinking more (you would have said) of Matty's little frills and Janet's bonnet-strings than of anything else in life.

And that was all about it. The summer went on and turned to autumn and to winter and to spring again, with that serene progression of nature which nothing obstructs: and the children grew, and the Merridews were as poor as ever, managing more or less to make both ends meet, but always just a little short somewhere, with their servants chosen on the same principle of supplementing each other's imperfect service as that which Janet had announced to me. For one thing, they kept their servants a long time, which I have noticed is characteristic of households not very rich nor very "particular." When you allow such pleas to tell in favour of an imperfect housemaid as that she is good to the children, or does not mind helping the cook, there is no reason why Mary, if she does not marry

in the meantime, should not stay with you a hundred years. And the Merridews' servants accordingly stayed, and looked very friendly at you when you went to call, and did their work not very well, with much supervision and exasperation (respectively) on the part of the mother and daughter. But the family was no poorer, though it was no richer. The only evidence of our expedition to town which I could note was, that it had produced a new pucker on Mrs. Merridew's brow. She had looked sufficiently anxious by times before, but the new pucker had something more than anxiety in it. There was a sense of something better that might have been; a sense of something lost—a suspicion of bitterness. How all this could be expressed by one line on a smooth white forehead I cannot explain; but to me it was so.

Now and then, too, a chance allusion would be made which recalled what had happened still more plainly. For instance,

I chanced to be calling one afternoon, when Mr. Merridew came home earlier than usual from town. We were sitting over our five-o'clock tea, with a few of the children scrambling about the floor and Janet working in the corner. He took up the ordinary position of a man who has just come home, with his back to the fire, and regarded us with that benevolent contempt which men generally think it right to exhibit for women over their tea; and everything was so ordinary and pleasant, that I for one was taken entirely by surprise, and nearly let fall the cup in my hand when he spoke.

"I don't know whether you saw John Babington's death in *The Times* three or four months ago, Janet," he said, "did you? Why did you never mention it? It is odd that I should not have heard. I met Ellen to-day coming out of the Amyotts, where I lunched, in such prodigious mourning that I was quite startled. All the world

might have been dead to look at her. And do you know she gave me a look as if she would have spoken. All that is so long past that it's ridiculous keeping up malice. I wish you would call next time you are in town to ask for the old lady. Poor John's death must have been a sad loss to them. I hear there was some fear that he had left his property away from his mother and sister. But it turned out a false report."

I did not dare to look at Mrs. Merridew to see how she bore it; but her voice replied quite calmly without any break, as if the conversation was on the most ordinary subject—

"Where did you manage to get so much news?"

"Oh, from the Amyotts," he said, "who knew all about it. Matilda, you know, poor girl" (with that half laugh of odious masculine vanity which I knew in my heart he would be guilty of), "married a cousin

of Amyott's, and is getting on very well, they say. But think over my suggestion, Janet. I think at this distance of time it would be graceful on your part to go and call."

"I cannot think they would like to see me now," she said in a low voice. Then I ventured to look at her. She was seated in an angular, rigid way, with her shoulders and elbows squared to her work, and the corners of her mouth pursed up, which would have given to any cursory observer the same impression it did to her husband.

"How hard you women are!" he said. "Trust you for never forgiving or forgetting. Poor old lady, I should have thought anybody would have pitied her. But however it is none of my business. As for Ellen, she is a very handsome woman, though she is not so young as she once was. I should not wonder if she were to make a good marriage even now. Is it possible, Janet, after being so fond of her—or pretending to be, how can

I tell?—that you would not like to say a kind word to Ellen now?"

"She would not think it kind from me," said Mrs. Merridew, still rigid, never raising her eyes from her work.

"I think she would: but at all events you might try," he said. All her answer was to shake her head, and he went away to his dressing-room shrugging his shoulders and nodding his head in bewildered comments to himself on what he considered the hard-heartedness of woman. As for me, I kept looking at her with sympathetic eyes, thinking that at least she would give herself the comfort of a confidential glance. But she did not. It seemed that she was determined to ignore the whole matter, even to me.

"I wish papa would take as much interest in us poor girls at home as he does in people that don't belong to him," said Janet. "Mamma, I never can piece this to make it long enough. It may do for Marian" (who was her next sister), "but it will never do for me."

"You are so easily discouraged," said Mrs. Merridew. "Let me look at it. You girls are always making difficulties. Under the flounce your piecing, as you call it, will never be seen. Those flounces," she added, with a little laugh, which I knew was hysterical, "are blessings to poor folks."

"I am sure I don't think there is anything to laugh at," said poor Janet, almost crying: "when you think of Nelly Fortis and all the other girls, with their nice dresses all new and fresh from the dressmaker's, and no trouble; while I have only mamma's old gown, that she wore when she was twenty, to turn, and patch, and piece—and not long enough after all!"

"Then you should not grow so," said her mother, "and you ought to be thankful that the old fashion has come in again, and my old gown can be of use." But as she spoke she turned round and gave me a look. The tears were in her eyes, and that pucker, oh, so deeply marked, in her forehead. I felt

she would have sobbed had she dared. And then before my eyes, as, I am sure, before hers, there glided a vision of Ellen Babington in her profound mourning, rustling past Mr. Merridew on the stairs, with heaps of costly crape, no doubt, and that rich black silk with which people console themselves in their first mourning. How could they take it all without a word? The after-pang that comes almost inevitably at the back of a sacrifice, was tearing Mrs. Merridew's heart. I felt it go through my own, and so I knew. She had done it nobly, but she could not forget that she had done it. Does one ever forget?

And then as I went home I fell into a maze again. Had she a right to do it? To sit at table with that unsuspicious man, and put her arm in his, and be at his side continually, and all the time be false to him? Falsely true! I could not get the words out of my mind.

MRS. MERRIDEW'S FORTUNE.

Chapter IV.

I do not now remember how long it was before I saw in the *Times* the intimation of old Mrs. Babington's death. I think it must have been about two years: for Janet was eighteen, and less discontented with things in general, besides being a great deal more contented than either her friends or his desired, with the civilities of young Bischam from the Priory, who was always coming over to see his aunt, and always throwing himself in the girl's way. He had nothing except his commission and a hundred and fifty a year which his father allowed him, and she had nothing at all; and, naturally, they took to each other. It is this

that makes me recollect what year it was. We had never referred to the matter in our frequent talks, Mrs. Merridew and I. But after the intimation in the *Times*, she herself broke the silence. She came to me the very next day. "Did you see it in the papers?" she asked, plunging without preface into the heart of the subject: and I could not pretend not to understand.

"Yes," I said, "I saw it;" and then stopped short, not knowing what to say.

She had got a worn-out look in these two years, such as all the previous years in which I had known her had not given. The pucker was more developed on her forehead; she was less patient and more easily fretted. She had grown thin, and something of a sharp tone had come into her soft, motherly voice. By times she would be almost querulous; and nobody but myself knew in the least whence the drop of gall came that had so suddenly shown itself in her nature. She

had fretted under her secret, and over her sacrifice—the sacrifice which had never been taken any notice of, but had been calmly accepted as a right. Now she came to me half wild, with the look of a creature driven to bay.

"It was for her I did it," she said; "she had always been so petted and cared for all her life. She did not know how to deny herself; I did it for her, not for Ellen. Oh, Mrs. Mulgrave, I cannot tell you how fond I was of that girl! And you saw how she looked at me. Never one word, never even a glance of response: and I suppose now——"

"My dear," I said, "you cannot tell yet; let us wait and see; now that her mother is gone her heart may be softened. Do not take any steps just yet."

"Steps!" she cried. "What steps can I take now? I have thrown altogether away from me what might have been of such use to the children. I have been false

to my own children. Poor John meant it to be of use to us——"

And then she turned away, wrought to such a point that nothing but tears could relieve her. When she had cried she was better; and went home to all her little monotonous cares again, to think and think, and mingle that drop of gall more and more in the family cup. Mr. Merridew was again absent on circuit at this time, which was at once a relief and a trouble to his wife. And everybody remarked the change in her.

"She is going to have a bad illness," Mrs. Spencer said. "Poor thing, I don't wonder, with all those children, and inferior servants, and so much to do. I have seen it coming on for a long time. A serious illness is a dangerous thing at her age. All her strength has been drained out of her; and whether she will be able to resist——"

"Don't be so funereal," said Lady

Isabella; "she has something on her mind."

"I think it is her health," said Mrs. Spencer; and we all shook our heads over her altered looks.

I had a further fright, too, some days after, when Janet came to me, looking very pale. She crept in with an air of secrecy which was very strange to the girl. She looked scared, and her hair was pushed up wildly from her forehead, and her light summer dress all dusty and dragging, which was unlike Janet, for she had begun by this time to be tidy, and feel herself a woman. She came in by the window as usual, but closed it after her, though it was very hot. "May I come and speak to you?" she said in a whisper, creeping quite close to my side.

"Of course, my dear; but why do you shut the window?" said I; "we shall be suffocated if you shut out the air."

"It is because it is a secret," she said.

"Mrs. Mulgrave, tell me, is there anything wrong with mamma?"

"Wrong?" I said, turning upon her in dismay.

"I can't help it," cried Janet, bursting into tears. "I don't believe mamma ever did anything wrong. I can't believe it: but there has been a woman questioning me so, I don't know what to think."

"A woman questioning you?"

"Listen," said Janet hastily. "This is how it was: I was walking down to the Dingle across the fields—oh! Mrs. Mulgrave, dear, don't say anything; it was only poor Willie Bischam, who wanted to say good-bye to me—and all at once I saw a tall lady in mourning looking at us as we passed. She came up to us just at the stile at Goodman's farm, and I thought she wanted to ask the way; but instead of that, she stopped me and looked at me. 'I heard you called Janet,' she said; 'I had once a friend who was called Janet,

and it is not a common name. Do you live here? is your mother living? and well? and how many children are there? I should like to know if you belong to my old friend.'"

"And what did you say?"

"What could I say, Mrs. Mulgrave? She did not look cross or disagreeable, and she was a lady. I said who I was, and that mamma was not quite well, and that there were ten of us; and then she began to question me about mamma. Did she go out a great deal? and was she tall or short? and had she pretty eyes 'like mine?' she said; and was her name Janet like mine? and then, when I had answered her as well as I could, she said, I was not to say a word to mamma; 'perhaps it is not the Janet I once knew,' she said; 'don't say anything to her;' and then she went away. I was so frightened, I ran home directly all the way. I knew I might tell you, Mrs. Mulgrave; it is like something

in a book, is it not, when people are trying to find out——oh, you don't think I can have done any harm to mamma?"

Janet was so much agitated that it was all I could do to quiet her down. "And I never said good-bye to poor Willie, after all," she said, with more tears when she had rallied a little. I thought it better she should not tell her mother, though one is very reluctant to say so to a girl; for Willie Bischam was a secret too. But he was going away, poor fellow, and probably nothing would ever come of it. I made a little compromise with my own sense of right.

"Forget it, Janet, and say nothing about it; perhaps it was some one else after all; and if you will promise not to meet Mr. Bischam again——"

"He goes to-night," said Janet, with a rueful look; and thus it was evident that on that point there was nothing more to be said.

This was in the middle of the week, and on Saturday Mr. Merridew was expected home. His wife was ill, though she never had been ill before in her life; she had headaches, which were things unknown to her; she was out of temper, and irritable, and wretched. I think she had made certain that Ellen would write, and make some proposal to her; and as the days went on one by one, and no letter came—— Besides, it was just the moment when they had decided against sending Jack to Oxford. To pay Willie's premium and do that at the same time was impossible. Mrs. Merridew had struggled long, but at last she was obliged to give in; and Jack was going to his father's chambers to read law with a heavy heart, poor boy; and his mother was half distracted. All might have been so different; and she had sacrificed her boys' interests, and her girls' interests, and her own happiness, all for the selfish comfort of Ellen Babington, who took no

notice of her: I began to think she would have a brain fever if this went on.

She was not at church on Sunday morning, and I went with the children, as soon as service was over, to ask for her. She was lying on the sofa when I went in, and Mr. Merridew, who had arrived late on Saturday, was in his dressing-gown, walking about the room. He was tired and irritable with his journey, and his work, and perennial cares. And she, with her sacrifice, and her secret, and perennial cares, was like tinder, ready in a moment to catch fire. I know nothing more disagreeable than to go in upon married people when they are in this state of mind, which can neither be ignored nor concealed.

"I don't understand you, Janet," he was saying, as I entered; "women are vindictive, I know; but at least you may be sorry, as I am, that the poor old lady has died without a word of kindness passing between us: after all, we might be to blame. One

changes one's opinions as one gets on in life. With our children growing up round us, I don't feel quite so sure that we were not to blame."

"*I* have not been to blame," she said, with an emphasis which sounded sullen, and which only I could understand.

"Oh no, of course; you never are," he said, with masculine disdain. "Catch a woman acknowledging herself to be in fault! The sun may go wrong in his course sooner than she. Mrs. Mulgrave, pray don't go away; you have seen my wife in an unreasonable mood before."

"I am in no unreasonable mood," she cried. "Mrs. Mulgrave, stay. You know—oh, how am I to go on bearing this, and never answer a word?"

"My dear, don't deceive yourself," he said, with a man's provoking calm, "you answer a great many words. I don't call you at all a meek sufferer. Fortunately the children are out of the way. Confound it,

Janet, what do you mean by talking of what you have to bear? I have not been such a harsh husband to you as all that; and when all I asked was that you should make the most innocent advances to a poor old woman who was once very kind to us both——"

"Charles!" said Mrs. Merridew, rising suddenly from her sofa, "I can't bear it any longer. You think me hard, and vindictive, and I don't know what. You, who ought to know me. Look here! I got that letter, you will see by the date, more than two years ago; you were absent, and I went and saw her: there—there! now I have confessed it; Mrs. Mulgrave knows—— I have had a secret from you for two years."

It was not a moment for me to interfere. She sat, holding herself hysterically rigid and upright on the sofa. Whether she had intended to betray herself or not, I cannot tell. She had taken the letter out of her writing-desk, which stood close by; but I don't know whether she had resolved on this

step, or whether it was the impulse of the moment. Now that she had done it a dreadful calm of expectation took possession of her. She was afraid. He might turn upon her furious. He might upbraid her with despoiling her family, deceiving himself, being false, as she had been before. Such a thing was possible. Two souls may live side by side for years, and be as one, and yet have no notion how each will act in any sudden or unusual emergency. He was her husband, and they had no interest, scarcely any thought, that one did not share with the other; and yet she sat gazing at him rigid with terror, not knowing what he might do or say.

He read the letter without a word; then he tossed it upon the table; then he walked all the length of the room, up and down, with his hands thrust very deeply into his pockets; then he took up the letter again. He had a struggle with himself. If he was angry, if he was touched, I cannot tell. His first

emotions, whatever they were, he gulped down without a word. Of all sounds to strike into the silence of such a moment, the first thing we heard in our intense listening was the abrupt ring of a short excited laugh.

"How did you venture to take any steps in it without consulting me?" he said.

"I thought—I thought——" she stammered under her breath.

"You thought I might have been tempted by the money," he said, taking another walk through the room, while she sat erect in her terror, afraid of him. It was some time before he spoke again. No doubt he was vexed by her want of trust, and wounded by the long silence. But I have no clue to the thoughts that were passing through his mind. At last he came to a sudden pause before her. "And perhaps you were right, Janet," he said, drawing a long breath. "I am glad now to have been free of the temptation. It was wrong not to tell me—and yet I think you did well."

Mrs. Merridew gave a little choked cry, and then she fell back on the sofa—fell into my arms. I had felt she might do it, so strange was her look, and had placed myself there on purpose. But she had not fainted, as I expected. She lay silent for a moment, with her eyes closed, and then she burst into tears.

I had no right to be there; but they both detained me, both the husband and wife, and I could not get away until she had recovered herself, and it was evident that what had been a tragical barrier between them was now become a matter of business, to be discussed as affecting them both.

"It was quite right the old lady should have it," Mr. Merridew said, as he went with me to the door, "quite right. Janet did only what was right; but now I must take it into my own hands."

"And annul what she has done?" I asked.

"We must consult over that," he said. "Ellen Babington, who has been so un-

grateful to my wife, is quite a different person from her mother. But I will do nothing against Mrs. Merridew's will."

And so I left them to consult over their own affairs. I had been thrust into it against my own will; but still it was entirely their affair, and no business of mine.

Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella called to me from their lawn as I went out to ask how Mrs. Merridew was, and shook their heads over her.

"She should have the doctor," said Mrs. Spencer.

"But the doctor would not pay her bills for her," said Lady Isabella.

And I had to answer meekly, as if I knew nothing about it, "I don't think it is her bills."

This conversation detained me some time from my own house; and when I reached my cottage, my maid stood by the gate, looking out for me, shading her eyes with her hands.

It was to tell me there was a lady waiting for me in the drawing-room: "A tall lady in mourning." And in a moment my heart smote me for some hard thoughts, and I knew who my visitor was.

I found her seated by my table, very pale, but quite self-possessed. She rose when I went in, and began to explain.

"You don't know me," she said. "I have no right to come to you; but once you came to—us—with Mrs. Merridew. Perhaps you remember me now? I am Ellen Babington. I want to speak to you about—my brother's will. You may have heard that I have just lost——"

"Yes," I said. "I am very sorry. If there is anything I can do——"

"You can do all that I want from any one," she said. "Janet will never believe that I wanted to keep the money—now. I have seen all her children to-day at church; and I think, if she had been there, I should perhaps have been able—but never mind. Tell her

I should like—if she would give her daughter Janet something out of the money—from me. She is a little like what her mother was. I am sure you are kind to them. I don't even know your name."

"Mrs. Mulgrave," I said; and she gave a little bow. She was very composed, very well-bred, terribly sad; with a look of a woman who had no more to do in the world, and who yet was, heaven help her! in the middle of her life, full of vigour, and capability, and strength.

"Will you tell Janet, please, that it is all settled?" she said. "I mean, not the girl Janet, but her mother. Tell her I have settled everything. I believe she will hear from the lawyers to-morrow; but I could not let it come only from the lawyers. I cannot forgive her, even now. She thinks it is Matilda she has wronged; but it is me she has wronged, taking my brother from me, my only brother, after all these years. But never mind. I kissed the little child instead to-day

—the quiet little one, with the gold hair. I suppose she is the youngest. Tell her I came on purpose to see them before I went away."

"But why send this message through me?" I said; "come and see *her*. I will take you; it is close by. And the sight of you will do her more good—than the money. Come, and let her explain."

I thought she hesitated for a moment, but her only answer was a shake of her head.

"What could she explain?" she cried, with strange impetuosity. "He and I had been together all our lives, and yet all the while he cared nothing for his sister and everything for her. Do you think I can ever forgive her? but I never forgot her. I don't think I ever loved any one so well in my life."

"Oh, come and tell her so," said I.

Again she shook her head. "I loved her as well as I loved him; and yet I hate her, she said. "But tell her I spoke to her Janet, and I kissed her baby; and that I have

arranged everything with the lawyers about poor John's will. I am sure you are a good woman. Will you shake hands with me for the children's sake before I go?"

Her voice went to my heart. I had only seen her once in my life before, but I could not help it. I went up to her and took her two hands, and kissed her; and then she, the stranger, broke down, and put her head on my shoulder and wept. It was only for a moment, but it bound us as if for our lives.

"Where are you going?" I asked, when she went away.

"I am going abroad with some friends," she said hurriedly.

"But you will come to us, my dear, when you come back?"

"Most likely I shall never come back," she said hastily; and then went away alone out of my door, alone across the green, with her veil over her face, and her black dress repulsing the sunshine. One's sympathies

move and change about like the winds. I had been so sorry for Mrs. Merridew an hour ago; but it was not for her I was most sorry now.

And this was how it all ended. I was always glad that Mrs. Merridew had told her husband before the letter came next morning. And they got the money; and John went to the University, and Janet had new dresses and new pleasures, and a ring, of which she was intensely proud, according to Ellen's desire. I dare say Ellen's intention was that something much more important should have been given to the child in her name; but then Ellen Babington, being an unmarried woman, did not know how much a large family costs, nor what urgent occasion there is for every farthing, even with an addition so great as five hundred a year.

I am afraid it did not make Mrs. Merridew much happier just at first. She wrote letters wildly, far and near, to everybody who could be supposed to know anything about Ellen;

and wanted to have her to live with them, and to share the money with her, and I don't know how many other wild fancies. But all that could be found out was that Ellen had gone abroad. And by degrees the signs of this strange tempest began to disappear—smoothed out and filled up as Nature smooths all traces of combat. The scars heal, new verdure covers the sudden precipice—the old gets assimilated with the new. By degrees an air of superior comfort stole over the house, which was very consolatory. Selina, the housmaid, married, and Richards retired to the inevitable greengrocery. And with a new man and new maids, and so much less difficulty about the bills, it is astonishing how the puckers died away from Mrs. Merridew's forehead—first one line went, and then another, and she grew younger in spite of herself. And with everything thus conspiring in her favour, and habit calmly settling to confirm all, is it wonderful if by and by she forgot that any accident had ever

happened, and that all had not come in the most natural way, and with the most pleasant consequences in the world?

The other day I saw in a chance copy of *Galignani*, which came to me in a parcel from Paris, the marriage of Ellen Babington to a Frenchman there; but that is all we have ever heard of her. Whether it is a good marriage or a bad one I don't know; but I hope, at least, it is better for her than being all alone, as she was when she left my house that day in June, having made her sacrifice in her turn. If things had but taken their natural course, how much unnecessary suffering would have been spared: Mrs. Merridew is, perhaps, happier now than she would have been without that five hundred a year—but for two years she was wretched, sacrificing and grudging the sacrifice, and making herself very unhappy. And though I don't believe Ellen Babington cared for the money, her heart will never be healed of that pang of bitterness which her brother's desertion gave

her. His companion for twenty years! and to think his best thoughts should have been given all that time to a woman who had only slighted him, and refused his love. Mrs. Merridew does not see the sting of this herself—she thinks it natural. And so I dare say would half the world beside.

THE BARLEY MOW.

Chapter I.

There was but one little harmless house of public entertainment at Dinglefield, a place not without its importance among us, with its little farm, and the fly with the old white horse which was an institution on the green, and very serviceable when there was luggage to be carried to the railway, or any party going on in bad weather when our pony carriages could not be used.

This was the Barley Mow, a favourite and picturesque little village public-house, the most inoffensive article of the kind, perhaps, which was to be found for miles and miles around. The green itself was not like the trim and daintily-kept greensward,

with orderly posts and railings, which is to be seen in many suburban hamlets. It was long, irregular, and just wild enough to be thoroughly natural. The lower end, near the Barley Mow, was smooth and neat, the best cricket ground that you could find in the neighbourhood. But the upper part was still wild with gorse bushes, and bordered by a little thicket of rhododendrons, which had strayed thither from the adjacent park. Many a cricket match was played upon the lower green, and on the bright summer Saturdays, when the cricket parties came, there was often quite a pretty little company from the surrounding houses to watch them, and a great traffic went on at the Barley Mow. It was an irregular old house, partly red brick, partly whitewashed, with a luxuriant old garden warm and sunny, opening through a green wicket set in a great hedge on the right hand. A signpost stood in the open space in front, where the road widened out, and by

the open door you could see through a clean, red-tiled passage into the garden at the back, where the turf was like velvet, and the borders full of all kinds of bright and sweet old-fashioned flowers. There were neither standard rose-bushes nor red geraniums to be seen there, not that Widow Aikin, good woman, had any whim of taste that prompted her to despise these conventional inmates of the modern garden, but that the pinks and gilliflowers, the rockets and larkspurs, and great straggling rose-bushes were cheaper and gave less trouble, having established themselves there, and requiring no bedding out. The room which looked out upon this garden was where the strangers and gentle-folks who came from far were entertained, and there was a parlour, with a bow window in front, for humbler persons. But the favourite place in summer for that kind of "company" was the bench outside the door, looking out upon the green. There was little traffic of any kind in winter, but the

summer aspect of the Barley Mow was a pleasant one. It had no air of stale dissipation about it, no heavy odour of spilt beer or coarse tobacco, but looked wholesome and sweet-smelling, a place of refreshment, not of indulgence. Anyhow, it was the fashion about the green to think and say this of Widow Aikin's clean, honest, respectable house. She was a favourite with all the "families." She served them with milk as well as beer, and fresh eggs, and sometimes fruit. She had all sorts of little agencies in hand, found servants for the ladies on the green, and executed little commissions of many kinds. She was a personage, privileged and petted: everybody had a smile and a kind word for her, and she for everybody. She was always about, never standing still, glancing in and out of the red-tiled passage, the bow-windowed parlour, the sunny garden, the noisy stable-yard. You saw her everywhere—now this side, now that—an ubiquitous being, so quick-footed that she

was almost capable of being in two places at once.

It was a favourite subject with Mrs. Aikin to talk of her own loneliness, and incapacity to manage "such a house as this." She liked to dwell upon the responsibilities of the position and the likelihood that a lone woman would be imposed upon; and the green generally considered this a very proper strain of observation, and felt it to be respectable that a widow should so feel and so express herself. But it was very well known that things had gone much better at the Barley Mow since Will Aikin managed very opportunely to be carried off by that vulgar gout which springs from beer, and has all the disadvantages with none of the distinctions belonging to its kindred ailment. There was no saying what might not have happened had he lived a year longer, for the creditors were urgent and the business paralysed. It was this which made his death opportune, for the brewers were merciful to the widow,

and gave her time to redeem herself; and when she was relieved from the necessity of nursing him and studying his "ways," which were as difficult as if the landlord of the Barley Mow had been a prince of the blood, the widow blossomed out into another woman. It is but a poor compliment to the lamented husband, but widows continually do this, it must be allowed, giving the lie practically to their own tears. Happily however Mrs. Aikin, like many others in her position, took her own desolation for granted, and attributed her increase of prosperity to luck or the blessing of God, which is the better way of stating it. "Oh! that poor Will had but lived to see it!" she would say with kindly tears in her eyes, and never whispered even to herself that had poor Will lived it would never have been. She never missed an opportunity, good soul, of bringing him into her conversation, telling stories of his excellence, his good looks (he was one of the plainest men in the county), his good jokes

(he was as dull as ditch-water) and his readiness in all encounters. She would stand in the doorway, with her apron lifted in her hand, ready to dry the tear which out of grief for his loss, or tremulous traditionary laughter over one of his pleasantries, was always ready to spring up in the corner of her eye. What did it matter to her that the poor old jokes were pointless? She never inquired into their claims, but accepted them as laughter-worthy by divine right.

Mrs. Aikin had but one child, Jane, a modest, dark-eyed girl, with pretty fair curling hair, which gave her a certain distinction among the rustic prettinesses about. Her mother professed to be annoyed by the mingling of two complexions, protesting that Jane was always "contrairy," that such light hair should have gone with blue eyes, and that she was neither one sort nor another; but in her heart she was proud enough of her daughter's uncommon looks—and Jane was

an uncommon girl. Next to the Barley Mow stood the smallest house on the green, a little place half wooden, half brick, which would have been tumbledown and disreputable had it not been so exquisitely neat and well cared for. This was the poorest little place of all the gentry's houses, but it was not by any means the humblest of the inhabitants of the green who lived at the Thatched Cottage. Old Mrs. Mowbray was a very great person, though she was a very small person. She was the tiniest woman on the green, and she had the tiniest income, but she was related to half the peerage, and considered herself as great a lady as if she had been a grand duchess. Nor did any one dispute her claim. The greatest people in the county yielded the *pas* to old Mrs. Mowbray, partly no doubt because she was very old and her magnificent pretensions were amusing, but partly also because they were well founded. There was not one house on the green that had

such visitors as she had. She was grand-aunt to a duke, and nobody would have been surprised to hear that in her own person she had a far-away right to the Crown—a right, let us say, coming by some side-wind from the Plantagenets, leaping over the other families who are of yesterday. Many people at Dinglefield called her the fairy queen. She had the easy familiarity of royalty with all her surroundings. What could it matter to her what were the small gradations of social importance among her neighbours and friends? She could afford to be indifferent to such trifling distinctions of society. Widow Aikin was not appreciably further out of the reach of this splendid little old poor patrician than Lady Denzil. Education was in favour of the latter, it is true, but there was this against her, that it was possible for her to entertain some delusive idea of equality, of which Mrs. Aikin was guiltless. Mrs. Mowbray accordingly made no secret of the fact that she entertained a great

friendship for the landlady of the Barley Mow, and was very fond of Jane. She had the girl with her a great deal, and taught her those pretty manners which were so unlike others of her class. When Jane was a growing girl of twelve or thirteen she used to wait upon the old lady's guests at tea as a maid of honour might have waited. It was done for love for one thing, which always confers a certain grace; and it was not possible to move awkwardly or act ungracefully under the eye of such a keen critic.

It was the general opinion of the ladies on the green that this patronage might not be an advantage to Jane as she grew older, and it became necessary to choose what was to be her occupation in the world; but in this respect Mrs. Mowbray behaved with great wisdom. It was, indeed, against not only all her traditions, but all the habits of her mind to "put nonsense in the girl's head," and disgust her with her natural position, which was what the other ladies feared.

It mattered nothing to Mrs. Mowbray whether the girl became a pupil-teacher ; or pushed upward in the small scale of rank, as understood at the Barley Mow, to be a nursery governess and call herself a lady ; or remained what she was by nature, her mother's right hand and chief assistant ? Parties ran very high on the green on this subject. It was fought over in many a drawing-room as hotly as if it had been a branch of the Eastern Question. Ought Jane Aikin to stay at the parish school with Mrs. Peters, whose favourite pupil she was, and become her aid and probable successor ? Ought she, being so refined in her manners, and altogether such a nice-looking girl, to learn a little music and French, and become a governess ? The ladies who were liberal, who believed in education, and that everybody should do their best to improve their position and better themselves, upheld the latter idea ; but the strongest party was in favour of the pupil-teacher notion,

which was considered a means of utilising Jane's good manners and excellent qualities, without moving her out of "her own sphere of life"—and this set was headed by the Rector, who was very hot and decided on the subject. A third party, to which nobody paid much attention, and which consisted chiefly of Mrs. Aikin herself, the only real authority, intended Jane to remain where she was, head-waiter and superintendent at the Barley Mow. The question between the two first projects had already been warmly discussed in the drawing-rooms before it occurred to anybody that it could be Mrs. Aikin's intention to do such injustice to her daughter, or indeed that the good landlady had any particular say in the matter. What! make a barmaid of Jane! The Rector was, it is to be feared, very injudicious in his treatment of the question. He attempted to carry matters with a very high hand, and went so far as to say that no modest girl could be brought up in "an

alehouse," as he was so foolish as to call it, an opprobrious epithet which Mrs. Aikin did not forgive for years. She was so desperately offended, indeed, that she went to chapel for four Sundays after she heard of it, walking straight past the church doors, and proclaiming her defection to the whole world. Mrs. Mowbray was the person who was employed to set this matter right. She was waited upon by representatives of the two different parties, both of them feeling secure of her sympathy, but both anxious at all events to bring that foolish woman, Jane's mother, to her senses. Mrs. Stoke was at the head of the governess set, and good Mr. Wigmore, our excellent churchwarden, represented the Rector's views. They met at the gate of the Thatched Cottage upon this mission. "I have not spoken to dear Mrs. Mowbray on the subject, because I feel so sure that she will be on our side—so fond as she is of Jane," said Mrs. Stoke. "Mrs. Mowbray is not the person to advocate

any breaking up of the divisions which mark society," said Mr. Wigmore. "*She* knows the evil of all such revolutionary measures." And thus they went in, each confident in his and her own cause.

Mrs. Mowbray sat by the fire in the big old carved ebony chair, which made her look more than ever a fairy queen. She had a handsome old ivory face, with a tinge of colour on the cheeks, which looked as if it might once have been rouge. Strangers considered that this peculiarity of complexion gave an artifical and even improper look to the old lady, but on the green it was considered one of the evidences of that supreme aristocratism which would not take the trouble to disguise anything it pleased to do, but would rouge, if rouge was necessary, in a masterful and magnificent way, making no secret of it. However, as a matter of fact it was not rouge, but perfectly real, as was the fine ivory yellow of her old nose, a stately and prominent

feature, evidently belonging to the highest rank. She would not have budged from her ebony chair to receive any one less than the Queen; but she permitted Mrs. Stoke to kiss her, and Mr. Wigmore to shake her hand, with serene graciousness. When they had both seated themselves she looked at them across her knitting with a smile. "This looks likes a deputation," she said. "What do you want, good people? If it is to settle about my funeral there is no hurry —for my cold is much better, and I have a good many things to see after before I can think of such luxuries." This distressed both her visitors, who did not like to hear an old lady speak of such serious matters in this light-minded way.

"Indeed indeed, dear Mrs. Mowbray, it was nothing of the kind. When such a dreadful event occurs there will be weeping and wailing on the green; and we all know very well that though you always talk so cheerfully, and so amusingly——"

"You regard such subjects with the melancholy which becomes right-thinking people," said Mr. Wigmore; "but we came —or to speak for myself, I came——"

"To speak of Jane Aikin," cried Mrs. Stoke, feeling the importance of having the first word, "and her mother's inconceivable foolishness in keeping her at home; and the still more foolish step she has taken in separating herself from all her true friends."

"Frequenting the Dissenters' services," said Mr. Wigmore. "Few things more sad have come under my observation in this very distressing parish—which is really such a mixture of everything that is unsatisfactory——"

"The parish is just like other parishes," said Mrs. Stoke, "only much better, I should say—so many educated people in it, and so few poor comparatively. But I am sure our dear old friend will agree with me that Jane is quite out of place——"

"Now, my good people," said the old lady, "think a moment—what do you mean by out of place ?—Everybody is out of place nowadays. I see people in this room calmly sitting down by me whose fathers and mothers would have come to the kitchen door fifty years ago; but if I made a fuss what would any one say?"

This made Mr. Wigmore very uncomfortable, whose father had been a cheesemonger in a good way of business; but as for Mrs. Stoke she did not care, being very well born, as she supposed. Mrs. Mowbray however, took them both in quite impartially. "Unless people really belong to the old nobility," she continued, "I don't see that it matters about their place. It does not mean anything. Even in what we call the old nobility, you know, there's not above half-a-dozen families that are anything like *pur sang*. I know dukes that are just as much out of place as Jane Aikin would be at Windsor Castle. The only place any

one has a right to is where their ancestors are born and bred—if they have any. And when you have not rank," said the old lady, looking keenly at Mr. Wigmore, "you had much better be *peuple*, as the French say. We haven't got an English word for it. No, it doesn't mean lower classes—it means *peuple*, neither less nor more. And Jane Aikin is pure *peuple*. She can't be out of place where she is."

"But you forget her education, dear Mrs. Mowbray—and you yourself that have given her such a taste for beautiful manners, and spoiled her for her own common class."

Mrs. Mowbray did not say anything, but she put on her spectacles and stared at her reprover. "I never spoil any one," she said; "out of my own condition—I make no secret of it—one girl is very much like another to me. They should all be pretty-mannered—I never knew *that* to spoil any one, small or great."

"Dear Mrs. Mowbray, no; but if we

could raise her to a position in which she would be appreciated. She has taken such a step out of her own class in associating with you."

"Associating—with me!" Mrs. Mowbray took off her spectacles again after she had gazed mildly with a wonder beyond speech in the speaker's face. Then she shrugged her shoulders slightly and shook her head. "I can't recall at this moment any one in this neighbourhood who does that. I have a great many friends, if that is what you mean, and I am not so particular as most people about the little subdivisions—but associates! I don't know any. Yes, Mr. Wigmore? you were going to speak."

"I am one of those who agree with you that the poor should be kept in their own place," said Mr. Wigmore. As he spoke the old lady took up her spectacles again, and deliberately put them on, looking at him as if (Mrs. Stoke said) he was a natural

curiosity, which somewhat discomfited the excellent man—"but, as our friend says, her manners and breeding are quite above her station."

"Jane Aikin has no station," said Mrs. Mowbray promptly. "She is *peuple*, as I told you. I know nothing of your aboves and belows. Let her stay where she is, in her natural place, and do her duty. Do your duty in that condition to which God has called you: that's what the Catechism says. There's nothing about being above or below. Very lucky for her she's got a natural place and her duty plain before her. If one had not one's own rank, which of course one does not choose, that's what I should prefer for myself: a distinct place and a clear duty—and that's what Jane Aikin has."

"In a public-house!" cried Mr. Wigmore aghast.

"In her mother's house, sir," said old Mrs. Mowbray.

Thus the green was routed horse and foot; but the old lady on further talk accepted the position of mediatrix to bring back the Widow Aikin to her allegiance, and to show her her duty as a churchwoman. She sallied forth for that purpose the very next morning in her old quilted white satin bonnet and great furred cloak. She never changed the fashion of her garments, having had abundant time to discover what was most becoming to her, as she frankly said. Mrs. Aikin was standing at her front door, looking out upon the bright morning, when the old lady appeared. There was very little doing at the Barley Mow. The parlour with the bow window was full of a dazzling stock of household linen, which Jane and a maid were looking over, and putting in order. Jane herself had the task of darning the thin places, which she did so as to make darning into a fine art. This had been taught her by Mrs. Peters at the parish school. Perhaps

it was not, after all, such a valuable accomplishment as it looked, but certainly Jane's darning had a beautiful appearance on the tablecloths, after they had passed their first perfection of being, at the Barley Mow.

"The sunshine's a pleasure," said Mrs. Aikin, making her best curtsey, "and I hope I see you well, ma'am, this bright morning. It shows us as how spring's coming. Might I be so bold as to ask you to step in and take a chair?"

"Not this morning," said Mrs. Mowbray in her frank voice, not unduly subdued in tone, "though I've come to scold you. They tell me you've gone off from your church, you that were born and bred in it, and Jane, though I taught her her Catechism myself. Do you mean to tell me you've got opinions—you?—with a nice child like Jane to thank God for, and everything going well——"

"Well, ma'am," said Mrs. Aikin, grow-

ing red and smoothing her apron, "I don't say as I'm one for opinions—more than doing your duty, and getting a bit of good out of a sermon when you can."

"That's very pious and right," said the old lady, "but your church that you were christened in is more than a sermon. I don't pretend to get much good of them myself: but you'll not tell me that you have left your church for that."

"Well, ma'am!" said Mrs. Aikin, reluctant to commit herself. She put out her foot, and began to trace patterns with her shoe in the sand on the doorstep, and fixed her eyes upon the process. She could not meet the little old lady's decided gaze. "Mr. Short at the chapel do preach beautiful, he do. You should just hear him for yourself. He'll make you come all over in a tremble, when you're sitting quite quiet like, thinking of nothing; and then he's real comforting to poor folks and them as is put upon. It's almost a pleasure to feel as

you've had your troubles with the quality too."

"Quality! Where do you find any quality to have troubles with?" said Mrs. Mowbray. "You and I have always been good friends. You don't consider that you're put upon, as you call it, because the Duke sent me my Christmas turkey. That was no offence to you."

"No, ma'am, never—not you. There is them that shall be nameless—not but what *they* call names a plenty."

"The woman's thinking of the Rector, I declare. Quality!" said Mrs. Mowbray with an accent of mingled amazement and amusement. "No, my dear woman, he's not quality. But he meant no harm. He was thinking of the girl and her good. They think they know, these men; and we must submit, you know, to our clergy. It was because of his interest in Jane."

"Interest in Jane!" said Widow Aikin

(she pronounced the name something like *Jeycyn;* but the peculiarities of Berkshire are too much for even phonetic spelling), "if that shows an interest! telling her mother to her face as she wasn't fit to bring her up decent and respectable, and showing no more confidence than that in the girl herself."

"It was his mistake," said Mrs. Mowbray, "he wants tact, that is what it is. He hasn't the right way of doing a thing, my dear woman. That is how these middling sort of people always break down. My nephew, the Duke, if he had to send you to prison, would do it as if it were the greatest kindness in the world. But the middling classes have no grace about them. That's not to say that you're to give up your church that you were christened in and married in. Who's to bury you, woman? Do you never think of that? Not your Mr. Short at the chapel, I hope. At least I know he would never do for me.

There ought to be more in your church than a sermon, or even than a pleasant word."

"Well, ma'am, I don't say but what that's true; and I never thought of the burying," said the widow, hanging her head. She was subdued and awe-stricken at the turn which the discussion had taken, and, indeed, had never intended to forsake "her church," but only to make a demonstration of her independence. Jane had come out from the parlour, leaving her work to listen to this argument, with great anxiety and interest, for her heart was in it. She was hovering in the passage behind her mother, now and then giving her a little touch or pull to enforce something the old lady said. During the pause that followed she came forward very anxiously, and put forward a plea of her own, in which there did not seem much point or applicability.

"Oh, mother," she said softly, pulling her sleeve, "and Johnny in the choir!"

"Oh, go along with your Johnnys," said the landlady of the Barley Mow. But it was clear enough that the victory was won.

THE BARLEY MOW.

CHAPTER II.

IT is full time that John should be spoken of, who was the other member of the family, and a very important one. He was Mrs. Aikin's nephew, the son of a brother who was very poorly off, and had been taken in by his good aunt as a miserable stunted child when he was but six or seven. The brother was a soldier, who had been discharged, and whose character it is to be supposed did not recommend him sufficiently to get any interest made for him, or to establish him anywhere in one of the occupations which seem made for old soldiers. Instead of this he had fallen into a kind of vagabondism, wandering

from place to place, and as his wife was dead this only child had been miserably neglected, and was in a bad way when Mrs. Aikin took him to her kindly care. He had never been a prepossessing boy, and he did not at all share with Jane in the interest of the green. He was heavy and lowering in his looks, quiet to outward appearance, though tales were told of him which were not consistent with this subdued aspect. Both the women however were devoted to John, either because they had no one else to be fond of, or because he possessed some qualities at bottom which made up for his faults of exterior. He certainly did not seem at any time to give himself much trouble to secure their affections. All that he did seemed to be done unwillingly—the very sound of his voice was churlish—and except Mrs. Aikin and her daughter nobody cared for the boy. From his very first coming he had showed himself in an unfavourable light. He was

then a boy of about eight years old, and little Jane, a delightful child, everybody's favourite, was a year younger. One summer evening he was standing with his hands in his pockets staring at the waggons with their big horses, when she came running up to him.

"Come and play, Johnny," she said in her soft little voice.

"I won't," he said, pushing her out of his way with his shoulder.

"Oh, Johnny, come and have tea in the garden," said little Jane, "mother says we may. I've got some cake and some gooseberries, and my own little tea-things, and all the best shall be for you. Oh, Johnny, come!"

"I won't," he said again, though he faltered when he heard of the cake.

"Oh, Johnny, come to please me," cried the poor little woman, already as foolish in her expectations as if she had been twenty years older.

"To please you! I'd a deal rather please myself," cried the boy, once more thrusting her aside with a push of his shoulder. Little Jane was ready to cry, but the mother coming out full of business called to the children in her hasty way to go at once to the garden, and get out of her road. Upon which the boy shrugged his shoulders, and obeyed with brutish unwillingness and display of yielding to superior force. This was how he had been ever since. The little girl would coax and entreat, the kind mother give cheerful orders, never so much as seeing the lowering looks of rebellion.

"Poor boy!" Mrs. Aikin would say, "he ain't got no mother, and I can see by his solemn face many a day as he's thinking and thinking of his poor father, which was never one as would settle down to anything. We has to do all we can to keep him cheerful, Jane and me."

Thus from the very first they made up their minds to spoil the loutish, unpleasant boy. The widow was continually praising him, and holding him up to the admiration of her neighbours. When it was found that he had a good voice, this gave them as much delight and triumph as if they had inherited a fortune, and when he made his appearance for the first time with the choir in his white surplice, the faces of the two were a sight to see, so glowing were they with satisfaction and delight. In this way the two cousins had grown up—the boy always sullen and downlooking, resisting rather than responding to the kindnesses heaped upon him, the girl always ready to smooth away every cloud, to say the best for him, to explain his moodiness and backwardness.

"It is only his way," Jane would say in her soft voice, and *her* way was so ingratiating and conciliatory that no one could stand against it. His aunt, too, was foolish

in her affection for this unattractive hero. He was the son of the house, the young master, though he had not a penny. His opinion was always asked about everything, and his judgment constantly relied upon. It was true that the advice he gave was not always taken, for Mrs. Aikin was very active, and liked to manage everything her own way; but when it happened that he agreed with her, she would trumpet forth his praises and give him all the credit.

"I should never have thought of that but for Johnny. There's no telling the sense of him," the good woman would say admiringly. All this special pleading however could not give the green any interest in John. Nobody cared for him except the two who cared so much for him, and nobody believed in him, notwithstanding his imposing appearance in the choir and his beautiful voice. As he grew up this voice changed from its angelical soprano to a big melodious baritone. He was the chief

singer at Dinglefield, and kept up the character of the place, which had always been noted for its choir, and indeed he was the only man in it to whom a solo could be entrusted. This made the Rector and Mr. Wigmore tolerant of the alehouse so far as he was concerned.

Thus the little family at the Barley Mow were happy enough when the difficulty was got over about Jane. Of course Mrs. Aikin had the best right to settle what her daughter was to do, and whatever they might advise, neither the clergy nor the ladies could interfere on their own account in the matter. So that when Mrs. Aikin gave up chapel and came back to her own pew all was forgiven and forgotten, and Jane, though the maid of the inn, became a greater favourite than ever. She was liked as much as her cousin was disliked. Even the contact which she could not be altogether saved from, in her position, with the roughest and coarsest class did not seem to affect

her. She went about and served the beer, and waited on the summer visitors as softly and as neatly as she used to serve the ladies at tea in old Mrs. Mowbray's tiny drawing-room. She never took any notice of foolish things that might be said to her, and did not even seem to hear or see the squabbles and noisy talk that must always go on more or less about such places. In the cricketing time they were always very busy, and Jane no doubt had the additional temptation of the gentlemen who would have talked and flirted had she allowed them to do so: but she passed through everything like a humble Una, with a smile for everybody, but not a word that could have been objected to, had all the ladies in the green sat in committee on her. Perhaps however her lout of a cousin did more for Jane than the ladies could have done. She was very modest and shy, and did not betray herself except to the keenest observation; but it was apparent enough to those who

were chiefly interested that all her thoughts were for John. She was constantly doing his work for him in her quiet way, undertaking this and that to let him have a holiday, or go to a choral meeting, or have his innings at cricket.

"Girls don't want so much play as boys," she would say with a smile. And he took her at her word, and accepted everything she did for him as if it had been the most natural thing in the world. Strangely enough, her mother did not object to this. She spoiled and petted the clumsy fellow just as much as Jane did, and took it for granted that he should have all kinds of indulgences as if he had been a favourite son. The great terror of both of them was his vagabond father, who appeared now and then, a scandal to their respectability, and a standing danger to John. The two women were always in a fright lest this undesirable relative should lead their darling astray.

"He is such a good boy now—he has always been such a good boy," Mrs. Aikin said, with an uncomfortable sense that nobody accepted this statement as gospel, which made her more and more hot in giving it forth. And when old Mrs. Mowbray stopped in her walk to inquire after Jane and the poultry, the widow fairly wept over this one danger which threatened the family peace.

"Why do you let him come at all?" the old lady asked peremptorily. "If I were in your place, I would order him off the premises. You have done too much for him already, my dear woman. When a man becomes a vagabond he has no more claim on his friends."

This did not at all please the landlady of the Barley Mow. Her honest face flushed, and she dried her eyes indignantly.

"Nature is nature, ma'am," she said; "good or bad, you can't deny your own flesh and blood."

"But I could keep my own flesh and blood at a distance," said the old lady, "especially if it has got more harm in it, and could do me an injury still."

"That is all that troubles me," said Mrs. Aikin. "I'd be as happy a woman as steps the green, but for that. Nature is nature, and a father's a father. And if so be as he was to put wild thoughts in our Johnny's head—what would me and Jane do? La, bless you, it would break that girl's heart."

"And that is just what I am thinking of," said Mrs. Mowbray briskly. "You are a silly woman. What has Jane's heart got to do with it? You keep this boy by her side year after year. And now they're growing man and woman, and what's to come of it? What do you mean by it? That's what I say!"

"La, ma'am, what could come of it? They've been brought up like brother and sister," the widow said with a laugh, and she went about with a smile on her face

or the rest of the day. The other ladies made remonstrances of the same kind with equally little use. Of course it was very clear that this was what she had made up her mind to—that the two should marry and succeed her when she grew old, and carry on the business. It was all suitable enough and natural enough. And, of course, the fact that Jane was above her position made no difference. When a woman is above her position the best thing for her to do is to conceal it carefully, and make the best of the circumstances. And she herself was not conscious of the fact of her superiority. Whether Mrs. Aikin had been so foolish as to communicate her ideas to Jane no one knew, but there could be little doubt that the poor girl took the arrangement for granted as much as her mother did. It was so natural! She had been fond of her cousin all her life, loving him with that most powerful of all kinds of love, the close tie of tender habit, the

affection one has for the being whom one has protected, excused, and been good to all one's life. If she had not pushed him softly through his work, coaxed him through his lessons, made the best of him to everybody, how could poor Johnny ever have got on at all? He wanted her backing up so perpetually, that it might be permitted to Jane to believe that he could not have got on without her. It is common to say that the love of a woman for a man has often a great deal that is motherly in it, and certainly this was the case here. It had been her duty to be kind to him, to make him feel himself at home, he who had no other home. All her own little pleasures, almost ever since she could remember, had been made secondary to Johnny—and what so natural as that this should go on? She took it for granted, poor girl. She scarcely expected to be courted as other girls were who "fall in love" with strangers. It had not been

necessary for her to fall in love. She had always been fond of her cousin. She had never thought of any other man.

And poor Jane was as delicate in her love as any lady of romance. She had none of the romping ways of country girls of her class. Neither was she sentimentally disposed. Her modest look dwelt upon him now and then with a tender pleasure, especially when he was singing, which was the only thing about him which seemed to justify that delusion. But even this look was so modest and so momentary that only careful observation surprised it now and then. She held her somewhat embarrassing position with a serious grace which was almost dignity—making no advances on her part, though she was the crown princess, and had everything to bestow, yet never doubting, I think, poor girl, what the course of affairs was to be. Was it not natural that he should love her best as she loved him best? and that their life should go on as

it had always done, with something added but nothing taken away? Such was the simple, happy tenor of Jane's maiden thoughts.

Whether John divined what the women took for granted it would difficult to say. Perhaps he saw the advantages of being master at the Barley Mow, and the homage he received no doubt increased his natural loutish self-complacency—that stolid vanity which so often dwells in the minds of those who have nothing in the world to be vain of. He took it for granted on his side that he was the sun of this little world, and accepted everything as a natural homage to his fine deservings. He thought the more of himself for all they did for him, not of them. As for Jane, her pretty looks, her superiority, her grace and good breeding were nothing to the lout. He would have liked her a great deal better had she been a noisy, laughing, romping girl. He accepted all the little sacrifices she made,

and allowed her to do his work, with that satisfied consciousness that she liked it, which gave him the feeling of doing rather than receiving a favour. And very likely he might go on, and carry out the programme, and marry her in the same lordly way. For there could be no doubt that it was very much to his advantage, and that his position as Jane's husband would be much more assured than that of Mrs. Aikin's nephew. So things went on, day gliding into day, and summer into winter. They were both young—there was no hurry; and to quicken the settlement or alter anything from the pleasant footing on which it at present stood was not at all the widow's wish.

The picture would have been incomplete however had there not been something on the other side. When one man is indifferent to the goods the gods provide him it is almost certain there is another somewhere to whom these gifts would seem divine.

Jane had always kept up her friendship with Mrs. Peters, the schoolmistress, who had trained her, and whose assistant the ladies on the green had wished her to be. She was fond of going to see her in the winter afternoons when there was not much doing, and always found something to do among the girls, work to set right, or a class to look after which had wearied the schoolmistress: and she got on so well with them that it was clear the ladies on the green had not been wrong in their idea of her powers. But while she thus came and went about the good schoolmistress whom she loved, another person had come into the little circle, of whom Jane took little notice. This was a brother-in-law of Mrs. Peters, who had been lately appointed schoolmaster, and was very highly thought of in the parish. He was ten years at least older than Jane, and appeared to her a middle-aged man, though he was scarcely over thirty. He was a good schoolmaster and a good man, a little precise in

speech perhaps, and rigid in his ways, but true and honest and kind, anxious to be of real service to his pupils and everybody round him. It was not wonderful that his serious eye should be caught by the serious, gentle girl who was so sweet and so kind to his sister-in-law, so much at home in the school, so helpful, and so understanding. After he had taken tea half a dozen times in her company the good young man's head became full of Jane. And he was not so instructed in the ways of the place as to be aware of Mrs. Aikin's understood plans, or the kind of tacit arrangement by which everything seemed settled. He did not even know of John's existence at first—and when he did become aware of him there seemed nothing alarming in the loutish lad, whose appearance and manners were not attractive to the outward eye. Mr. Peters, though the very name of a public-house was obnoxious to him, began to come out in the evenings, when that first winter was over,

and would sit down in the shade on a bench outside the door of the Barley Mow, sometimes for hours together, within reach of all the noises, and of the smoking and beer-drinking, which were a horror to him, and not respectable even, or becoming in his position. To see him seated there in his black coat, with that air of respectability half ashamed of itself, was both comical and touching. It was said that the Rector spoke to him about it, pointing out that the Barley Mow, however respectable in itself, was not a place where an instructor of youth ought to spend his evenings, a reproach which cut to the schoolmaster's very heart. But he was so far gone that he stood up in defence of the place where his beloved spent her life.

"Sir," he stammered, reddening and faltering, "I see a—person there: who is an example to—every one round."

"You mean Mrs. Aikin," the Rector said. "Yes, yes, Peters, she is very respectable,

I don't say anything against her; but it is not a place for you to be seen at, you know."

And this was true, there could be no doubt. The schoolmaster after this would come late. He would be seen going out for a walk, passing the Barley Mow with wistful looks after his tea-time, casting glances aside at the cheerful bustle; and when the darkness was falling, and everything had grown indistinct in the twilight, some keen eye would see him steal to his accustomed seat and stay there, neither drinking nor talking, except to Jane when she passed him. He watched her taking the tray from her cousin's hand, letting him go free for his cricket or his practice, sometimes even sending him indoors to take a hand at whist, and had begun to be angry with the young man for letting her do his work for him before he surprised the gleam of soft love and kindness in Jane's pretty eyes which revealed the whole story. Was that what it

meant? It was such a shock to him that the schoolmaster fell ill, and was not about the place for weeks. But at last he came back again, as people constantly do, to gaze at sights that break their hearts. The front of the Barley Mow was a cheerful place in these summer evenings. Mrs. Aikin allowed no rioting or excess of drinking on her benches, and she was as imperative as a little queen. And all the travellers who passed stopped there to get water for their horses and beverages not quite so innocent for themselves. The horses alone were a sight to see. The whole hierarchy of rank on four legs might be seen at the door. The beautiful riding-horses, slim and dainty, with their shy, supercilious looks; the carriage horses just a trifle less fine—the large. florid, highly-fed brutes in the drays, that made no stand on their quality, but looked calmly conscious of unlimited corn at home —the saucy little pony, ready for any impertinence—the shabby, poor gentleman in the

fly who had seen better days, meek beast, broken-spirited, and unfortunate—the donkey, meeker still, but with a whole red revolution, if he could only but once get the upper hand, in his eye. It was curious to sit there in the darkening of the soft summer night, and see the indistinct vehicles gliding past, and all the dim figures of men, while the stars came out overhead, and the heat of the day sank into grateful coolness. And what a dramatic completeness the humble, bustling scene took, when one perceived the little human drama, tragedy or comedy, who could tell which, that was going on in the midst, Jane regarding the loutish cousin who was not her lover with those soft eyes of tenderness as the stars regarded the earth : he altogether indifferent, caring nothing, taking a vulgar advantage of her weakness to save himself trouble ; and the spectator in the corner, hidden in the shadows, who did not lose a look or a word, whose very heart was burning to see the

wasted affection, and made furious by the indifference. Mr. Peters would have given all he had in the world could he have purchased that soft look from Jane; but the lout thought nothing of it, except so far as it ministered to his own rude self-satisfaction. Perhaps he had his grievance too. He would have liked to escape from this propriety and quiet to the noisy revels on the other side of the green, where there was always some nonsense going on at the Load-'o-Hay, a kind of rival, but much inferior place, which was the one place in the world which Mrs. Aikin regarded with feelings of hatred, and which moved even Jane to something like anger. He would have liked to have had "a bit of fun" there, and left the steady business of the Barley Mow to take care of itself. How it was that neither Jane nor her mother perceived or guessed the discrepancy between his thoughts and theirs is past divining. The girl, at least, one would have thought,

must have had some moments of distrust, some wondering doubts : but if so she never showed them, and as for Mrs. Aikin, she was too busy a woman to think of anything that did not come immediately under her eyes.

THE BARLEY MOW.

Chapter III.

This state of calm, so full of explosive elements, could scarcely go on without some revelation, sooner or later, of the dangers below; and, again, the little old fairy queen, Mrs. Mowbray, had a hand in the revelation. Though she was so old, there was no more clear-sighted or keen observer in all the county; and, as her interest in Jane was great, it cannot be supposed that she had not seen through the complications about her. But as yet there had been no opening—nothing which could justify her in speaking particularly on this subject; and all that could be said in a general way had been already said. Her mind how-

ever was very much set upon it; and she had taken in with an eager ear all the gossip of her old maid about Mr. Peters, whose visits to the Barley Mow had been naturally much commented upon. Mrs. Mowbray, as has been already said, had a royal indifference to the particular grade of the people about her. They were all her inferiors; and, whether the difference seemed small or great to the common eye, it was one of kind, and therefore unalterable, in her impartial judgment. Acting on this principle, the loves of Jane and John at the Barley Mow were just as interesting as the loves of the young ladies and gentlemen on the green, who thought much more highly of themselves.

This being the case, it will be less surprising to the reader to hear that, when Mrs. Mowbray in her walks encountered the schoolmaster, she managed to strike up an acquaintance with him; and ere long had so worked upon him with artful talk of Jane,

that poor Mr. Peters opened his heart to the kind old lady, though he had never ventured to do so to the object of his love. The way in which this happened was as follows. It was summer—a lovely evening, such as tempted everybody out of doors. The schoolmaster, poor man, had gone out to walk the hour's walk which he imposed upon himself as a necessary preface to his foolish vigil in front of the Barley Mow, which had settled down into a regular routine. He made believe to himself, or tried to make believe, that when he sat down on that bench at the door it was only because he was tired after his long walk; it was not as if he went on purpose—to do that would be foolishness indeed. But he was no moth, scorching his wings in the flame—he was an honest, manly pedestrian, taking needful rest in the cool of the evening. This was the little delusion he had wrapped himself in. When he was setting out for his walk, he met Mrs. Mowbray, and

took off his hat with that mixture of conscious respect and stiff propriety which became his somewhat doubtful position—that position which made him feel that more was expected from him than would be expected from the common people round. He was in his way a personage, a representative of education and civilization; but yet he did not belong to the sphere occupied by the ladies and gentlemen. This made poor Mr. Peters doubly precise. But as the old lady—whose lively mind was full of Jane, and of a little plan she had in her head—turned to look at him instead of looking where she stepped, she suddenly knocked her foot against a projecting root, and would have fallen had not the schoolmaster, almost too shy to touch her, and wondering much in his own mind what a gentleman would do in such an emergency, rushed forward to give his assistance. Mrs. Mowbray laid hold of him with a very decided clutch. She was not shy—she threw her whole

weight (it was not much) upon his arm, which she grasped to save herself. "I was nearly over," she said, panting a little for breath, with a pretty flush rising into her pale old delicate cheeks. The shock stirred her old blood and made her heart beat, and brought a spark to her eyes. It did not frighten and trouble, but excited her not unpleasantly, so thorough-bred was this old woman. "No, I am not hurt, not a bit hurt: it was nothing. I ought to look where I am going, at my age," she said; and held Mr. Peters fast by the arm, and panted, and laughed. But even after she had recovered herself she still leant upon him. "You must give me your arm to my house," she said; "there's the drawback of being old. I can't help trembling, as if I had been frightened or hurt. You must give me your arm to my house."

"Certainly, madam," said Mr. Peters. He did not like to dispense with any title of civility, though (oddly enough, and in

England alone) the superior classes do so; but he would not say "Ma'am," like a servant. It seemed to him that "Madam" was a kind of stately compromise; and he walked on, himself somewhat tremulous with embarrassment, supporting with the greatest care his unexpected companion; and though she trembled, the courageous old lady laughed and chattered.

"You were going the other way?" she said. "I am wasting your time, I fear, and stopping your walk."

"Oh, no, madam, not at all," said Mr. Peters; "I am very glad to be of use. I am very happy that I was there just at the moment—just at the fortunate moment——"

"Do you call it a fortunate moment when I hurt my foot—not that I have really hurt my foot—and got myself shaken and upset like this—an old woman at my age?"

"I meant — the unfortunate moment, madam," said Mr. Peters, colouring high,

and feeling that he had said something wrong, though what he scarcely knew.

"Oh, fie! that looks as if you were sorry that you have been compelled to help me," said the old lady, laughing.

Poor Mr. Peters had not the least idea how to take this banter. He thought he had done or said something wrong. He coloured up to the respectable tall hat that shaded his sober brows; but she stopped his troubled explanations summarily.

"Where were you going? It does not matter? Well, you shall come in with me, and Morris will give you some tea. You can tell me about your school—I am always interested in my neighbours' concerns. You pass this way most evenings, don't you? I see you passing. You always take a walk after your day's work—a very wholesome custom. And then your evenings—where do you spend your evenings? Are there any nice people who give you a cup of tea? Do you go and see your friends?

Yes, I am interested, always interested, to learn how my fellow-creatures get through their life; I don't do much myself but look on, nowadays. And you know life's a strange sort of thing," said the old lady. "Nothing interests me so much. It isn't a line of great events, as we think in our youth—the intervals are more important than the events. Are you dull, eh? You are a stranger in this place. How do you spend your evenings after you go in?"

"Madam, there is always plenty to do," said Mr. Peters; "a master can never be said to have much leisure." And then he unbent from that high seriousness and said, with a mixture of confused grandeur and wistfulness, "In the circles to which I have admission there is not much that can be called society. I have to spend my evenings at home, or——"

"Or——?" said Mrs. Mowbray. "Just so, that is the whole business; alone, or—— But where is the 'or'? So am I. I am

alone (which I generally like best), or—I have friends with me. Friends—I call them friends for want of a better word—the people on the green. They bore me, but I like them sometimes. Now, you are a young man. Tell me what 'or' commends itself to you."

Thus exhorted, Mr. Peters hung down his head ; he stammered in his reply. "I am afraid, madam, you would think but badly of me if you knew : without knowing why. I go and sit down there—in front of Mrs. Aikin's house."

"In front of the Barley Mow! Dear me!" she said, with well-acted surprise ; "that is not the thing for a schoolmaster to do!"

"I know it, madam," said Mr. Peters with a sigh.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Mowbray, with the air of one who is making an important discovery ; "ah! I divine you at last. It is a girl that beguiles you to the Barley Mow!

Then it must be a good girl, for they allow no one else there. Bless me! I wonder if it should be Jane!"

"You know her, madam?"

"Ah, it is Jane then? Mr. Schoolmaster —I forget your name—you are a man of penetration and sense; I honour you. A man who chooses the best woman within his knowledge—that's the sort of man I approve of. It happens so seldom. Men are all such fools on that point. So it is Jane!"

Mr. Peters breathed a long sigh. "She never looks at me, madam—she never knows I am there. You must not think she has anything to do with it."

"Ay, ay, that's always the way. When the men show some sense the women are fools; or else it's the other thing. Now, listen to me. You say, Do I know Jane? Yes, I know her from her cradle. Why, I brought her up! Can't you see the girl has the manners of a lady? I gave them to her. There is nothing Jane will not do for

me. And I like the looks of you. You're stiff, but you're a man. Do you think I should have come out of my way, and hurt my foot (oh, it is quite well now!) to speak to you, if I hadn't heard all about this? I want to help you to marry Jane."

"Oh, madam, what can I say to you?" cried Mr. Peters, not knowing in his bewilderment what might be going to happen. He was shocked in his sense of propriety by being told that he was stiff, and by the old lady's frank avowal that she knew all about him after she had wormed his secret out of him; and he was excited by this promise of aid, and by the bold jump of his patroness to the last crown of success. To *marry* Jane! To get a word from her, or a kind look, seemed enough in the meantime; and he did not know on the spot whether he was ready to marry any one, even this queen of his affections.

He led Mrs. Mowbray to her door, and listened to her talk, divided between alarm

and eagerness. She made everything so easy! She was willing to be his plenipotentiary—to explain everything. She would see no obstacle in the way—all he had to do was to put himself in her hands. The old lady herself got very much excited over it. She said more than she meant, as people have a way of doing when they are excited, and sent Mr. Peters away in the most curious muddle of hope and fear—hope that the way might be opened for him to Jane, fear lest he might be driven along that path at a pace much more rapid and urgent than he had meant to go.

Next morning Mrs. Mowbray had made up her mind to send for Jane and open the subject at once—merely to represent to her how much more satisfactory this man was than such a lout as John. What a suitable union it would be! just her own quiet tastes and ways. And a man able to sustain and help her, instead of a lad of her own age, whom she would have to carry on her

shoulders, instead of being guided by. The pleas in his favour were so strong, that the old lady could not see what pretence Jane could find for declining to listen to the schoolmaster. But she was not so certain about it next morning—and she neither went to the Barley Mow nor sent for Jane—but gave herself, as she said, time to think. And but for an accident that happened that very evening, prudence might have overcome the livelier impulse in her mind.

That evening however Mrs. Mowbray went out again to see the sunset, taking a short turn down the lane from her house. The lane ran between her house and the Barley Mow, and a back door from Mrs. Aikin's garden opened into it. It was a very green, very flowery bit of road, leading nowhere in particular except due west; and as the ground was high here—for Dinglefield stood on a gentle eminence raised above the rest of the valley—this lane of an evening,

when the sun was setting, seemed to lead straight through into the sunset. It was an exceptional evening: the sunset glowed with all the colour that could be found in a tropical sky, and the whole world was glorified. It drew Mrs. Mowbray out in spite of herself; she had thrown a scarf over her cap and about her shoulders, being so near home, and was "stepping westward," like the poet, but with the meditative step of age which signifies leisure from everything urgent, and time to bestow upon this great pageant of Nature. To be so at leisure from everything in thought as well as in life is a privilege of the aged and solitary. And there is nobody who enjoys the beauty of such a scene or dwells upon it with the same delight. But the privilege has its drawbacks, like most human things. Those busy folks who give but a glance, and are gone, have perhaps a warmer, because accidental pleasure: the more deliberate enjoyment is a little sad. Mrs. Mowbray however was

one to feel this as little as could well be. She walked briskly, and her mind, even in the midst of this spectacle, was full of her plans. She was half-way down the lane, with all the light in her face, when she suddenly perceived two figures black against the light in front of her, standing out like black *silhouettes* on the glow of lovely colour. She saw them dimly; but they, having their backs to the dazzling light, and being totally unmindful of the sunset, saw her very clearly, and were much alarmed by her appearance. They had been so much occupied with each other that the sound of the old lady's step upon some gravel was the first thing that roused them. The girl gave a frightened exclamation, and sprang apart from her companion, who for his part backed into the hedge, as if with the hope of concealing himself there. Though Mrs. Mowbray's attention and curiosity were immediately roused, she did not even then recognize them, and they might have

escaped her if they had not been so consciously guilty. The girl was the first to be detected. She ran off after that startled look, with a half-laughing cry, leaving the other to bear the consequences.

"Bless me! Ellen Turner. The little flirt! She is after some mischief," Mrs. Mowbray said to herself; and even then she thought nothing of the young man. But he was not aware of this. He did not know that her eyes, which had been fixed on the glow in the sky, were dazzled by it, and unable to see him; and feeling himself detected, it seemed to John safer to take the matter into his own hands. He made a step into the middle of the road, in front of her. He could not have done anything less wise. Mrs. Mowbray was thinking only of Ellen, and nothing at all of the man she was fooling. This was the way she put it to herself: What did it matter who the silly fellow was? If he put any dependence on such a little coquette as that, he was to be

pitied, poor fellow. The old lady had half a mind to warn him. But she was much surprised to find him confront her like this, and even a little frightened. And it was only now that she recognized who he was.

He had forgotten what little manners he had, and all his awe of "the quality" in the excitement of the moment. "You'll go telling of us!" he cried, in sudden excitement, almost with a threat of his clenched hand.

A thrill of apprehension ran through the old lady's frame, but she stood still suddenly, confronting him with the courage of her nature. "How dare you speak to me so, with your cap on your head?" she said.

John's hand stole to his hat in spite of himself. He fell back a step. "I beg your pardon, my lady; but I was a-going to say —You won't say nothing to *them?*—It was a—accident—it wasn't done a-purpose. You won't tell—about *her* and me?"

"Whom am I to tell?" The old lady had seized the position already, and it

made her herself again. She perceived in a moment the value of the incident. And he had taken his hat off by this time, and stood crushing it in his hands. "I don't mean nothing," he said. "It's only a lark. I don't care nothing for her, nor I don't suppose she do for me."

"That I'll answer for," said Mrs. Mowbray briskly; "neither for you nor any one else, you vain blockhead! But if its only a lark, as you say, what are you frightened for? And what do you want of me?"

He stared at her for a moment with his mouth open, and then he said, "Haunt and Jeyeyne thinks a deal of you."

"I dare say they do," said the old lady; "but what of that? And they think a deal of you, you booby—more's the pity. If you have a fancy for Ellen Turner, why don't you let them know? Why don't you marry her, or some one like her, and have done with it? I don't say she's much of a girl, but she's good enough for you."

His hand gripped his hat with rising fury; the very dullest of natures feels the keen edge of contempt. And then he laughed; he had a sharp point at his own command, and could make reprisals.

"They'd kill her," he said, "if they knew it. They're too sweet upon me to put up with it. They think as I don't see what they're after; but I see it fast enough."

"And what are they after, if you are so clear-sighted?"

"They mean as I'm to settle down and marry Jeyeyne—that's what they mean. They think, 'cos I'm a quiet one, that I can't see an inch from my nose. They think a fellow is to be caught like that afore he's had his fling, and seen a bit of the world."

"Oh," said the old lady; "so you want to have your fling, and see the world?"

"That is just about it, my lady," said the lout, taking courage. "I talks to *her* just to pass the time; but what I wants is to see the world. I won't say as I mightn't come back

after, and settle down. Jeyeyne's a good sort of girl enough—I've nothing to say against her; and she knows my ways—but a man isn't like a set of women. I must have my fling—I must—afore I settle down."

"And who is to do your work, Mr. John, while you have your fling? Or are you clever enough to see that you are not of the least use at the Barley Mow?"

"Oh, ain't I of use! See what a fuss there will be when they think I'm going! But Haunt can afford a good wage, and there's lots of fellows to be had."

"You ungrateful cub!" cried the old lady; "is this all your thanks for their kindness, taking you in, and making a man of you! You were glad enough to find a home here when you were a wretched, hungry little boy."

"Begging your pardon, my lady, I never was," said John, with a gleam of courage. "I'd have been a deal better with father if

they'd let me alone. He'd a got me into the regiment as a drummer, and I'd have been in the band afore this. And that's the sort of life to suit me. I ain't one of your dull sort—I likes life. This kind of a dismal old country place never was the place for me."

"You ungrateful, unkind, impertinent"!—

Mrs. Mowbray stopped short. She could not get out all the words that poured from her lips, and the sight of him there opposite silenced her after all. Mrs. Aikin's goodness to this boy had been the wonder and admiration of everybody round. They had considered her foolishly generous—Quixotic, almost absurd, in her kindness; and now to hear his opinion of it! This bold ingratitude closes the spectator's mouth. Perhaps, after all, it is better to leave the bramble wild, and the street boy in the gutter, and give up all attempts to improve the one or the other. But there is nothing which so silences natural human sentiment and approval of charity and kindness. Mrs.

Mowbray was struck dumb. Who could tell that he had not even some show of justice in his wrong—something that excused his doubt, if nothing to excuse his unkindness? This strange suggestion took away her breath.

"They've had their own way," said John; "they did it to please themselves; and that's what they'd like to do again—marry me right off—a fellow at my age, and stop my fun! But I'm not the sort to have a girl thrust down my throat. I'll have my fling first, or else I'll have nothing to say to it. Now, my lady," he added, lowering his voice, and coming a step nearer, "if you'll stand my friend! There's nobody as Haunt and Jeyeyne thinks so much of as you. If you says it they won't oppose. I don't want to quarrel with nobody; but I *will* have my fling, and see the world!"

"And so you shall!" cried Mrs. Mowbray; "if I can manage it. So you shall, my man! Get out of Jane's way—that's all I want of

you. And I think better of you since you proposed it! Yes, yes! I'll take it all upon me! There's nothing I wish for more than that you should take yourself out of this. Have your fling! And I hope you'll fling yourself a hundred miles out of reach of the Barley Mow!"

John looked at her with dull amazement. What did she mean? His thanks were stopped upon his lips. For, after all, this was not a pleasant way of backing up. "Get out of Jane's way!" His heavy self-complacency was ruffled for the moment. "I don't mind how far I go," he said, with a suspicious look.

"Nor I, I assure you," cried Mrs. Mowbray briskly; "I'll plead your cause;" and with that she turned round and went back again, forgetting all about the sunset. Nature is hardly treated by the best of us; we let her come in when we have nothing else in hand, but forget her as soon as a livelier human interest claims our attention.

This was how even the old lady, who had been so meditatively occupied by Nature, treated the patient mother now.

Next day was Sunday, and of course Mrs. Mowbray could not enter upon the business which she had undertaken then. But when there is any undercurrent of feeling or complication of rival wishes in a family, Sunday is a very dangerous day, especially when the family belongs to the lower regions of society, and the Sunday quiet affords means of communication not always to be had on other days. This, of course, was scarcely the case among the household at the Barley Mow, but the habit of their class was upon them, and the natural fitness of Sunday for an important announcement, joined, it is to be supposed, with the fact that he had already unbosomed himself to one person, drew John's project out. When Mrs. Mowbray accordingly took her way to Mrs. Aikin's on the Monday morning, more and more pleased as she thought of it, with the idea of getting John out of

the way, she saw at once by the aspect of both mother and daughter that her news was no news. The two women had a look of agitation and seriousness which on Mrs. Aikin's part was mingled with resentment. She was discoursing upon her chickens when Mrs. Mowbray found her way into the barn-yard. "They don't care what troubles folks has with them, not they," she was saying with a flush on her cheek. "The poor hen, as has sat on her nest all day, and never got off to pick a bit o' food. What's that to them, the little yellow senseless things? And them as we've brought up and cared for all our lives, and should know better, is just as bad." Jane was putting up a setting of Brahmapootra eggs for somebody. She was very pale, and made no reply to her mother, but her hand trembled a little as she put them into the packet. "What is the matter?" said the old lady as she came in. Jane gave her a silent look and said nothing. "La, bless us, ma'am, what should

be the matter?" said Mrs. Aikin. They were so disturbed that Mrs. Mowbray did a thing which she was not at all in the habit of doing. She departed from her original intention, and said nothing at all of her mission, concluding, as was the fact, that John himself had spoken. No later than that afternoon however her self-denial was rewarded, for Mrs. Aikin came to the Thatched Cottage, curtseying and apologetic. "I saw as you didn't believe me, ma'am," she said. "There is nobody like you for seeing how things is. A deal has happened, and I don't know whether I'm most pleased or unhappy. For one thing it's all settled between Johnny and Jane."

"All settled!" the old lady was so much surprised that she could scarcely speak.

"Yes, ma'am, thank you, the poor dears! I always said that as soon as he knew his own mind—There ain't a many lads as one can see through like our John."

"You didn't wish it then?" said Mrs.

Mowbray. "I should have thought this morning that something bad had happened. You didn't wish it! Then we've all been doing you injustice, my dear woman, for I thought you had set your heart on this all along."

"And so I have; and I'm as happy—*that* happy I don't know what to do with myself," said Mrs. Aikin, putting her apron to her eyes.

"Happy! nobody would think it to look at you—nor Jane. I thought I knew you like my A, B, C, but now I can't tell a bit what you mean."

"Jane, she's all of a flutter still, and she's that humble-minded, all her thought is, will she make him happy? But you don't suppose, ma'am, as I think any such nonsense—lucky to get her, I say, and so does everybody. It ain't that. But he's been seeing his father, and his father's put nonsense in the lad's head. I always said as he'd do it. Johnny's the best of boys; he'd never have

thought of such a thing if it hadn't been put in his head. He says he wants to go cut into the world and see a bit of life afore he settles down."

"And that is what troubles you? If I were you I should let him go," said the old lady. "Lucky! I should think he was lucky. A young fellow like that! He is not half good enough for Jane."

"Well, ma'am," said Mrs. Aikin, half ruffled, half pleased, "it is well known who was always your pet, and a great honour for her and me too—and I don't know how it is as folks do such injustice to our John. It's all the father, well I know; leave him to himself and a better boy couldn't be. But I've written him a letter and given him a piece of my mind. It's him as always puts fancies in the boy's head. See the world! Where could he see the world better than at the Barley Mow! Why there's a bit of everything at our place. There's them gentlemen cricketers in the summer, and

the best quality in the kingdom coming and going at Ascot time, and London company in the best parlours most every Sunday through the season. All sorts there is. There was never a week, summer or winter, so long as I can remember, but something was going on at the Barley Mow. Summer, it's nothing but taking money from morning to night. I don't mean to say," said Mrs. Aikin, suddenly recollecting that this sounded like a confession of large profits such as no woman in trade willingly acknowledges—"I don't mean to say as the expenses ain't great, or as it's all profit, far from it. But what I says to Johnny I don't deny anywhere—it's a living—and it's the amusingest living and the most variety of any I know."

"And yet he wants to see the world; there's no accounting for men's depravity. Do you mean to let him go?"

Mrs. Aikin laughed. "I ain't a good one to deceive," she said; "this morning I was all in a way, but now I've had time to think.

You know yourself, ma'am, that to say 'No' is the way to make a boy more determined than ever. Seemingly I'm a giving in, but I don't mean to take no steps one way or other. I'll let things take their course. And now that Jane and him understands one another, and the summer trade's so brisk, who can say? Maybe it'll go out of his head if he ain't opposed. I've give my consent—so far as words goes—but I tell him as there's no hurry. We can wait."

She laughed again in thorough satisfaction with her own tactics And Mrs. Mowbray, with a different sentiment, echoed the laugh. "Yes, we can wait," the old lady said; "my poor little Jane!" That was all, but it made Mrs. Aikin angry, she could not tell why.

Mr. Peters at this period kept putting himself perpetually in Mrs. Mowbray's way. He went past her house for his walk, he came back again past the Thatched Cottage. She could scarcely go out in the evening that he did not turn up in her path: and for some

days the old lady was cruel enough to say nothing to him. At last one evening she called the poor schoolmaster to her. "You must make up your mind to it like a man," she said, "Jane is going to marry her cousin It is all settled. The mother told me, like a fool."

"All settled!" Poor Mr. Peters grew so pale that she thought he was going to faint. "I saw him," he gasped, "only yesterday, with——"

"Never mind, yes; that's quite true," said the old lady. "That woman has settled it like a fool. They are going to throw the girl away among them. But we cannot do anything. You must make up your mind to it like a man."

The schoolmaster's stiffness and embarrassment all melted away under the influence of strong feeling. He took off his hat unconsciously, showing a face that was like ashes. "Then God bless her," he said, "and turn away the evil. If she is happy, what does it matter about me!"

"She will never be happy," said the old lady, "never, with that lout; and the thing for us to do is to wait. I tell you, what you've got to do is to wait. After all, the devil seldom gets things all his own way."

Mr. Peters put on his hat again, and went away with a heavy heart. He did not go near the Barley Mow. He went home to his room, and sat there very desolate, reading poetry. He could bear it, he thought; but how could she bear it when she came to hear of Ellen Turner and those meetings in the lane?

At present however nothing was known of Ellen Turner at the Barley Mow. The very next Sunday after that the women had forgotten all the dangers of John's perversity, and remembered only the fact of the engagement, and that all doubt was over on the point which they thought so essential to their happiness. Mrs. Aikin had a new bonnet on, resplendent in red ribbons, and the happiness in Jane's face was better than any new bonnet. As it happened, there was a solo in the anthem that day which John sang standing up in his

white surplice, and rolling out Handel's great notes so that they filled the church. He had a beautiful voice, and while he sang poor Jane's face was a sight to see: her countenance glowed with a kind of soft rapture. She clasped her hands unawares with the prayer-book held open in them, her eyes were raised, her lips apart, her nostrils slightly dilated. She had the look of a votary making a special offering. Poor simple Jane! There was no consciousness in her mind of any elevation above the rest, as she lifted that ineffable look, and praised God in a subdued ecstasy, offering to Him the voice of her beloved. For the moment Jane was as the prophets, as the poets, raised up above everything surrounding her, triumphing even over the doubt that was too ready to invade her mind at other times. She was but a country girl, the maid of the inn, occupying the most unelevated and most unelevating of positions, but yet no lady of romance could have stood on a higher altitude, for the time.

THE BARLEY MOW.

CHAPTER IV.

THIS however was the last time that Jane's look of modest, silent happiness could touch any heart. Whether she caught sight of some private telegraphing which passed between her newly-betrothed and Ellen Turner in the very church that very day, is not known; but other people saw it with wonder and forebodings. Mr. Peters, who had seen the rapture in Jane's upturned face with a mingled pity and sympathy and pain which made him, too, heroic for the moment, perceived the nod and look of intelligence which passed between the baritone in the surplice and the little dressmaker in the free seats with an impulse of suppressed wrath which it

took all the moral force he could command to resist. It was the first time the betrothed pair had appeared, as it were, in public, since it was known that "all was settled." And was it for this, for a vulgar reprobate who betrayed her at the moment of union, while the first happiness ought still to have been in delicate blossom, that she had overlooked altogether the far more worthy love of the other? He could not help wondering over that any more than Jane herself, a little while later, could help wondering. The best thrown aside, the worst chosen—is not this a far more poignant and wonderful evil than the tyrannies of parents or hindrances of fate which keep lovers apart? But no more from that day did Jane's celestial content wound any sufferer. She grew grave, pale, almost visibly older from that moment. She withdrew herself from everybody. Even the old lady at the Thatched Cottage, who depended upon her for so many things, did not see her for weeks together. And their next meeting

was a chance one, and took place on an August evening, about a month after these events. How Jane could have kept out of sight for so long was a mystery which nobody could have explained; but she had managed it somehow, sending respectful messages of regret by her mother. This time they met face to face without warning, as Mrs. Mowbray was returning in the cool of the evening from Sir Thomas Denzil's, where she had been dining. The old lady sent her maid away instantly, so anxious was she to have a conversation with her favourite. Jane for her part would fain have escaped, but she could not be rude to her kind old patroness, and Mrs. Mowbray took her arm quite eagerly. "You may go home, Morris," she said; and almost without waiting till the maid was gone, "What has become of you, Jane? Where have you been hiding? Is it because you are so happy, my dear, or for some other reason, that you run away from me?" A nervous quiver went over poor

Jane; she said with a trembling voice, "For another reason." She did not even look her old friend in the face.

"Then what is it, my dear? Come, tell me. Don't you know, whatever it is, you can't hide it from me?"

To this Jane made answer by drooping her head and turning away her face; and then she pressed the old lady's hand, which was on her arm, to her side, and said hastily, "I was coming—I wanted you to speak for me—oh! ma'am, if you would speak to mother! about—about——"

"What! my poor little Jane! What, dear? Tell me, tell me freely," said the old lady, almost crying. There could be but one subject that could excite the poor girl so.

"About John's going away. Oh, he's sick of this quiet place! I can see it—and mother takes no notice. Men are not like us women. He's dying to get away, and mother, she can't see it. She humours him in words, but she

will not do anything. Oh, ma'am, speak for us! He's had all we have to give him, and he's tired of it, and he will never be happy till he gets away."

"Do you wish him to go?—You, Jane?"

"Yes," she cried passionately, "I wish it too!—it will make me happier. I mean not so—miserable. Oh, ma'am, that's not what I mean. I am all confused like. I know—I know it's for his good to go away——"

"But it's your good I think of—and your mother, too," said Mrs. Mowbray. "We care for you, and not for him. You've avoided me Jane, and never told me if you were happy—now that you're engaged, you and he."

"It was a mistake," she said, "all a mistake! We didn't know our own minds. Don't you know, ma'am, that happens sometimes? I always felt it was a mistake: but mother deceived herself. It's so easy to believe what you wish. And he deceived

himself. But now that he's done it it drives him wild——Oh, he must go—that's the only thing that will do any good. If she would only see it, and let him go!"

"Do you want to break it off, Jane?"

"Oh," she cried, with a moan, "break it off! Am I one to break it off? But he can't abide the place, and he wants to go.——If he has any true—respect—for me—he'll feel it when he's gone. That's what I think. Oh! ma'am, speak a word to mother, and tell her to let him go."

"There is more in your mind," said the old lady: "but if it is as serious as this—I'll go there straight, my dear. I'll go straight and speak to your mother. I know you've got more in your mind."

Jane did not make any reply, but quickened her steps to keep up with the active old woman as she hurried on. Poor Jane was past all make-believe. "Think!" she said, almost under her breath, "what it is when he comes and pretends to be fond of me——Oh,

ma'am! pretends as if he loved me—after all I know!" She wrung her hands, and there was a suppressed anguish in her voice, such as only a tender creature outraged could have been driven to. Then Mrs. Mowbray, who knew all the gossip of the place, remembered to have heard that Ellen Turner, who was a dressmaker, had been working at Mrs. Aikin's—no doubt that was the cause. She went along quickly, almost dragging the girl with her. It was a beautiful evening, soft and cool after a hot day. The lights were beginning to twinkle about the Barley Mow. There were people sitting out on the bench, and people visible at the open windows with the lights behind them, and a murmur of cheerful voices. The scene was very homely, but the night was so soft, the shadows so grateful upon the refreshed earth, the dews so sweet, and nothing but rest and refreshment in the air. Overhead the sky was veiled, a few modest stars peeping from the edges of the clouds, nothing bright to jar upon the subdued

quiet. All this went to Jane's heart. She began to cry softly, as she looked with wistful eyes at her home. The sensation subdued her. So peaceful and quiet, with the vague, half-dim figures about, the cheerful lights in the windows, was it possible that there could be such trouble there?

But all at once there came a jarring note into this tranquillity—the sound of a woman's voice raised in anger. They were going towards the garden door, but before they reached it somebody was pushed out violently, and, half falling forward, came stumbling against Jane, who was straight in the way. "Get out of my sight, you little baggage, you treacherous, wicked, lying creature, you bad girl!" cried Mrs. Aikin in a furious voice. Jane clutched at Mrs. Mowbray's arm, and shrank back, while the girl who had stumbled against her gave a sudden scream of dismay. It was Ellen Turner, her cheeks blazing red with anger, though the sight of Jane cowed her. "What have you been doing, you little

flirt?" cried old Mrs. Mowbray. "If a man speaks to me, ain't I to give him a civil answer?" cried the girl standing still, and preparing to give battle. Jane did not say a word. She shook herself free of the old lady without knowing what she did, and went in to her mother, without as much as a look at the other. As soon as she had disappeared John showed himself out of the darkness like a spectre. "Run, Nell, run," he said. "She's safe now. She's in Jane's hands. I'll see you to-morrow. Run, Nell, run." And he darted back again among the guests, and threw himself into his work with devotion. Never before had John been seen so busy and so civil. Who could interfere with him in the middle of his work? He was as safe as if he had been at church.

What had happened was that Mrs. Aikin had found her nephew and the little dress-maker together, on very affectionate terms, and her outburst of sudden wrath was very hot and violent. But after the first moment

it was entirely against Ellen that her anger was directed, and she was as little willing as before to listen to Mrs. Mowbray's suggestion that he should be sent away. She was, like most women of her class, perhaps like most women of all classes, furious against the girl, half sorry for, half contemptuous of, the man. "Lord, what could Johnny do against one of them artful things?" she said, when she had calmed down. "It's Jane's fault, as don't talk to him enough, nor keep him going. That minx shall never set foot in my house again." Jane said very little while her mother talked thus. She was very pale, and her breath came quickly, but she betrayed no emotion either of grief or anger. She stood still by her mother's side while Mrs. Aikin cried and sobbed. Jane was past all that. She said, "He don't know his own mind, mother. Let him go as he wishes." They were both made incapable of work by this sudden incident. But John—John had turned into a model of industry and carefulness. While the two

women retired into their little parlour with the door shut, he, safe from all interference, kept everything going. He ran about here and there, attending to everybody, civil and thoughtful. When he was asked what was the matter, he answered carelessly, "Some row among the women," as if that was too trifling and too everyday a matter for his notice. He had never shown so much cleverness in all his life before.

Even after this however the widow still temporized. Yes, she said in words, she would let him go, but after the bustle was over—after the summer work was done with. She gave a hundred excuses, and invented new reasons constantly for her delay. Jane said little, having said all she could. A new reserve crept over her, she talked to nobody—went no more to talk to Mrs. Peters, and never saw her old friend at the Thatched Cottage when she could help it. She was sick of her false position, as well as of those pangs which she told to nobody, which were

all shut up in her own heart. No more in church or otherwise did the look of happiness come back to her face. When John sang she would stand with her eyes fixed on her book, or else would cover her face with her hand. The beautiful song was no longer hers to be offered up to God's praise. But sometimes during the sermon her eyes would turn unconsciously to that foolish pretty face in the free seats—the pink and white countenance of Ellen Turner, inferior in beauty as in everything else to herself. "What is there in her that is better than me? Why should she be preferred to me?" was what Jane was asking herself, with a wondering pain that was half self-abasement and half indignation. Just so good Mr. Peters, in the school pew, gazed from her to the loutish baritone in his surplice and back again. Why should fate be so contradictory and hearts so bitterly deceived?

This state of affairs however could not go on very long—and it came to a conclusion

quite suddenly at last. There was an agricultural show in the neighbourhood some twenty miles off from Dinglefield, to which all the rural people of the neighbourhood, and John among them, went at the end of August. In other circumstances Jane would have gone with her cousin; but she had no heart for shows of any kind. In the evening most of the Dinglefield people came home, but not John. Mrs. Aikin was evidently frightened by his non-appearance, but she made the best of it. "He had gone off with some of his friends," she said, "and of course he had missed his train. He was always missing trains. He was the carelessest lad!" But when next day came, and the next, with no news of John, the mother and daughter could no longer disguise their alarm. The widow "was in such a way" that her friends gathered round her full of condolence and encouragements; and Mrs. Mowbray herself put on her bonnet, and went to tell her not to be a fool, and to bid her remember that young

men cannot be held in like girls. "I know that, ma'am, I know that," said Mrs. Aikin, soothed. The rest of her consolers had encouraged her by telling her they had always foreseen it, and that this was what over-indulgence always came to at last. The widow turned her back upon these Job's comforters, and clutched at Mrs. Mowbray's shawl. "I've held him too tight, ma'am, and I should have taken your advice," she said. They had sent expresses in all directions in search of him, and that very evening they had information that he had enlisted in the regiment to which his father had formerly belonged, and which was at the time quartered in the town where the show had been held. This is always, though it is hard to say why, terrible news for a decent family. "'Listed!" do not all the vagabonds, the good-for-nothings, 'list? It was Mr. Peters who brought this news to the two anxious women. He had been in Castleville "by accident," he said; the truth being that he had given the children a holiday on purpose

to offer this humble service to the woman who had his heart. It was good news, though it was such bad news, for the widow's imagination had begun to jump at all sorts of fatal accidents, and he was made kindly welcome, and allowed to remain with them until Mrs. Aikin's first fit of distress and relief, and shame and vexation, and content was over. "It's his father, it's all his father," she said. "Such a thought would never, never have come into our Johnny's head." Mr. Peters, with trembling anxiety, observed that Jane did not say a word. She was moving about with her usual quickness, preparing tea, that the kind visitor who had taken so much trouble should have some refreshment after his long walk. She was full of suppressed excitement, her cheek less pale than usual, her eyes shining. But she said nothing till her mother's outburst was over. Mrs. Aikin was a foolish, softhearted, sanguine woman. As soon as she knew the worst her mind leapt at a universal mending

and making up. She had no sooner dried her eyes and swallowed a cup of tea, after protesting that she "could not touch it," than she began with a certain timidity in another tone.

"It's well known what most families do when such a thing happens," she said with a sigh, "folks as has more money than we have. And I've heard say as it was a foolish thing; but when you consider all things —— lads is so silly, they never see what they're doing till after it's done, and past changing—past their changing I mean."

Jane did not say anything, but she stood still suddenly in the middle of the room to listen, with a startled look.

"I dare to say he's repented long before this," said the widow, "him as never was put to hard work nor ordered about, him as had most things his own way, though he mightn't know it. It might have been better for Johnny if you and me hadn't been so fond

of him, Jane—and it will all tell upon him now. We've spoiled him, and we're leaving him to bear it by himself! Oh! Jane! Jane!"

"What is it, mother? You are thinking of something," said Jane with a harsh tone, quite unusual to her, in her voice.

"Oh, Jane, you're hard-hearted, you ain't forgiving, you're not like me," cried the widow. "If you were the girl folks think you, you would come to me on your knees, that's what you would do, to get me to buy him off."

"Oh, mother, mother, I knew that was what you were coming to. Don't do it! I cannot bear it. I cannot go on with it. You may save him, but you'll kill me."

"Kill you!—what has it got to do with you?" said Mrs. Aikin, drying her eyes. "Thank the Lord, it ain't so bad but what it can be mended—when one comes to think of it! I'll write to the lawyer this very night."

"If I can be of any use—" said Mr. Peters, faltering. The more he felt it was against himself, the more he was anxious to do it to show, if only to himself, that it was Jane and not his own interest that was nearest to his thoughts. But the poor man felt chilled to the heart as he made his offer. He did not understand Jane. It was only an impulse of anger, he thought, against the lover for whom, no doubt, she was longing in her heart.

"You're very kind, Mr. Peters—very kind. I'll never forget it—and you think it's the right thing, don't you now? He ain't fit for the army, isn't Johnny. He was always delicate in the chest, and needs to be taken a deal of notice of. And to give him up all for one thing—all for a minute's foolishness."

"Mother!" said Jane, with a shrill tone of passion in her voice, "he is not to come back here again; let him be!"

"No—no—no. You'll be the first to

thank me, though you've lost your temper now. The fright will do him a deal of good," Mrs. Aikin said, getting up with all her cheerfulness restored. "We'll leave him a week or so just to see the error of his ways, and then we'll buy him off, and have him back, and settle everything. Poor lad! You may take my word he's miserable enough, thinking of you and me, and wondering what we are thinking of him. Poor John! We won't go on shilly-shallying any longer, but we'll have it all settled when he comes home."

She was still speaking with the smile on her face which these pleasant anticipations had brought there when a sudden commotion got up outside—loud voices, and something like a scuffle. Sounds of this kind are not so rare or so alarming even at the best regulated of taverns as they are in a private house, and the widow paid but little attention. She went across the room and opened her big, old-fashioned chest. Her heart was

warmed and her face brightened by her resolution. Jane gave a glance of despair at Mr. Peters (which he no more understood than if he had not seen it). She went across the room after her mother, and laid her hand on her shoulder. "Mother," she said, "don't do it—don't do it; let him have his choice."

"Ah! what was that?" cried Mrs. Aikin with a start.

The disturbance outside continued, and just at this moment the words became audible, along with the sound of steps rushing to the door. "My 'usband, my 'usband!" cried the voice; "what have you done with my 'usband?" The mother and daughter turned round by a common impulse, and looked at each other—then stood as if stiffened into stone, with their faces to the door. Without another word said they knew what it meant. They needed no further explanation, nor the sight of Ellen Turner, all in disorder, with her hair hang-

ing about her neck, and her face swollen with tears, who suddenly dashed the door open and came wildly in. "John, John! I want my 'usband!" the poor creature cried, half demented. Jane shrank back against her mother, leaning on her heavily, then cast a wondering gaze around, appealing, as it were, to earth and heaven. Could it be true? She put out one hand to the girl to silence her, and turned round and leant against the wall, with a gasp for breath and a low moan. This was all the demonstration she made. She was not even conscious of the altercation that followed, the crying, and questioning, and denying. Jane turned her face to the wall. People have died and broken their hearts with less pain. The world seemed to go round with her, and all truth and sense to fail.

When she was seen again, which indeed was next day, moving about her work as if nothing had happened, Jane was like a ghost in the first morning light. All the blood

seemed to have been drained out of her. She was like a marble woman, moving unconsciously, not touched by anything she did. "I am quite well," she said when people asked, "quite well, and quite right, there is nothing the matter." As for the poor schoolmaster, he went home that night sobbing in the great pity of his heart. Though he loved her so, the good fellow felt that if anything could have brought back to her the wretched lout whom she had loved he would have done it had it cost him his life: but Mr. Peters had to go away helpless, unable to save her a single pang, as most of us one time or other have to do.

When and how John had found means and ways to make himself Ellen Turner's husband, or whether he had really done so at all, remained always a mystery to the green. But she went off to him, and became a wretched hanger-on of the regiment, from which Mrs. Aikin no longer thought of

buying him off. Nothing else could have settled the question so summarily, and but for Jane's stony face all the neighbourhood would have been glad. Her misery, which was so patient and sweet, and of which she talked to no one, lasted a great deal longer than it ought to have done, everybody felt. But it could not last for ever. Bad enough that such a girl should waste the first sweetness of her life on such a delusion, but the delusion must come to an end some time. After a longer interval than pleased the green, an interval of which old Mrs. Mowbray was very impatient, declaring pettishly a hundred times that she would marry off the faithful Peters to some one if Jane did not mind, Jane came to herself. She is now the mistress of the schoolroom, if not the schoolmistress, with too many children of her own to be able to take charge of those of the parish, but so "comfortable," with what the Barley Mow affords, that the schoolmaster's income requires no eking out

from her work. She is far better off, and in circumstances much more congenial to her than if she had been able to carry out the plan which had been her early dream, and which she and her mother had so passionately wished. And Jane is happy: but the scar of the old wound has never departed, and never will depart. It is unforgettable for the sake of the pain, more than for the sake of the love. As for the faithful Peters, he is as happy as ever schoolmaster was, and very proper and mindful of his position, and would not sit on a bench outside a village inn nowadays night after night, as he once did, not for any inducement in the world.

Mrs. Aikin held out, and kept her place after Jane was married as long as that was practicable, but has sold the business now (and it brought in a pretty penny), and lives very happily with a cow of her own and a poultry yard, and half-a-dozen grandchildren. Happy woman! She has no scar upon her comfortable soul, and knows of no mistake she

ever made : but she feeds the hungry mouths of her wretched nephew and his wretched family, and does not grumble, for, after all, she says, "Nature is Nature, and it was all his father's fault."

THE END.

MY FAITHFUL JOHNNY

My Faithful Johnny

DEDICATED TO F. W. C. AND B. C.

Chapter I.

Everybody knows the charming song which is called by this name. I hear it sometimes in a young household full of life and kindness and music, where it is sung to me, with a tender indulgence for my weakness and limited apprehension of higher efforts, by the most sympathetic and softest of voices. A kind half-smile mingles in the music on these occasions. Those dear people think I like it because the translated "words" have a semblance of being Scotch, and I am a Scot. But the words are not Scotch, nor is this their charm. I don't

even know what they are. "I will come again, my sweet and bonnie." That, or indeed the name even is enough for me. I confess that I am not musical. When I hear anything that I like much, at least from an instrument, I instantly conceive a contempt for it, feeling that it must be inferior somehow to have commended itself to me. I wander vainly seeking an idea through fields and plains of sonatas. So do a great many other lowly people, like me, not gifted with taste or (fit) hearing; but, if you will only suggest an idea to me, I will thankfully accept that clue. I don't understand anything about dominant sevenths or any mathematical quantity. "How much?" I feel inclined to say with the most vulgar. Therefore "My Faithful Johnny" charms me because this is a suggestion of which my fancy is capable. I don't know who the faithful Johnny was, except that he is to come again, and that somebody, presumably, is looking for him;

and, with this guide, the song takes a hundred tones, sorrowful, wistful and penetrating. I see the patient waiting, the doubt which is faith, the long vigil—and hear the soft cadence of sighs, and with them, through the distance, the far-off notes of the promise—never realized, always expected—"I will come again." This is how I like to have my music. I am an ignorant person. They smile and humour me with just a tender touch of the faintest, kindest contempt. Stay—not contempt; the word is far too harsh; let us say indulgence—the meaning is very much the same.

I do not think I had ever heard the song when I first became acquainted with the appearance of a man with whom, later, this title became completely identified. He was young—under thirty—when I saw him first, passing my house every morning as regular as the clock on his way to his work, and coming home in the evening swinging his cane, with a book under his arm, his coat just

a little rusty, his trousers clinging to his knees more closely than well-bred trousers cling, his hat pushed back a little from his forehead. It was unnecessary to ask what he was. He was a clerk in an office. This may be anything, the reader knows, from a lofty functionary managing public business, to numberless nobodies who toil in dusty offices and are in no way better than their fate. It was to this order that my clerk belonged. Every day of his life, except that blessed Sunday which sets such toilers free, he walked along the irregular pavement of the long suburban road in which I lived at nine o'clock in the morning were it wet or dry; and between five and six he would come back. After all, though it was monotonous, it was not a hard life, for he had the leisure of the whole long evening to make up for the bondage of the day. He was a pale man with light hair, and a face more worn than either his years or his labours warranted. But his air of physical weakness

must have been due to his colourless complexion, or some other superficial cause, for his extreme and unbroken regularity was inconsistent with anything less than thoroughly good health. He carried his head slightly thrown back, and his step had a kind of irregularity in it which made it familiar to me among many others ; at each half dozen steps or so his foot would drag upon the pavement, giving a kind of rhythm to his progress. All these particulars I became aware of, not suddenly, but by dint of long unconscious observation, day after day, day after day, for so many years. Never was there a clerk more respectable, more regular. I found out after a while that he lodged about half a mile further on in one of the little houses into which the road dwindled as it streamed out towards the chaos which on all sides surrounds London—and that when he passed my house he was on his way to or from the omnibus which started from a much-frequented corner about

a quarter of a mile nearer town. All the far-off ends of the ways that lead into town and its bustle have interests of this kind. I am one of the people, I fear somewhat vulgar-minded, who love my window and to see people pass. I do not care for the dignity of seclusion. I would rather not, unless I were sure of being always a happy member of a large cheerful household, be divided from the common earth even by the trees and glades of the most beautiful park. I like to see the men go to their work, and the women to their marketing. But no; the latter occupation is out of date—the women go to their work too; slim, young daily governesses, hard-worked music-mistresses, with the invariable roll of music. How soon one gets to know them all, and have a glimmering perception of their individualities—though you may see them every day for years before you know their names!

After I had been acquainted (at a dis-

tance) with him for some time, and had got to know exactly what o'clock it was when he passed, a change came upon my clerk. One summer evening I saw him very much smartened up, his coat brushed, a pair of trousers on with which I was not familiar, and a rosebud in his button-hole, *coming back*. I was thunderstruck. It was a step so contrary to all traditions that my heart stopped beating while I looked at him. It was all I could do not to run down and ask what was the matter. Had something gone wrong in the City? Was there a panic, or a crisis, or something in the money-market? But no; that could not be. The spruceness of the man, the rose in his coat, contradicted this alarm; and as I watched disquieted, lo! he crossed the road before my eyes, and turning down Pleasant Place, which was opposite, disappeared, as I could faintly perceive in the distance, into one of the houses. This was the first of a long series of visits. And after a while I saw

her, the object of these visits, the heroine of the romance. She also was one of those with whom I had made acquaintance at my window—a trim little figure in black, with a roll of music, going out and in two or three times a day, giving music lessons. I was quite glad to think that she had been one of my favourites too. My clerk went modestly at long intervals at first, then began to come oftener, and finally settled down as a nightly visitor. But this was a long and slow process, and I think it had lasted for years before I came into actual contact with the personages of this tranquil drama. It was only during the summer that I could see them from my window and observe what was going on. When at the end of a long winter I first became aware that he went to see her every evening, I confess to feeling a little excitement at the idea of a marriage shortly to follow; but that was altogether premature. It went on summer after summer, winter

after winter, disappearing by intervals from my eyes, coming fresh with the spring flowers and the long evenings. Once passing down Pleasant Place towards some scorched fields that lay beyond—fields that began to be invaded by new houses and cut up by foundation digging, and roadmaking, and bricklaying, but where there was still room for the boys, and my boys, among others, to play cricket—I had a glimpse of a little interior which quickened my interest more and more. The houses in Pleasant Place were small and rather shabby, standing on one side only of the street. The other was formed by the high brick wall of the garden of a big old-fashioned house, still standing amid all the new invasions which had gradually changed the character of the district. There were trees visible over the top of this wall, and it was believed in the neighbourhood that the upper windows of the houses in Pleasant Place looked over it into the garden. In fact, I had myself

not long before condoled with the proprietor of the said garden upon the inconvenience of being thus overlooked. For this hypocrisy my heart smote me when I went along the little street, and saw the little houses all gasping with open windows for a breath of the air which the high wall intercepted. They had little front gardens scorched with the fervid heat. At the open window of No. 7 sat my clerk with his colourless head standing out against the dark unknown of the room. His face was in profile. It was turned towards some one who was singing softly the song of which I have placed the name at the head of this story. The soft, pensive music came tender and low out of the unseen room. The musician evidently needed no light, for it was almost twilight, and the room was dark. The accompaniment was played in the truest taste, soft as the summer air that carried the sound to our ears. "I know!" I cried to my companion with some excitement, "that is what

he is. I have always felt that was the name for him." "The name for whom?" she asked bewildered. "My faithful Johnny," I replied; which filled her with greater bewilderment still.

And all that summer long the faithful Johnny went and came as usual. Often he and she would take little walks in the evening, always at that same twilight hour. It seemed the moment of leisure, as if she had duties at home from which she was free just then. When we went away in August they were taking their modest little promenades together in the cool of the evening; and when we came back in October, as long as the daylight served to see them by, the same thing went on. As the days shortened he changed his habits so far as to go to Pleasant Place at once before going home, that there might still be light enough (I felt sure) for her walk. But by and by the advancing winter shut out this possibility: or rather, I could not see any longer what

happened about six o'clock. One evening however, coming home to dinner from a late visit, I met them suddenly, walking along the lighted street. For the first time they were arm-in-arm, perhaps because it was night, though no later than usual. She was talking to him with a certain familiar ease of use and wont as if they had been married for years, smiling and chattering and lighting up his mild, somewhat weary countenance with responsive smiles. "I will come again, my sweet and bonnie——" I smiled at myself as these words came into my head, I could not tell why. How could he come again when, it was evident, no will of his would ever take him away? Was she fair enough to be the "sweet and bonnie" of a man's heart? She was not a beauty; nobody would have distinguished her even as the prettiest girl in Pleasant Place. But her soft, bright face as she looked up to him: a smile on it of the sunniest kind; a little humorous twist about the corners of

the mouth ; a pair of clear, honest brown eyes ; a round cheek with a dimple in it—caught my heart at once as they must have caught his. I could understand (I thought) what it must have been to the dry existence of the respectable clerk, the old-young and prematurely faded, to have this fresh spring of life, and talk, and smiles, and song welling up into it, transforming everything. He smiled back upon her as they walked along in the intermittent light of the shop windows. I could almost believe that I saw his lips forming the words as he looked at her, "My sweet and bonnie." Yes ; she was good enough and fair enough to merit the description. "But I wish they would marry," I said to myself. Why did not they marry ? He looked patient enough for anything ; but even patience ought to come to an end. I chafed at the delay, though I had nothing to do with it. What was the meaning of it ? I felt that it ought to come to an end.

CHAPTER II.

IT was some months after this, when I took the bold step of making acquaintance on my own account with this pair; not exactly with the pair, but with the one who was most accessible. It happened that a sudden need for music lessons arose in the family. One of the children, who had hitherto regarded that study with repugnance, and who had been accordingly left out in all the musical arrangements of her brothers and sisters, suddenly turned round by some freak of nature and demanded the instruction which she had previously resisted. How could we expect Fräulein Stimme, whose ministrations she had scorned, to descend

to the beggarly elements, and take up again one who was so far behind the others? "I cannot ask her," I said; "you may do it yourself, Chatty, if you are so much in earnest, but I cannot take it upon me;" and it was not until Chatty had declared with tears that to approach Fräulein Stimme on her own account was impossible, that a brilliant idea struck me. "Ten o'clock!" I cried; which was an exclamation which would have gone far to prove me out of my senses had any severe critic been listening. This was the title which had been given to the little music-mistress in Pleasant Place, before she had become associated in our minds with the faithful clerk. And I confess that, without waiting to think, without more ado, I ran to get my hat, and was out of doors in a moment. It was very desirable, no doubt, that Chatty should make up lost ground and begin her lessons at once, but that was not my sole motive. When I found myself out of doors

in a damp and foggy November morning, crossing the muddy road in the first impulse of eagerness, it suddenly dawned upon me that there were several obstacles in my way. In the first place I did not even know her name. I knew the house, having seen her, and especially him, enter it so often; but what to call her, who to ask for, I did not know. She might, I reflected, be only a lodger, not living with her parents, which up to this time I had taken for granted; or she might be too accomplished in her profession to teach Chatty the rudiments—a thing which, when I reflected upon the song I had heard, and other scraps of music which had dropped upon my ears in passing, seemed very likely. However I was launched, and could not go back. I felt very small, humble, and blamably impulsive however when I had knocked at the door of No. 7, and stood somewhat alarmed waiting a reply. The door was opened by a small maid-servant, with a very long dress

and her apron folded over one arm, who stared, yet evidently recognized me, not without respect, as belonging to one of the great houses in the road. This is a kind of aristocratical position in the suburbs. One is raised to a kind of personage by all the denizens of the little streets and terraces. She made me a clumsy little curtsey, and grinned amicably. And I was encouraged by the little maid. She was about fifteen, rather grimy, in a gown much too long for her; but yet her foot was upon her native heath, and I was an intruder. She knew all about the family, no doubt, and who they were, and the name of my clerk, and the relations in which he stood to her young mistress, while I was only a stranger feebly guessing, and impertinently spying upon all these things.

"Is the young lady at home?" I asked, with much humility.

The girl stared at me with wide-open eyes; then she said with a broad smile,

"You mean Miss Ellen, don't ye, miss?" In these regions it is supposed to be complimentary to say "Miss," as creating a pleasant fiction of perpetual youth.

"To tell the truth," I said, with a consciousness of doing my best to conciliate this creature, "I don't know her name. It was about some music lessons."

"Miss Ellen isn't in," said the girl, "but missus is sure to see you if you will step into the parlour, miss;" and she opened to me the door of the room in which I had seen my faithful Johnny at the window, and heard her singing to him, in the twilight, her soft song. It was a commonplace little parlour, with a faded carpet and those appalling mahogany and haircloth chairs which no decorative genius, however brilliant, could make anything of. What so easy as to say that good taste and care can make any house pretty? This little room was very neat, and I don't doubt that Miss Ellen's faithful lover found a little paradise in it; but it

made my heart sink foolishly to see how commonplace it all was; a greenish-whitish woollen cover on the table, a few old photographic albums, terrible antimacassars in crochet work upon the backs of the chairs. I sat down and contemplated the little mirror on the mantelpiece and the cheap little vases with dismay. We are all prejudiced nowadays on this question of furniture. My poor little music-mistress! how was she to change the chairs and tables she had been born to? But, to tell the truth, I wavered and doubted whether she was worthy of him when I looked round upon all the antimacassars, and the dried grasses in the green vase.

While I was struggling against this first impression the door opened, and the mistress of the house came in. She was a little woman, stout and roundabout, with a black cap decorated with flowers, but a fresh little cheerful face under this tremendous headdress which neutralized it. She came up to

me with a smile and would have shaken hands, had I been at all prepared for such a warmth of salutation, and then she began to apologize for keeping me waiting. "When my daughter is out I have to do all the waiting upon him myself. He doesn't like to be left alone, and he can't bear anybody but me or Ellen in the room with him," she said. Perhaps she had explained beforehand who *he* was, but in the confusion of the first greeting I had not made it out. Then I stated my business, and she brightened up still more.

"Oh, yes; I am sure Ellen will undertake it with great pleasure. In the Road at No. 16? Oh, it is no distance; it will be no trouble; and she is so glad to extend her connection. With private teaching it is such a great matter to extend your connection. It is very kind of you to have taken the trouble to come yourself. Perhaps one of Ellen's ladies, who are all so kind to her, mentioned our name?"

"That is just where I am at a loss," I said uneasily. "No; but I have seen her passing all these years, always so punctual, with her bright face. She has been a great favourite of mine for a long time, though I don't know her name."

The mother's countenance brightened after a moment's doubt. "Yes," she said, "she is a good girl—always a bright face. She is the life of the house."

"And I have seen," said I, hesitating more and more, "a gentleman. I presume there is to be a marriage by and by. You must pardon my curiosity, I have taken so much interest in them."

A good many changes passed over the mother's face. Evidently she was not at all sure about my curiosity, whether perhaps it might not be impertinent.

"Ah!" she said, with a little nod, "you have remarked John. Yes, of course, it was sure to be remarked, so constantly as he comes. I need not make any secret of it.

In one way I would rather he did not come so often: but it is a pleasure to Ellen. Yes; I may say they are engaged."

Engaged? After all these years! But I remembered that I had no right, being an intruder, to say anything. "I have seen them in the summer evenings——"

"Yes, yes," she said; "yes," with again a nod of her head. "Perhaps it was imprudent, for you never can tell whether these things will come to anything; but it was her only time for a little pleasure. Poor child, I always see that she gets that hour. They go out still, though you would not say it would do her much good in the dark; but there is nothing she enjoys so much. She is the best girl that ever was. I don't know what I should do without her;" and there was a glimmer of moisture in the mother's eyes.

"But," I said, "surely after a while they are going to be married?"

"I don't know. I don't see how her

father can spare her." The cheerful face lost all its brightness as she spoke, and she shook her head. "He is so fond of Ellen, the only girl we have left now; he can't bear her out of his sight. She is such a good girl, and so devoted." The mother faltered a little—perhaps my question made her think—at all events, it was apparent that everything was not so simple and straightforward for the young pair as I in my ignorance had thought.

But I had no excuse to say any more. It was no business of mine, as people say. I settled that Ellen was to come at a certain hour next day, which was all that remained to be done. When I glanced round the room again as I left, it had changed its aspect to me, and looked like a prison. Was the poor girl bound there, and unable to get free? As the mother opened the door for me, the sound of an imperious voice calling her came down stairs. She called back, "I am coming, James, I am coming;" then let

me out hurriedly. And I went home feeling as if I had torn the covering from a mystery, and as if the house in Pleasant Place, so tranquil, so commonplace, was the scene of some tragic story, to end one could not tell how. But there was no mystery at all about it. When "Miss Harwood" was announced to me next day, I was quite startled by the name, not associating it with any one; but the moment the little music-mistress appeared, with her little roll in her hand, her trim figure, her smiling face, and fresh look of health and happiness, my suspicions disappeared like the groundless fancies they were. She was delighted to have a new pupil, and one so near, whom it would be "no trouble" to attend; and so pleased when I (with much timidity, I confess) ventured to tell her how long I had known her, and how I had watched for her at my window, and all the observations I had made. She brightened, and laughed and blushed, and declared it was very kind of me to take

such an interest; then hung her head for a moment, and laughed and blushed still more, when my confessions went the length of the faithful lover. But this was nothing but a becoming girlish shyness, for next minute she looked me frankly in the face, with the prettiest colour dyeing her round cheek. "I think he knows you too," she said. "We met you once out walking, and he told me, 'There is the lady who lives in the Road, whom I always see at the window.' We hoped you were better to see you out." And then it was my turn to feel gratified, which I did unfeignedly. I had gone through a great deal of trouble, cheered by my spectatorship of life-out-of-doors from that window. And I was pleased that they had taken some friendly notice of me too.

"And I suppose," I said, returning to my theme, "that it will not be long now before you reward his faithfulness. Must Chatty leave you then? or will you go on, do you think, taking pupils after—?"

She gave me a little bewildered look. "I don't think I know what you mean."

"After you are married," I said plumply. "That must be coming soon now."

Then she burst out with a genial, pretty laugh, blushing and shaking her head. "Oh, no; we do not think of such a thing! Not yet. They couldn't spare me at home. John—I mean, Mr. Ridgway—knows that. My father has been ill so long; he wants attendance night and day, and I don't know what mother would do without me. Oh dear no; we are very happy as we are. We don't even think of that."

"But you must think of it some time, surely, in justice to him," I said, half indignant for my faithful Johnny's sake.

"Yes, I suppose so, some time," she said, with a momentary gravity stealing over her face—gravity and perplexity too: and a little pucker came into her forehead. How to do it? A doubt, a question, seemed to enter her mind for a moment. Then she

gave her head a shake, dismissing the clouds from her cheerful firmament, and with a smiling decision set down Chatty to the piano. Chatty had fallen in love with Miss Harwood, her own particular music-mistress, in whom no one else had any share, on the spot.

And after a while we all fell in love, one after another, with Miss Ellen. She was one of those cheerful people who never make a fuss about anything, never are put out, or make small troubles into great ones. We tried her in every way, as is not unusual with a large, somewhat careless, family, in whose minds it was a settled principle that, so long as you did a thing some time or other, it did not at all matter when you did it—and that times and seasons were of no particular importance to any one but Fräulein Stimme. *She*, of course—our natural disorderliness had to give way to her; but I am afraid it very soon came to be said in the house, "Ellen will not mind." And

Ellen did not mind; if twelve o'clock proved inconvenient for the lesson, she only smiled and said, "It is no matter; I will come in at three." And if at three Fräulein Stimme's clutches upon Chatty were still unclosed, she would do anything that happened to be needed—gather the little ones round the piano and teach them songs, or go out with my eldest daughter for her walk, or talk to me. How many talks we had upon every subject imaginable! Ellen was not what is called clever. She had read very few books. My eldest daughter aforesaid despised her somewhat on this account, and spoke condescendingly of this or that as "what Ellen says." But it was astonishing, after all, how often "what Ellen says" was quoted. There were many things which Ellen had not thought anything about; and on these points she was quite ignorant; for she had not read what other people had thought about them, and was unprepared with an opinion; but whenever the subject

had touched her own intelligence, she knew very well what she thought. And by dint of being a little lower down in the social order than we were, she knew familiarly a great many things which we knew only theoretically and did not understand. For instance, that fine shade of difference which separates people with a hundred and fifty pounds .a year from people with weekly wages was a thing which had always altogether eluded me. I had divined that a workman with three pounds a week was well off, and a clerk with the same, paid quarterly, was poor ; but wherein lay the difference, and how it was that the latter occupied a superior position to the former, I have never been able to fathom. Ellen belonged, herself, to this class. Her father had been in one of the lower departments of a public office, and had retired with a pension of exactly this amount after some thirty years' service. There was a time in his life, to which she regretfully yet proudly referred as "the time

when we were well off," in which his salary had risen to two hundred and fifty pounds a year. That was the time when she got her education and developed the taste for music which was now supplying her with work which she liked, and a little provision for herself. There was no scorn or *hauteur* in Ellen; but she talked of the working classes with as distinct a consciousness of being apart from and superior to them as if she had been a duchess. It was no virtue of hers; but still Providence had placed her on a different level, and she behaved herself accordingly. Servants and shopkeepers, of the minor kind at least, were within the same category to her—people to be perfectly civil to, and kind to, but, as a matter of course, not the kind of people whom in her position it would become her to associate with. When I asked myself why I should smile at this, or wherein it was more unreasonable than other traditions of social superiority, I could not give any answer. We are not

ourselves, so far as I know, sons of the Crusaders, and it is very difficult to say what is the social figment of rank by which we hold so dearly. Ellen Harwood exhibited to us the instinct of aristocracy on one of its lower levels; and one learned a lesson while one smiled in one's sleeve. Never was anything more certain, more serious, than her sense of class distinctions, and the difference between one degree and another; and nobody, not a prince of the blood, would have less understood being laughed at. This serene consciousness of her position and its inherent right divine was a possession inalienable to our music-mistress. She would have comprehended or endured no trifling or jesting with it. One blushed while one laughed in an undertone. She was holding the mirror up to nature without being aware of it. And there were various fanciful particulars also in her code. The people next door who let lodgings were beneath her as much as the working people—all to

be very nicely behaved to, need I say, and treated with the greatest politeness and civility, but not as if they were on the level of "people like ourselves." Lady Clara Vere de Vere could not have been more serenely unconscious of any possible equality between herself and her village surroundings than Ellen Harwood. Fortunately, Mr. John Ridgway was "in our own position in life."

These and many other vagaries of human sentiment I learned to see through Ellen's eyes with more edification and amusement, and also with more confusion and abashed consciousness, than had ever occurred to me before. These were precisely my own sentiments, you know, towards the rich linendraper next door; and no doubt my aristocratical repugnance to acknowledge myself the neighbour of that worthy person would have seemed just as funny to the Duke of Bayswater as Ellen's pretensions did to me. It must not be supposed however that Ellen

Harwood was in a state of chronic resistance to the claims of her humbler neighbours. She was an active, bright, cheerful creature, full of interest in everything. Her father had been ill for years; and she had grown accustomed to his illness, as young people do to anything they have been acquainted with all their lives, and was not alarmed by it, nor oppressed, so far as we could tell, by the constant claims made upon her. She allowed that now and then he was cross—"which of us would not be cross, shut up in one room for ever and ever?" But she had not the least fear that he would ever die, or that she would grow tired of taking care of him. All the rest of her time after her lessons she was in attendance upon him, excepting only that hour in the evening when John's visit was paid. She always looked forward to that, she confessed. "To think of it makes everything smooth. He is so good. Though I say it that shouldn't," she cried, laughing and blushing, "you can't think how nice he

is. And he knows so much; before he knew us he had nothing to do but read all the evenings—fancy! And I never met any one who had read so much; he knows simply everything. Ah!" with a little sigh, "it makes such a difference to have him coming every night; it spirits one up for the whole day."

"But, Ellen, I can't think how it is that he doesn't get tired———"

"Tired!" She reddened up to her very hair. "Why should he get tired? If he is tired, he has my full permission to go when he likes," she said, throwing back her proud little head. "But nobody shall put such an idea into my mind. You don't know John. If you knew John that would be quite enough; such a thing would never come into your mind."

"You should hear me out before you blame me. I was going to say, tired of waiting, which is a very different sentiment."

Ellen laughed, and threw aside her little

offence in a moment. "I thought you could not mean that. Tired of waiting! But he has not waited so very long. We have not been years and years like some people—No; only eighteen months since it was all settled. We are not rich people like you, to do a thing the moment we have begun to think about it: and everything so dear!" she cried, half merry, half serious. "Oh, no; he is not the least tired. What could we want more than to be together in the evening? All the day goes pleasantly for thinking of it," she said, with a pretty blush. "And my mother always manages to let me have that hour. She does not mind how tired she is. We are as happy as the day is long," Ellen said.

I have always heard that a long engagement is the most miserable and wearing thing in the world. I have never believed it, it is true; but that does not matter. Here however was a witness against the popular belief. Ellen was not the victim of a long

engagement, nor of a peevish invalid, though her days were spent in tendance upon one, and her youth gliding away in the long patience of the other. She was as merry and bright as if she were having everything her own way in life ; and so I believe she really thought she was, with a mother so kind as, always, however tired she might be, to insist upon securing that evening hour for her, and a John who was better than any other John had ever been before him. The faithful Johnny! I wondered sometimes on his side what he thought.

CHAPTER III.

ONE day Ellen came to me, on her arrival, with an air of suppressed excitement quite unusual to her. It was not, evidently, anything to be alarmed about, for she looked half way between laughing and crying, but not melancholy. "May I speak to you after Chatty has had her lesson?" she asked. I felt sure that some new incident had happened in her courtship, about which I was so much more interested than about any other courtship I was acquainted with. So I arranged with all speed—not an easy thing when there are so many in a house, to be left alone, and free to hear whatever she might have to say. She was a little hurried with

the lesson, almost losing patience over Chatty's fumbling—and how the child did fumble over the fingering, putting the third finger where the first should be, and losing count altogether of the thumb, which is too useful a member to be left without occupation! It appeared to me half a dozen times that Ellen was on the eve of taking the music off the piano, and garotting Chatty with the arm which rested nervously on the back of the child's chair. However she restrained these impulses, if she had them, and got through the hour *tant bien que mal.* It was even with an air of extreme deliberation, masking her excitement, that she stood by and watched her pupil putting away the music and closing the piano. Chatty, of course, took a longer time than usual to these little arrangements, and then lingered in the room. Generally she was too glad to hurry away.

"Go, Chatty, and see if the others are ready to go out for their walk."

"They have gone already, mamma. They said they would not wait for me. They said I was always so long of getting my things on."

"But why are you so long of getting your things on? Run away and see what nurse is about; or if Fräulein Stimme would like——"

"Fräulein isn't here to-day. How funny you are, mamma, not to remember that it's Saturday."

"Go this moment!" I cried wildly, "and tell nurse that you must go out for a walk. Do you think I will permit you to lose your walk, because the others think you are long of putting your things on? Nothing of the sort. Go at once, Chatty," I cried, clapping my hands, as I have a way of doing, to rouse them when they are not paying attention, "without a word!"

To see the child's astonished face! She seemed to stumble over herself in her haste to get out of the room. After the unusual

force of this adjuration I had myself become quite excited. I waved my hand to Ellen, who had stood by listening, half frightened by my vehemence, pointing her to a chair close to me. "Now, tell me all about it," I said.

"Is it really for me that you have sent Chatty away in such a hurry? How good of you!" said Ellen. And then she made a pause, as if to bring herself into an appropriate frame of mind before making her announcement. "I could not rest till I had told you. You have always taken such an interest. John has got a rise of fifty pounds a year."

"I am very glad, very glad, Ellen."

"I knew you would be pleased. He has been expecting it for some time back; but he would not say anything to me, in case I should be disappointed if it did not come. So I should, most likely, for I think he deserves a great deal more than that. But the best people never get so much as they

deserve. Fifty pounds a year is a great rise all at once, don't you think? and he got a hint that perhaps about Midsummer there might be a better post offered to him. Isn't it flattering? Of course I know he deserves it; but sometimes those who deserve the most don't get what they ought. That makes two hundred and twenty; an excellent income, don't you think? He will have to pay income-tax," Ellen said, with a flush of mingled pride and gratification and grievance which it was amusing to see.

"I don't know that I think much of the income-tax; but it is very pleasant that he is so well thought of," I said.

"And another rise at Midsummer! It seems more than one had any right to expect," said Ellen. Her hands were clasped in her lap, her fingers twisting and untwisting unconsciously, her head raised, and her eyes fixed, without seeing anything, upon the blue sky outside. She was rapt

in a pleasant dream of virtue rewarded and goodness triumphant. A smile went and came upon her face like sunshine. "And yet," she cried, "to hear people speak, you would think that it was never the right men that got on. Even in sermons in church you always hear that it is rather a disadvantage to you if you are nice and good. I wonder how people can talk such nonsense; why, look at John!"

"But even John has had a long time to wait for his promotion," said I, feeling myself the devil's advocate. I had just checked myself in time not to say that two hundred and twenty pounds a year was not a very gigantic promotion; which would have been both foolish and cruel.

"Oh, no, indeed!" cried Ellen; "he looks a great deal older than he is. He lived so much alone, you know, before he knew *us;* and that gives a man an old look —but he is not a bit old. How much would you give him? No, indeed, thirty; he is

only just thirty! His birthday was last week."

"And you, Ellen?"

"I am twenty-four—six years younger than he is. Just the right difference, mother says. Of course I am really a dozen years older than he is; I have far more sense. He has read books and books till he has read all his brains away; but luckily as long as I am there to take care of him——" Then she made a pause, looked round the room with a half frightened look, then, drawing closer to me, she said in a hurried undertone, "He said something about that other subject to-day."

"Of course he did; how could he have done otherwise?" I said with a little momentary triumph.

"Please, *please* don't take his part, and make it all more difficult; for you know it is impossible, impossible, quite impossible; nobody could have two opinions. It was that, above all, that I wanted to tell you about."

"Why is it impossible, Ellen?" I said. "If you set up absurd obstacles, and keep up an unnatural state of things, you will be very sorry for it one day. He is quite right. I could not think how he consented to go on like this, without a word."

"How strange that you should be so hot about it!" said Ellen, with a momentary smile; but at the bottom of her heart she was nervous and alarmed, and did not laugh with her usual confidence. "He said something, but he was not half so stern as you are. Why should it be so dreadfully necessary to get married? I am quite happy as I am. I can do all my duties, and take care of him too; and John is quite happy——"

"There you falter," I said; "you dare not say that with the same intrepidity, you little deceiver. Poor John! he ought to have his life made comfortable and bright for him now. He ought to have his wife to be proud of, to come home to. So faithful as he is, never thinking of any

other pleasure, of any amusement, but only you."

Ellen blushed with pleasure, then grew pale with wonder and alarm. "That is natural," she said, faltering. "What other amusement should he think of? He is most happy with me."

"But very few men are like that," I said. "He is giving up everything else for you; he is shutting himself out of the world for you; and you—what are you giving up for him?"

Ellen grew paler and paler as I spoke. "Giving up?" she said aghast. "I—I would give up anything. But I have got nothing, except John," she added, with an uneasy little laugh. "And you say he is shutting himself out of the world. Oh, I know what you are thinking of—the kind of world one reads about in books, where gentlemen have clubs, and all that sort of thing. But these are only for you rich people. He is not giving up anything that I know of."

"What do the other young men do, Ellen? Every one has his own kind of world."

"The other young men!" she cried indignant. "Now I see indeed you don't know anything about him (how could you? you have never even seen him), when you compare John to the other clerks. *John!* Oh, yes, I suppose they go and amuse themselves; they go to the theatres, and all those wrong places. But you don't suppose John would do that, even if I were not in existence! Why *John!* the fact is, you don't know him; that is the whole affair."

"I humbly confess it," said I; "but it is not my fault. I should be very glad to know him, if I might."

Ellen looked at me with a dazzled look of sudden happiness, as if this prospect of bliss was too much for her—which is always very flattering to the superior in such intercourse as existed between her and me. "Oh! would you?" she said, with her heart in her mouth, and fixed her eyes eagerly upon me,

as if with some project she did not like to unfold.

"Certainly I should." Then, after a pause I said, "Could not you bring him to-morrow to tea?"

Ellen's eyes sparkled. She gave a glance round upon the room, which was a great deal bigger and handsomer than the little parlour in Pleasant Place, taking in the pictures and the piano and myself in so many distinct perceptions, yet one look. Her face was so expressive that I recognized all these different details of her pleasure with the distinctest certainty. She wanted John to see it all, and to hear the piano, which was much better than her little piano at home; and also to behold how much at home she was, and how everybody liked her. Her eyes shone out upon me like two stars. And her big English "Oh!" of delight had her whole breath in it, and left her speechless for the moment. "There is nothing in the world I would like so much," she cried at last: then paused, and,

with a sobered tone, added, "If mother can spare me"—a little cloud coming over her face.

"I am sure your mother will spare you. You never have any parties or amusements, my good little Ellen. You must tell her I will take no denial. You never go anywhere."

"Where should I go?" said Ellen. "I don't want to go anywhere, there is always so much to do at home. But for this once—And John would so like to come. He would like to thank you. He says, if you will not think him too bold, that you have been his friend for years."

"It is quite true," I said; "I have looked for him almost every day for years. But it is not much of a friendship when one can do nothing for the other——"

"Oh, it is beautiful!" cried Ellen. "He says always we are in such different ranks of life. We could never expect to have any intercourse, except to be sure by a kind of

happy accident, like me. It would not do, of course, visiting or anything of that sort; but just to be friends for life, with a kind look, such as we might give to the angels if we could see them. If there only could be a window in heaven, here and there!" and she laughed with moisture in her eyes.

"Ah!" I said, "but windows in heaven would be so crowded with those that are nearer to us than the angels."

"Do you think they would want that?" said Ellen in a reverential low tone; "don't you think they must see somehow? they would not be happy if they could not see. But the angels might come and sit down in an idle hour, when they had nothing to do. Perhaps it would grieve them, but it might amuse them too, to see all the crowds go by, and all the stories going on, like a play, and know that, whatever happened, it would all come right in the end. I should not wonder a bit if, afterwards, some one were to say, as

you did about John, 'I have seen you passing for years and years——'"

I need not repeat all the rest of our talk. When two women begin this kind of conversation, there is no telling where it may end. The conclusion however was that next evening John was to be brought to make my acquaintance; and Ellen went away very happy, feeling, I think, that a new chapter was about to begin in her life. And on our side we indulged in a great many anticipations. The male part of the household assured us that, "depend upon it," it would be a mistake; that John would be a mere clerk, and no more; a man, perhaps, not very sure about his *h*'s; perhaps over-familiar, perhaps frightened; that most likely he would feel insulted by being asked to tea—and a great deal more, to all of which we, of course, paid no attention. But it was not till afterwards that even I realized the alarming business it must have been to John to walk into a room full of unknown people—dreadful

critical children, girls and boys half grown up —and to put to the test a friendship of years, which had gone on without a word spoken, and now might turn out anything but what it had been expected to be. He was a little fluttered and red when Ellen, herself very nervous, brought him in, meeting all the expectant faces, which turned instinctively towards the door. Ellen herself had never come in the evening before, and the aspect of the house, with the lamps lighted, and the whole family assembled, was new to her. She came in without saying a word, and led her love, who for his part moved awkwardly and with shy hesitation, through the unknown place, threading his way among the tables and chairs, and the staring children, to where I sat. I have always said my little Chatty was the best bred of all my children. There was no one so much interested as she ; but she kept her eyes upon her work, and never looked up till they were seated comfortably and beginning to look at their ease. John

faltered forth what I felt sure was intended to be a very pretty speech to me, probably conned beforehand, and worthy of the occasion. But all that came forth was, "I have seen you often at the window." "Yes, indeed," I said hurriedly, "for years; we are old friends: we don't require any introduction," and so got over it. I am afraid he said "ma'am." I see no reason why he should not say ma'am; people used to do it; and excepting us rude English, everybody in the world does it. Why should not John have used that word of respect if he chose? You say ma'am yourself to princesses when you speak to them, if you ever have the honour of speaking to them; and he thought as much of me, knowing no better, as if I had been a princess. He had a soft, refined voice. I am sure I cannot tell whether his clothes were well made or not—a woman does not look at a man's clothes—but this I can tell you, that his face was well made. There was not a fine feature in it; but He who shaped

them knew what He was about. Every line was good—truth and patience and a gentle soul shone through them. In five minutes he was at home, not saying much, but looking at us all with benevolent, tender eyes. When Chatty brought him his tea and gave him her small hand, he held it for a moment, saying, "This is Ellen's pupil," with a look which was a benediction. "I should have known her anywhere," he said. "Ellen has a gift of description—and then, she is like you."

"Ellen has a great many gifts, Mr. Ridgway—the house is sure to be a bright one that has her for its mistress."

He assented with a smile that lit up his face like sunshine; then shook his head, and said, "I wish I could see any prospect of that. The house has been built, and furnished, and set out ready for her so long. That is, alas! only in our thoughts. It is a great pleasure to imagine it; but it seems always to recede a little further—a little further. We have need of patience." Then

he paused, and added, brightening a little, "Fortunately we are not impatient people, either of us."

"Forgive me," I said. "It is a great deal to take upon me—a stranger as I am."

"You forget," he said, with a bow that would not have misbecome a courtier, "that you were so kind as to say that we were not strangers but old friends."

"It is quite true. Then I will venture to speak as an old friend. I wish you were not so patient. I wish you were a hot-headed person, and would declare once for all that you would not put up with it."

He reddened, and turned to me with a look half of alarm, half, perhaps, of incipient, possible offence. "You think I am too tame, too easy—not that I don't desire with my whole heart—"

"Not that you are not as true as the heavens themselves," I said, with the enthusiasm of penitence. His face relaxed

and shone again, though once more he shook his head.

"I think—I am sure—you are quite right. If I could insist I might carry my point, and it would be better. But what can I say? I understand her, and sympathize with her, and respect her. I cannot oppose her roughly, and set myself before everything. Who am I, that she should desert what she thinks her duty for me?"

"I feel like a prophet," I said. "In this case to be selfish is the best."

He shook his head again. "She could not be selfish if she tried," he said.

Did he mean the words for himself, too? They were neither of them selfish. I don't want to say a word that is wicked, that may discourage the good—they were neither of them strong enough to be selfish. Sometimes there is wisdom and help in that quality which is so common. I will explain after what I mean. It does not sound true, I am well aware, but I think it is true:

however in the meantime there was nothing more to be said. We began to talk of all sorts of things; of books, with which John seemed to be very well acquainted, and of pictures, which he knew too—as much, at least, as a man who had never been out of England, nor seen anything but the National Gallery, could know. He was acquainted with that by heart, knowing every picture and all that could be known about it, making me ashamed, though I had seen a great deal more than he had. I felt like one who knows other people's possessions, but not his own. He had never been, so to speak, out of his own house; but he knew every picture on the walls there. And he made just as much use of his *h*'s as I do myself. If he was at first a little stiff in his demeanour, that wore off as he talked. Ellen left him entirely to me. She went off into the back drawing-room with the little ones, and made them sing standing round the piano. There was not much light, except

the candles on the piano, which lighted up their small fresh faces and her own bright countenance ; and this made the prettiest picture at the end of the room. While he was talking to me he looked that way, and a smile came suddenly over his face—which drew my attention also. "Could any painter paint that?" he said softly, looking at them. As the children were mine, you may believe I gazed with as much admiration as he. The light seemed to come from those soft faces, not to be thrown upon them, and the depth of the room was illuminated by the rose-tints, and the whiteness, and the reflected light out of their eyes. "Rembrandt, perhaps," I said ; but he shook his head, for he did not know much of Rembrandt. When they finished their little store of songs I called to Ellen to sing us something by herself. The children went away, for it was their bedtime ; and all the time the good-nights were being said she played a little soft trill of prelude,

very sweet, and low, and subdued. There was a harmonizing influence in her that made everything appropriate. She did things as they ought to be done by instinct, without knowing it; while he, with his gaze directed to her, felt it all more than she did—felt the softening of that undertone of harmonious accompaniment, the sweet filling up of the pause, the background of sound upon which all the little voices babbled out like the trickling of brooks. When this was over Ellen did not burst into her song all at once, as if to show how we had kept her waiting; but went on for a minute or two, hushing out the former little tumult. Then she chose another strain, and, while we all sat silent, began to sing—the song I had heard her sing to him when they were alone that summer evening. Was there a little breath in it of consciousness, a something shadowing from the life to come—"I will come again?" We all sat very silent and listened: he with his face turned to her, a tender smile upon it—a look

of admiring pleasure. He beat time with his hand, without knowing it, rapt in the wistful, tender music, the longing sentiment, the pervading consciousness of her, in all. I believe they were both as happy as could be while this was going on. She singing to him, and knowing that she pleased him, while still conscious of the pleasure of all the rest of us, and glad to please us too; and he so proud of her, drinking it all in, and knowing it to be for him, yet feeling that he was giving us this gratification, making an offering to us of the very best that was his. Why was it, then, that we all, surrounding them, a voiceless band of spectators, felt the hidden meaning in it, and were sorry for them, with a strange impulse of pity—sorry for those two happy people, those two inseparables who had no thought but to pass their lives together? I cannot tell how it was; but so it was. We all listened with a little thrill of sympathy, as we might have looked at those whose doom we knew, but

who themselves had not yet found out what was coming upon them. And at the end, Ellen too was affected in a curious sympathetic way by some mysterious invisible touch of our sympathy for her. She came out of the half-lit room behind, with trembling, hurried steps, and came close to my side, and took in both hers the hand I held out to her. "How silly I am!" she cried, with a little laugh. "I could have thought that some message was coming to say he must go and leave me. A kind of tremor came over me all at once." "You are tired," I said. And no doubt that had something to do with it; but why should the same chill have crept over us all?

Chapter IV.

The time passed on very quietly during these years. Nothing particular happened; so that looking back now—now that once more things have begun to happen, and all the peaceful children who cost me nothing but pleasant cares have grown up and are setting forth, each with his and her more serious complications, into individual life—it seems to me like a long flowery plain of peace. I did not think so then, and no doubt from time to time questions arose that were hard to answer and difficulties that cost me painful thought. But now all seems to me a sort of heavenly monotony and calm, turning years into days. In this gentle

domestic quiet six months went by like an afternoon ; for it was, I think, about six months after the first meeting I have just described when Ellen Harwood rushed in one morning with a scared face, to tell me of something which had occurred and which threatened to break up in a moment the quiet of her life. Mr. Ridgway had come again various times—we had daily intercourse at the window, where, when he passed, he always looked up now, and where I seldom failed to see him and give him a friendly greeting. This intercourse, though it was so slight, was also so constant that it made us very fast friends ; and when Ellen, as I have said, rushed in very white and breathless one bright spring morning, full of something to tell, my first feeling was alarm. Had anything happened to John ?

"Oh, no. Nothing has happened. At least, I don't suppose you would say anything had happened—that is, no harm—except to me," said Ellen, wringing her

hands, "except to me! Oh, do you recollect that first night he came to see you, when you were so kind as to ask him, and I sang that song he is so fond of? I took fright then; I never could tell how—and now it looks as if it would all come true——"

"As if what would come true?"

"Somebody," said Ellen, sitting down abruptly in the weariness of her dejection, "somebody from the office is to go out directly to the Levant. Oh, Chatty, dear, you that are learning geography and everything, tell me where is the Levant? It is where the currants and raisins come from. The firm has got an establishment, and it is likely—oh, it is very likely: they all think that John, whom they trust so much—John—will be sent——"

She broke off with a sob—a gasp. She was too startled, too much excited and frightened, to have the relief of tears.

"But that would be a very good thing, surely—it would be the very best thing for

him. I don't see any cause for alarm. My dear Ellen, he would do his work well ; he would be promoted ; he would be made a partner——"

"Ah !" She drew a long breath : a gleam of wavering light passed over her face. "I said you would think it no harm," she said mournfully, "no harm—except to me."

"It is on the Mediterranean Sea," said Chatty over her atlas, with a great many big round "Oh's" of admiration and wonder, "where it is always summer, always beautiful. Oh, Ellen, I wish I were you ! but you can send us some oranges," the child added philosophcially. Ellen gave her a rapid glance of mingled fondness and wrath.

"You think of nothing but oranges !" she cried (quite unjustly, I must say) then putting her hands together and fixing her wistful eyes upon me, "I feel," she said in the same breath, "as if the world were coming to an end."

"You mean it is just about beginning—

for of course he will not go without you—and that is the very best thing that could happen."

"Oh, how can you say so? it cannot happen; it is the end of everything," Ellen cried, and I could not console her. She would do nothing but wring her hands and repeat her plaint, "It is the end of everything." Poor girl, apart from John her life was dreary enough, though she had never felt it dreary. Music lessons in the morning, and after that continual attendance upon an exacting fiery invalid. The only break in her round of duty had been her evening hours, her little walk and talk with John. No wonder that the thought of John's departure filled her with a terror for which she could scarcely find words. And she never took into account the other side of the question, the solution which seemed to me so certain, so inevitable. She knew better—that, at least, whatever other way might be found out of it, could not be.

Next day in the evening, when he was going home, John himself paused as he was passing the window, and looked up with a sort of appeal. I answered by beckoning to him to come in, and he obeyed the summons very rapidly and eagerly. The spring days had drawn out, and it was now quite light when John came home. He came in and sat down beside me, in the large square projecting window, which was my favourite place. There was a mingled air of eagerness and weariness about him, as if, though excited by the new prospect which was opening before him, he was yet alarmed by the obstacles in his way, and reluctant, as Ellen herself was, to disturb the present peaceful conditions of their life. "I do not believe," he said, "that they will ever consent. I don't know how we are to struggle against them. People of their age have so much stronger wills than we have. They stand to what they want, and they have it, reason or no reason."

"That is because you give in; you do not stand to what you want," I said. He looked away beyond me into the evening light, over the heads of all the people who were going and coming so briskly in the road, and sighed.

"They have such strong wills. What can you say when people tell you that it is impossible, that they never can consent. Ellen and I have never said that, or even thought it. When we are opposed we try to think how we can compromise, how we can do with as little as possible of what we want, so as to satisfy the others. I always thought that was the good way, the nobler way," he said with a flush coming over his pale face. "Have we been making a mistake?"

"I fear so—I think so; yes, I am sure," I cried. "Yours would be the nobler way if—if there was nobody but yourself to think of."

He looked at me with a wondering air. "I think I must have expressed myself

wrongly," he said; "it was not ourselves at all that we were thinking of."

"I know; but that is just what I object to," I said. "You sacrifice yourselves, and you encourage the other people to be cruelly selfish, perhaps without knowing it. All that is virtue in you is evil in them. Don't you see that to accept this giving up of your life is barbarous, it is wicked, it is demoralizing to the others. Just in so much as people think well of you they will be forced to think badly of them."

He was a little startled by this view, which, I confess, I struck out on the spur of the moment, not really seeing how much sense there was in it. I justified myself afterwards to myself, and became rather proud of my argument; but for a woman to argue, much less suggest, that self-sacrifice is not the chief of all virtues, is terrible. I was half frightened and disgusted with myself, as one is when one has brought forward in the heat of partizanship a thoroughly bad, yet,

for the moment, effective argument. But he was staggered, and I felt the thrill of success which stirs one to higher effort.

"I never thought of that; perhaps there is some truth in it," he said. Then, after a pause, "I wonder if you, who have been so good to us all, who are fond of Ellen—I am sure you are fond of Ellen—and the children like her."

"Very fond of Ellen, and the children all adore her," I said with perhaps unnecessary emphasis.

"To me that seems natural," he said brightening. "But yet what right have we to ask you to do more? You have been as kind as it is possible to be."

"You want me to do something more? I will do whatever I can—only speak out."

"It was this," he said, "if you would ask—you who are not an interested party—if you would find out what our prospects are. Ellen does not want to escape from her duty.

There is nothing we are not capable of sacrificing rather than that she should shrink from her duty. I need not tell you how serious it is. If I don't take this—in case it is offered to me—I may never get another chance again; but, if I must part from Ellen, I cannot accept it. I cannot; it would be like parting one's soul from one's body. But I have no confidence in myself any more than Ellen has. They have such strong wills. If they say it must not and cannot be—what can I reply? I know myself. I will yield, and so will Ellen. How can one look them in the face and say, 'Though you are her father and mother, we prefer our own comfort to yours'?"

"Do not say another word. I will do it," I said, half exasperated, half sympathetic—oh, yes! more than half sympathetic. They were fools; but I understood it, and was not surprised, though I was exasperated. "I will go and beard the lion in his den," I said. "Perhaps they will not let me see the

lion, only his attendant. But remember this," I said vindictively, "if Ellen and you allow yourselves to be conquered, if you are weak and throw away all your hopes, never come to me again. I have made up my mind. You must give up me as well as all the rest. I will not put up with such weakness." John stared at me with alarm in his eyes; he was not quite comfortable even when I laughed at my own little bit of tragedy. He shook his head with a melancholy perplexity.

"I don't see clearly," he said; "I don't seem able to judge. To give in is folly; and yet, when you think—supposing it were duty—suppose her father were to die when she was far away from him?"

"If we were to consider all these possibilities there never would be a marriage made—never an independent move in life," I cried. "Parents die far from their children, and children, alas! from their parents. How could it be otherwise? But God is near to

us all. If we were each to think ourselves so all-important, life would stand still; there would be no more advance, no progress; everything would come to an end."

John shook his head; partly it was in agreement with what I said, partly in doubt for himself. "How am I to stand up to them and say, "Never mind what you want—*we* want something else? There's the rub," he said, still slowly shaking his head. He had no confidence in his own power of self-assertion. He had never, I believe, been able to answer satisfactorily the question, why should he have any special thing which some one else wished for? It was as natural to him to efface himself, to resign his claims, as it was to other men to assert them. And yet in this point he could not give up—he could not give Ellen up, come what might; but neither could he demand that he and she should be permitted to live their own life.

After long deliberation I decided that it

would not be expedient to rush across to Pleasant Place at once and get it over while John and Ellen were taking their usual evening walk, which was my first impulse; but to wait till the morning, when all would be quiet, and the invalid and his wife in their best humour. It was not a pleasant errand; the more I thought of it, the less I liked it. If they were people who could demand such a sacrifice from their daughter, was it likely that they would be so far moved by my arguments as to change their nature? I went through the little smoky garden plot, where the familiar London "blacks" lay thick on the grass, on the sweetest May morning, when it was a pleasure to be alive. The windows were open, the little white muslin curtains fluttering. Up stairs I heard a gruff voice asking for something, and another, with a querulous tone in it, giving a reply. My heart began to beat louder at the sound. I tried to keep up my courage by all the arguments I could think of. Never-

theless, my heart sank down into my very shoes when the little maid, with her apron folded over her arm, and as grimy as ever, opened to me—with a curtsey and a "La!" of delighted surprise—this door of fate.

Chapter V.

I had a long time to wait before Mrs. Harwood came. The morning sun was shining into the room, making everything more dingy. No doubt it had been dusted that morning as well as the little maid could dust it; but nothing looked pure or fresh in the brightness of the light, which was full of motes, and seemed to find out dust in every corner. The dingy cover on the table, the old-fashioned Books of Beauty, the black horsehair chairs, stood out remorselessly shabby in the sunshine. I wondered what kind of house Ellen would have when she furnished one for herself. Would John and she show any "taste" between them

—would they "pick up" pretty things at sales and old furniture shops, or would they buy a drawing-room suite for twenty-five pounds, such as the cheap upholsterers offer to the unwary? This question amused me while I waited, and I was sorry to think that the new household was to be planted in the Levant, and we should not see how it settled itself. There was a good deal of commotion going on overhead, but I did not pay any attention to it. I pleased myself arranging a little home for the new pair—making it pretty for them. Of her own self Ellen would never, I felt sure, choose the drawing-room suite in walnut and blue rep—not now, at least, after she had been so much with us. As for John, he would probably think any curtain tolerable so long as she sat under its shadow. I had been somewhat afraid of confronting the mother, and possibly the father; but these thoughts put my panic out of my head. These horsehair chairs! was there

ever such an invention of the evil one? Ellen could not like them; it was impossible. When I had come this length my attention was suddenly attracted by the sounds up stairs; for there came upon the floor over my head the sound of a foot stamped violently in apparent fury. There were voices too; but I could not make out what they said. As to this sound however it was easy enough to make out what it meant: nothing could be more suggestive. I trembled and listened, my thoughts taking an entirely new direction; a stamp of anger, of rage, and partially of impotence too. Then there was a woman's voice rising loud in remonstrance. The man seemed to exclaim and denounce violently; the woman protested, growing also louder and louder. I listened with all my might. It was not eavesdropping; for she, at least, knew that I was there; but, listen as I might, I could not make out what they said. After a while there was silence, and

I heard Mrs. Harwood's step coming down the stairs. She paused to do something, perhaps to her cap or her eyes, before she opened the door. She was in a flutter of agitation, the flowers in her black cap quivering through all their wires, her eyes moist, though looking at me with a suspicious gaze. She was very much on her guard, very well aware of my motive, determined to give me no encouragement. All this I read in her vigilant eyes.

"Mrs. Harwood, I came to speak to you—I promised to come and speak to you—about Mr. Ridgway, who is a great friend of mine, as perhaps you know."

The poor woman was in great agitation and trouble; but this only quickened her wits. "I see John Ridgway every day of my life," she said, not without a little dignity. "He might say whatever he pleased to me without asking anybody to speak for him."

"Won't you give your consent to this marriage?" I asked. It seemed wisest to

plunge into it at once. "It is my own anxiety that makes me speak. I have always been anxious about it, almost before I knew them."

"There are other things in the world besides marriages," she said. "In this house we have a great deal to think of. My husband—no doubt you heard his voice just now—he is a great sufferer. For years he has been confined to that little room up stairs. That is not a very cheerful life."

Here she made a pause, which I did not attempt to interrupt; for she had disarmed me by this half-appeal to my sympathy. Then suddenly, with her voice a little shaken and unsteady, she burst forth: "The only company he has is Ellen. What can I do to amuse him—to lead his thoughts off himself? I have as much need of comfort as he has. The only bright thing in the house is Ellen. What would become of us if we were left only the two together all these long days? They are long enough as it is. He has not a very

good temper, and he is weary with trouble —who wouldn't be in his case? John Ridgway is a young man with all the world before him. Why can't he wait? Why should he want to take our only comfort away from us?"

Her voice grew shrill and broken; she began to cry. Poor soul! I believe she had been arguing with her husband on the other side; but it was a little comfort to her to pour out her own grievances, her alarm and distress, to me. I was silenced. How true it had been what John Ridgway said: How could he, so gentle a man, assert himself in the face of this, and claim Ellen as of chief importance to him? Had not they a prior claim?—was not her duty first to her father and mother? I was put to silence myself. I did not know what to say.

"The only thing is," I said timidly at last, "that I should think it would be a comfort to you to feel that Ellen was settled, that she had a home of her own, and a good husband

who would take care of her when—She ought to outlive us all," I added, not knowing how to put it. "And if it were to be always as you say," I went on, getting a little courage, "there would be no marriages, no new homes. We have all had fathers and mothers who had claims upon us. What can it be but a heartbreak to bring up a girl for twenty years and more, and think everything of her, and then see her go away and give her whole heart to some one else, and leave us with a smile on her face?" The idea carried me away—it filled my own heart with a sort of sweet bitterness; for had not my own girl just passed that age and crisis? "Oh! I understand you; I feel with you; I am not unsympathetic. But when one thinks—they must live longer than we; they must have children too, and love as we have loved. You would not like, neither you nor I, if no one cared—if our girls were left out when all the others are loved and courted. You like this good John to be fond of her—to

ask you for her. You would not have been pleased if Ellen had just lived on and on here, your daughter and nothing more."

This argument had some weight upon her. She felt the truth of what I said. However hard the after consequences may be, we still must have our "bairn respectit like the lave." But on this point Mrs. Harwood maintained her position on a height of superiority which few ordinary mortals, even when the mothers of attractive girls, can attain. "I have never made any objection," she said, "to his coming in the evening. Sometimes it is rather inconvenient; but I do not oppose his being here every night."

"And you expect him to be content with this all his life?"

"It would be better to say all my life," she replied severely; "no, not even that. As for me, it does not matter much. I am not one to put myself in anybody's way; but all her father's life—which can't be very long now," she added, with a sudden gush of

tears. They were so near the surface that they flowed at the slightest touch, and besides, they were a great help to her argument. " I don't think it is too much," she cried, " that she should see her poor father out first. She has been the only one that has cheered him up. She is company to him, which I am not. All his troubles are mine, you see. I feel it when his rheumatism is bad ; but Ellen is outside : she can talk and be bright. What should I do without her ! What should I do without her ! I should be nothing better than a slave ! I am afraid to think of it ; and her father—her poor father—it would break his heart ; it would kill him. I know that it would kill him," she said.

Here I must acknowledge that I was very wicked. I could not but think in my heart that it would not be at all a bad thing if Ellen's marriage did kill this unseen father of hers who had tired their patience so long, and who stamped his foot with rage at the

idea that the poor girl might get out of his clutches. He was an old man, and he was a great sufferer. Why should he be so anxious to live? And if a sacrifice was necessary, old Mr. Harwood might just as well be the one to make it as those two good young people from whom he was willing to take all the pleasure of their lives. But this of course was a sentiment to which I dared not give utterance. We stood and looked at each other while these thoughts were going through my mind She felt that she had produced an impression, and was too wise to say anything more to diminish it—while I, for my part, was silenced, and did not know what to say.

"Then they must give in again," I said at last. "They must part; and if she has to spend the rest of her life in giving music lessons, and he to go away, to lose heart and forget her, and be married by any one who will have him in his despair and loneliness—I hope you will think that a

satisfactory conclusion—but I do not. I do not!"

Mrs. Harwood trembled as she looked at me. Was I hard upon her? She shrank aside as if I had given her a blow. "It is not me that will part them," she said. "I have never objected. Often it is very inconvenient—you would not like it yourself if every evening, good or bad, there was a strange man in your house. But I never made any objection. He is welcome to come as long as he likes. It is not me that says a word——"

"Do you want him to throw up his appointment?" I cried, "his means of life."

She looked at me with her face set. I might have noticed, had I chosen, that all the flowers in her cap were shaking and quivering in the shadow cast upon the further wall by the sunshine, but did not care to remark, being angry, this sign of emotion. "If he is so fond of Ellen, he will not mind giving up a chance," she said; "if some one

must give in, why should it be Harwood and me?"

After this I left Pleasant Place hurriedly, with a great deal of indignation in my mind. Even then I was not quite sure of my right to be indignant; but I was so. "If some one must give in, why should it be Harwood and me?" I said to myself that John had known what he would encounter, that he had been right in distrusting himself; but he had not been right in trusting me. I had made no stand against the other side. When you come to haggle about it, and to be uncertain which should give in, how painful the complications of life become! To be perfect, renunciation must be without a word; it must be done as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The moment it is discussed and shifted from one to another, it becomes vulgar, like most things in this universe. This was what I said to myself as I came out into the fresh air and sunshine, out of the little stuffy house.

I began to hate it with its dingy carpets and curtains, its horsehair chairs, that shabby, shabby little parlour—how could anybody think of it as home? I can understand a bright little kitchen, with white hearth and floor, with the firelight shining in all the pans and dishes. But this dusty place with its antimacassars! These thoughts were in my mind when, turning the corner, I met Ellen full in the face, and felt like a traitor, as if I had been speaking ill of her. She looked at me, too, with some surprise. To see me there, coming out of Pleasant Place, startled her. She did not ask me, Where have you been? but her eyes did, with a bewildered gleam.

"Yes; I have been to see your mother," I said; "you are quite right, Ellen. And why? Because I am so much interested; and I wanted to see what mind she was in about your marriage."

"My—marriage! there never was any

question of that," she said quickly, with a sudden flush.

"You are just as bad as the others," said I, moved by this new contradiction. "What! after taking that poor young man's devotion for so long, you will let him go away—go alone, break off everything."

Ellen had grown pale as suddenly as she had blushed. "Is that necessary?" she said, alarmed. "Break off everything? I never thought of that. But, indeed, I think you are making a mistake. If he goes, we shall have to part, but only—only for a time."

"How can you tell," I cried, being highly excited, "how long he may be there? He may linger out his life there, always thinking about you, and longing for you—unless he gets weary and disgusted, and asks himself what is the use, at the last. Such things have been; and you on your side will linger here, running out and in to your lessons with no longer any heart for them; unable to keep yourself from thinking that everybody

is cruel, that life itself is cruel—all because you have not the courage, the spirit——"

She put her hand on mine and squeezed it suddenly, so that she hurt me. "Don't!" she cried; "you don't know; there is nothing, not a word to be said. It is you who are cruel—you who are so kind; so much as to speak of it, when it cannot be! It cannot be—that is the whole matter. It is out of the question. Supposing even that I get to think life cruel, and supposing he should get weary and disgusted. Oh! it was you that said it, you that are so kind. Supposing all that, yet it is impossible; it cannot be; there is nothing more to be said."

"You will see him go away calmly, notwithstanding all?"

"Calmly," she said, with a little laugh, "calmly—yes, I suppose that is the word. I will see him go calmly. I shall not make any fuss if that is what you mean."

"Ellen, I do not understand. I never heard you speak like this before."

"You never saw me like this before," she said with a gasp. She was breathless with a restrained excitement which looked like despair. But when I spoke further, when I would have discussed the matter, she put up her hand and stopped me. There was something in her face, in its fixed expression, which was like the countenance with which her mother had replied to me. It was a startling thought to me that Ellen's soft fresh face, with its pretty bloom, could ever be like that other face surmounted by the black cap and crown of shabby flowers. She turned and walked with me along the road to my own door, but nothing further was said. We went along side by side silent till we reached my house, when she put out her hand and touched mine suddenly, and said that she was in a hurry and must run away. I went in more disturbed than I can say. She had always been so ready to yield, so cheerful, so soft, independent indeed, but never harsh in her independence.

What did this change mean? I felt as if some one to whom I had turned in kindness nad met me with a blow. But by and by, when I thought better of it, I began to understand Ellen. Had not I said to myself, a few minutes before, that self-renunciation when it had to be, must be done silently without a word? better perhaps that it should be done angrily than with self-demonstration, self-assertion. Ellen had comprehended this; she had perceived that it must not be asked or speculated upon, which was to yield. She had chosen her part, and she would not have it discussed or even remarked. I sat in my window pondering while the bright afternoon went by, looking out upon the distant depths of the blue spring atmosphere, just touched by haze, as the air, however bright, always is in London, seeing the people go by in an endless stream without noticing them, without thinking of them. How rare it is in human affairs that there is not some one who must give up to the others, some

one who must sacrifice himself or be sacrificed! And the one to whom this lot falls is always the one who will do it; that is the rule so far as my observation goes. There are some whom nature moves that way, who cannot stand upon their rights, who are touched by the claims of others and can make no resistance on their own account. The tools are to him that can handle them, as our philosopher says; and likewise the sacrifices of life to him who will bear them. Refuse them, that is the only way; but if it is not in your nature to refuse them, what can you do? Alas! for sacrifice is seldom blessed. I am saying something which will sound almost impious to many. Human life is built upon it, and social order; yet personally in itself it is seldom blessed; it debases those who accept it; it harms even those who, without wilfully accepting it, have a dim perception that something is being done for them which has no right to be done. It may, perhaps—I cannot tell—bear fruit of

happiness in the hearts of those who practice it. I cannot tell. Sacrifices are as often mistaken as other things. Their divineness does not make them wise. Sometimes, looking back, even the celebrant will perceive that his offering had better not have been made.

All this was going sadly through my mind when I perceived that some one was passing slowly, endeavouring to attract my attention. By this time it was getting towards evening —and as soon as I was fully roused I saw that it was John Ridgway. If I could have avoided him I should have done so, but now it was not possible; I made him a sign to come up stairs. He came into the drawing-room slowly, wtth none of the eagerness that there had been in his air on the previous day, and it may easily be believed that on my side I was not eager to see him to tell him my story. He came and sat down by me, swinging his stick in his usual absent way, and for a minute neither of us spoke.

"You do not ask me if I have any news for you; you have seen Ellen!"

"No; it is only because I have news on my side. I am not going after all."

"You are not going!"

"You are disappointed," he said, looking at me with a face which was full of interest and sympathy. These are the only words I can use. The disappointment was his, not mine; yet he was more sympathetic with my feeling about it than impressed by his own. "As for me, I don't seem to care. It is better in one way, if it is worse in another. It stops any rise in life; but what do I care for a rise in life? they would never have let me take Ellen. I knew that even before I saw it in your eyes."

"Ellen ought to judge for herself," I said, "and you ought to judge for yourself; you are of full age; you are not boy and girl. No parents have a right to separate you now. And that old man may go on just the same for the next dozen years."

"Did you see him?" John asked. He had a languid, wearied look, scarcely lifting his eyes.

"I saw only her; but I know perfectly well what kind of man he is. He may live for the next twenty years. There is no end to these tyrannical, ill-tempered people; they live for ever. You ought to judge for yourselves. If they had their daughter settled near, coming to them from her own pleasant little home, they would be a great deal happier. You may believe me or not, but I know it. Her visits would be events; they would be proud of her, and tell everybody about her family, and what a good husband she had got, and how he gave her everything she could desire."

"Please God," said John devoutly; his countenance had brightened in spite of himself. But then he shook his head. "If we had but got as far as that," he said.

"You ought to take it into your own hands," cried I in all the fervour of a revo-

lutionary. "If you sacrifice your happiness to them, it will not do them any good; it will rather do them harm. Are you going now to tell your news?"

He had got up on his feet, and stood vaguely hovering over me with a faint smile upon his face. "She will be pleased," he said; "no advancement, but no separation. I have not much ambition; I think I am happy too."

"Then, if you are all pleased," I cried, with annoyance which I could not restrain, "why did you send me on such an errand? I am the only one that seems to be impatient of the present state of affairs, and it is none of my business. Another time you need not say anything about it to me."

"There will never be a time when we shall not be grateful to you," said John; but even his mild look of appealing reproach did not move me. It is hard to interest yourself in people and find after all that they like their own way best.

Chapter VI.

He was quite right in thinking Ellen would be pleased. And yet, after it was all over, she was a little wounded and disappointed, which was very natural. She did not want him to go away, but she wanted him to get the advancement all the same. This was foolish, but still it was natural, and just what a woman would feel. She took great pains to explain to us that it was not hesitation about John, nor even any hesitation on the part of John in going—for Ellen had a quick sense of what was desirable and heroic, and would not have wished her lover to appear indifferent about his own advancement, even though she was very thankful and happy that

in reality he was so. The reason of the failure was that the firm had sent out a nephew, who was in the office, and had a prior claim. "Of course he had the first chance," Ellen said, with a countenance of great seriousness; "what would be the good of being a relation if he did not have the first chance?" And I assented with all the gravity in the world. But she was disappointed, though she was so glad. There ought not to have been any one in the world who had the preference over John! She carried herself with great dignity for some time afterwards, and with the air of a person superior to the foolish and partial judgments of the world; and yet in her heart how thankful she was! from what an abyss of blank loneliness and weary exertion was her life saved! For now that I knew it a little better I could see how little that was happy was in her home. Her mother insisted that she should have that hour's leisure in the evening. That was all that

any one thought of doing for her. It was enough to keep her happy, to keep her hopeful. But without that, how long would Ellen's brave spirit have kept up? Perhaps had she never known John, and that life of infinite tender communion, her natural happy temperament would have struggled on for a long time against all the depressing effects of circumstances, unaided. But to lose is worse than never to have had. If it is

> Better to have loved and lost,
> Than never to have loved at all,

yet it is at the same time harder to lose that bloom of existence out of your lot, than to have struggled on by mere help of nature without it. She had been so happy—making so little go such a long way!—that the loss of her little happiness would have been appalling to her. And yet she was dissatisfied that this heartbreak did not come. She had strung herself up to it.

It would have been advancement, progress, all that a woman desires for those belonging to her, for John. Sacrificing him for the others, she was half angry not to have it in her power to sacrifice herself to his "rise in life." I think I understood her, though we never talked on the subject. She was dissatisfied, although she was relieved. We have all known these mingled feelings.

This happened at the beginning of summer; but all its agitations were over before the long sweet days and endless twilights of the happy season had fully expanded upon us. It seems to me as I grow older that a great deal of the comfort of our lives depends upon summer—upon the weather, let us say, taking it in its most prosaic form. Sometimes indeed to the sorrowful the brightness is oppressive; but to all the masses of ordinary mortals who are neither glad nor sad, it is a wonderful matter not to be chilled to the bone; to be

able to do their work without thinking of a fire; without having a sensation of cold always in their lives never to be got rid of. Ellen and her lover enjoyed that summer as people who have been under sentence of banishment enjoy their native country and their home.

You may think there is not much beauty in a London suburb to tempt any one: and there is not for those who can retire to the beautiful fresh country when they will, and surround themselves with waving woods and green lawns, or taste the freshness of the mountains or the saltness of the sea. We, who go away every year in July, pined and longed for the moment of our removal; and my neighbour in the great house which shut out the air from Pleasant Place, panted in her great garden (which she was proud to think was almost unparalleled for growth and shade in London), and declared herself incapable of breathing any longer in such a close and shut up

locality. But the dwellers in Pleasant Place were less exacting. They thought the long suburban road very pleasant. Where it streamed off into little dusty houses covered with brown ivy and dismal trellis work, and where every unfortunate flower was thick with dust, they gazed with a touch of envy at the "gardens," and felt it to be rural. When my pair of lovers went out for their walk they had not time to go further than to the "Green Man," a little tavern upon the roadside, where one big old elm tree, which had braved the dust and the frost for more years than any one could recollect, stood out at a corner at the junction of two roads, with a bench round it, where the passing carters and cabmen drank their beer, and a trough for the horses, which made it look "quite in the country" to all the inhabitants of our district. Generally they got as far as that, passing the dusty cottages and the little terrace of new houses. A great and prolonged and most

entertaining controversy went on between them as they walked, as to the kind of house in which they should eventually settle down. Ellen, who was not without a bit of romance in her, of the only kind practicable with her upbringing, entertained a longing for one of the dusty little cottages. She thought, like all inexperienced persons, that in her hands it would not be dusty. She would find means of keeping the ivy green. She would see that the flowers grew sweet and clean, and set blacks and dust alike at defiance. John, for his part, whose lodging was in one of those little houses, preferred the new terrace. It was very new—very like a row of ginger-bread houses—but it was very clean, and for the moment bright, not as yet penetrated by the dust. Sometimes I was made the confidante of these interminable, always renewed, always delightful discussions. "They are not dusty yet," Ellen would say, "but how long will it be before they are dusty?

whereas with the villas" (they had a great variety of names—Montpellier Villas, Funchal Villas, Mentone Mansions — for the district was supposed to be very mild) "one knows what one has to expect; and if one could not keep the dust and the blacks out with the help of brushes and dusters, what would be the good of one? I should sow mignonette and Virginia stock," she cried with a firm faith; "low-growing flowers would be sure to thrive. It is only roses (poor roses!) and tall plants that come to harm." John, for his part, dwelt much upon the fact that in the little front parlours of the terrace houses there were shelves for books fitted into a recess. This weighed quite as much with him as the cleanness of the new places. "The villas are too dingy for her," he said, looking admiringly at her fresh face. "She could never endure the little gray, grimy rooms." That was his romance, to think that everything should be shining

and bright about her. He was unconscious of the dinginess of the parlour in Ellen's home. It was all irradiated with her presence to him. These discussions however all ended in a sigh and a laugh from Ellen herself. "It is all very fine talking," she would say.

And so the summer went on. Alas! and other summers after it. My eldest girl married. My boys went out into the world. Many changes came upon our house. The children began to think it a very undesirable locality. Even Chatty, always the sweetest, sighed for South Kensington, if not for a house in the country and a month in London in the season, which was what the other girls wished for. This common suburban road, far from fashion, far from society—what but their mother's inveterate old-fashionedness and indifference to appearances could have kept them there so long? The great house opposite with the garden had ceased to be. The high wall was gone from Pleasant Place,

and instead of it stood a fresh row of little villakins like the terrace which had once been John Ridgway's admiration. Alas! Ellen's forebodings had been fully realized, and the terrace was as dingy as Montpellier Villas by this time. The whole neighbourhood was changing. Half the good houses in the road—the houses, so to speak, of the aristocracy, which to name was to command respect from all the neighbourhood—had been built out and adorned with large fronts of plate glass and made into shops. Omnibuses now rolled along the dusty way. The station where they used to stop had been pushed out beyond the "Green Man," which once we had felt to be "quite in the country." Everything was changing; but my pair of lovers did not change. Ellen got other pupils instead of Chatty and her contemporaries who were growing up and beyond her skill, and came out at ten o'clock every morning with as fresh a face as ever, and her little roll of music always in her hand. And

every evening, though now he was set down at his lodgings from the omnibus, and no longer passed my window on his way home. John made his pilgrimage of love to Pleasant Place. She kept her youth—the sweet complexion, the dew in her eyes, and the bloom upon her cheek—in a way I could not understand. The long waiting did not seem to try her. She had always his evening visit to look for, and her days were full of occupation. But John, who had naturally a worn look, did not bear the probation so well as Ellen. He grew bald; a general rustiness came over him. He had looked older than he was to begin with: his light locks, his colourless countenance, faded into a look of age. He was very patient—almost more patient than Ellen, who, being of a more vivacious temper, had occasional little outbursts of petulant despair, of which she was greatly ashamed afterwards; but at the same time this prolonged and hopeless waiting had more effect upon him than upon her.

Sometimes he would come to see me by himself for the mere pleasure, it seemed to me, though we rarely spoke on the subject, of being understood.

"Is this to go on for ever?" I said. "Is it never to come to an end?"

"It looks like it," said John, somewhat drearily. "We always talk about our little house. I have got three rises since then. I doubt if I shall ever have any more; but we don't seem a bit nearer——" and he ended with a sigh—not of impatience, like those quick sighs mixed up with indignant, abrupt little laughs in which Ellen often gave vent to her feelings—but of weariness and despondency much more hard to bear.

"And the father," I said, "seems not a day nearer the end of his trouble. Poor man, I don't wish him any harm."

This, I fear, was a hypocritical speech, for in my heart I should not have been at all sorry to hear that his "trouble" was coming to an end.

Then for the first time a gleam of humour lighted in John's eye. "I am beginning to suspect that he is—better," he said; "stronger at least. I am pretty sure he has no thought of coming to an end."

"All the better," I said; "if he gets well, Ellen will be free."

"He will never get well," said John, falling back into his dejection, "and he will never die."

"Then it will never come to anything. Can you consent to that?" I said.

He made me no reply. He shook his head; whether in dismal acceptance of the situation, whether in protest against it, I cannot tell. This interview filled me with dismay. I spent hours pondering whether, and how, I could interfere. My interference had not been of much use before. And my children began to laugh when this lingering, commonplace little romance was talked of. "My mother's lovers," the boys called them —"My mother's turtle-doves."

The time had almost run on to the length of Jacob's wooing when one day Ellen came to me, not running in, eager and troubled with her secret as of old, but so much more quietly than usual, with such a still and fixed composure about her, that I knew something serious had happened. I sent away as quickly as I could the other people who were in the room, for I need not say that to find me alone was all but an impossibility. I gave Chatty, now a fine, tall girl of twenty, a look, which was enough for her; she always understood better than any one. And when at last we were free I turned to my visitor anxiously. "What is it?" I said. It did not excite her so much as it did me.

She gave a little abstracted smile. "You always see through me," she said. "I thought there was no meaning in my face. It has come at last. He is really going this time, directly, to the Levant. Oh, what a little thing Chatty was when I

asked her to look in the atlas for the Levant; and now she is going to be married! What will you do," she asked abruptly, stopping short to look at me, "when they are all married and you are left alone?"

I had asked myself this question sometimes, and it was not one I liked. "'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,'" I said; "the two little ones of all have not so much as thought of marrying yet."

Ellen answered me with a sigh, a quickly drawn impatient breath. "He is to sail in a fortnight," she said. "Things have gone wrong with the nephew. I knew he never could be so good as John; and now John must go in a hurry to set things right. What a good thing that it is all in a hurry! We shall not have time to think."

"You must go with him—you must go with him, Ellen!" I cried.

She turned upon me almost with severity in her tone. "I thought you knew better.

I—go with him! Look here," she cried very hurriedly, "don't think I don't face the full consequences—the whole matter. He is tired, tired to death. He will be glad to go—and after—after! If he should find some one else there, I shall never be the one to blame him."

"Ellen! you ought to ask his pardon on your knees—*he* find some one else! What wrong you do to the faithfullest—the truest——"

"He is the faithfullest," she said; then, after a moment, "but I will never blame him. I tell you beforehand. He has been more patient than ever man was."

Did she believe what she was saying? It was very hard to know. The fortnight flew by like a day. The days had been very long before in their monotony, but now these two weeks were like two hours. I never quite knew what passed. John had taken his courage in both hands, and had bearded the father himself in his den; but,

so far as I could make out, it was not the father but the mother with her tears who vanquished him. "When I saw what her life was," he said to me when he took leave of me, "such a life! my mouth was closed. Who am I that I should take away her only comfort from her? We love each other very dearly, it is our happiness, it is the one thing which makes everything else sweet: but perhaps, as Ellen says, there is no duty in it. It is all enjoyment. Her duty is to them; it is her pleasure, she says, her happiness to be with me."

"But—but you have been engaged for years. No doubt it is your happiness—but surely there is duty too."

"She says not. My mind is rather confused. I don't seem to know. Duty, you know, duty is a thing that it is rather hard to do; something one has to raise one's self up to, and carry through with it, whether we like it or whether we don't like it.

That's her definition; and it seems right—don't you think it is right? But to say that of us would be absurd. It is all pleasure—all delight," his tired eyelids rose a little to show a gleam of emotion, then dropped again with a sigh; "that is her argument; I suppose it is true."

"Then, do you mean to say——" I cried, and stopped short in sheer bewilderment of mind, not knowing what words to use.

"I don't think I mean to say anything. My head is all confused. I don't seem to know. Our feeling is all one wish to be together; only to see one another makes us happy. Can there be duty in that? she says. It seems right, yet sometimes I think it is wrong, though I can't tell how."

I was confused too and silenced. I did not know what to say. "It depends," I said faltering, "upon what you consider the object of life."

"Some people say happiness; but that

would not suit Ellen's theory," he said. "Duty—I had an idea myself that duty was easily defined; but it seems it is as difficult as everything is. So far as I can make out," he added with a faint smile, "I have got no duties at all."

"To be faithful to her," I said, recollecting the strange speech she had made to me.

He almost laughed outright. "Faithful! that is no duty; it is my existence. Do you think I could be unfaithful if I were to try?"

These were almost the last words he said to me. I suppose he satisfied himself that his duty to his employer required him to go away. And Ellen had a feverish desire that he should go away, now that the matter had been broached a second time. I am not sure that when the possibility of sacrifice on his part dawned upon her, the chance that he might relinquish for her this renewed chance of rising in the

world, there did not arise in her mind a hasty impatient wish that he might be unfaithful, and give her up altogether. Sometimes the impatience of a tired spirit will take this form. Ellen was very proud; by dint of having made sacrifices all her life, she had an impetuous terror of being in her turn the object for which sacrifices should be made. To accept them was bitterness to her. She was eager to hurry all his preparations, to get him despatched, if possible, a little earlier than the necessary time. She kept a cheerful face, making little jokes about the Levant and the people he would meet there, which surprised everybody. "Is she glad that he is going?" Chatty asked me, with eyes like two round lamps of alarmed surprise. The last night of all they spent with us—and it seemed a relief to Ellen that it should be thus spent, and not *tête-à-tête* as so many other evenings had been. It was the very height and flush of summer, an evening which would not sink

into darkness and night as other evenings do. The moon was up long before the sun had gone reluctantly away. We sat without the lamp in the soft twilight, with the stream of wayfarers going past the windows, and all the familiar sounds, which were not vulgar to us, we were so used to them. They were both glad of the half light. When I told Ellen to go and sing to us, she refused at first with a look of reproach; then, with a little shake of her head, as if to throw off all weakness, changed her mind and went to the piano. It was Chatty who insisted upon Mr. Ridgway's favourite song, perhaps out of heedlessness, perhaps with that curious propensity the young often have to probe wounds and investigate how deep a sentiment may go. We sat in the larger room, John and myself, while behind, in the dim evening, in the distance, scarcely visible, Ellen sat at the piano and sang. What the effort cost her I would not venture to inquire. As for him, he sat with melancholy

composure listening to every tone of her voice. She had a very sweet refined voice —not powerful, but tender, what people call sympathetic. I could not distinguish his face, but I saw his hand beat the measure accompanying every line, and when she came to the burden of the song he said it over softly to himself. Broken by all the babble outside, and by the music in the background, I yet heard him, all tuneless and low, murmuring this to himself: "I will come again, I will come again, my sweet and bonnie." Whether his eyes were dry I cannot tell, but mine were wet. He said them with no excitement, as if they were the words most simple, most natural—the very breathing of his heart. How often, I wonder, would he think of that dim room, the half-seen companions, the sweet and tender voice rising out of the twilight? I said to myself, "Whoever may mistrust you, I will never mistrust you," with fervour. But just as the words passed through my mind,

as if Ellen had heard them, her song broke off all in a moment, died away in the last line, "I will come a——" There was a sudden break, a jar on the piano—and she sprang up and came towards us, stumbling, with her hands put out, as if she could not see. The next sound I heard was an unsteady little laugh, as she threw herself down on a sofa in the corner where Chatty was sitting. "I wonder why you are all so fond of that old-fashioned nonsense," she said.

And next day the last farewells were said, and John went away.

CHAPTER VII.

WE left town directly after this for the autumn holidays. The holidays had not very much meaning now that all the boys had left school, and we might have gone away when we pleased. But the two youngest girls were still in the remorseless hands of Fräulein Stimme, and the habit of emancipation in the regular holiday season had clung to me. I tried very hard to get Ellen to go with us, for at least a day or two, but she resisted with a kind of passion. Her mother, I am sure, would have been glad had she gone; but Ellen would not. There was in her face a secret protestation,

of which she was perhaps not even herself aware, that if her duty bound life itself from all expansion, it must also bind her in every day of her life. She would not accept the small alleviation, having, with her eyes open and with a full sense of what she was about, resigned everything else. She would have been more perfect, and her sacrifice more sweet, had she taken sweetly the little consolations of every day; but nobody is perfect, and Ellen would not come. I had gone to Pleasant Place to ask her, and the scene was a curious one. The mother and daughter both came to the parlour to receive me, and I saw them together for the first time. It was about a fortnight after John went away. Ellen had not been ill, though I had feared she would; but she was pale, with dark lines under her eyes, and a worn and nervous look. She was bearing her burden very bravely, but it was all the harder upon her that she was evidently determined not to complain. When

I told my errand, Mrs. Harwood replied eagerly, "You must go, Ellen. Oh, yes! I can do; I can do very well. It will only be for a week, and it will do you so much good; you must go." Ellen took scarcely any notice of this address. She thanked me with her usual smile. "It is very, very good of you—you are always good—but it is impossible." "Why impossible, why impossible?" cried her mother. "When I tell you I can do very well—I can manage. Your father will not mind, when it is to do you good." I saw that Ellen required a moment's interval of preparation before she looked round.

"Dear mother," she said, "we have not any make-believes between us, have we? How is it possible that I can go? Every moment is mapped out. No, no; I cannot do it. Thank you all the same. My mother wants to give me a pleasure, but it cannot be. Go away for a week! I have never done that in all my life."

"But you think she can, you think she ought," I said, turning to her mother. The poor woman looked at her child with a piteous look. I think it dawned upon her, then and there, for the first time, that perhaps she had made a mistake about Ellen. It had not occurred to her that there had been any selfishness in her tearful sense of the impossibility of parting with her daughter. All at once, in a moment, with a sudden gleam of that enlightenment which so often comes too late, she saw it. She saw it, and it went through her like an arrow. She turned to me with another piteous glance. What have I done? what have I done? her looks seemed to say.

"Two or three days," the poor woman said, with a melancholy attempt at playfulness. "Nothing can happen to us in that time. Her father is ill," she said, turning to me as if I knew nothing, "and we are always anxious. She thinks it will be too much for me by myself. But what does it matter

for a few days? If I am overdone, I can rest when she comes back."

Was it possible she could suppose that this was all I knew? I was afraid to catch Ellen's eye. I did not know what might come after such a speech. She might break forth with some sudden revelation of all that I felt sure must be in her heart. I closed my eyes instinctively, sick with terror. Next moment I heard Ellen's clear, agreeable voice.

"I don't want you to be overdone, mother. What is the use of all that is past and gone if I am to take holidays and run away when I like for two or three days? No, no; my place is here, and here I must stay. I don't want you to be overdone."

And looking at her, I saw that she smiled. But her mother's face was full of trouble. She looked from Ellen to me, and from me to Ellen. For everything there is a beginning. Did she only then for the first time perceive what had been done?

However, after this there was nothing more to say. We did not see Ellen again till the days were short and the brilliant weather over. She changed very much during that winter. Her youth, which had bloomed on so long unaltered, seemed to leave her in a day. When we came back, from looking twenty she suddenly looked thirty-five. The bloom went from her cheeks. She was as trim as ever, and as lightfooted, going out alert and bright every morning to her lessons; but her pretty little figure had shrunk, and her very step on the pavement sounded different. Life and all its hopes and anticipations seemed to have ebbed away from her. I don't doubt that many of her neighbours had been going on in their dull routine of life without knowing even such hopes or prospects as hers, all this time by Ellen's side, fulfilling their round of duty without any diversions. Oh, the mystery of these myriads of humble lives, which are never enlivened even by a

romance *manqué*, a story that might have been; that steal away from dull youth to dull age, never knowing anything but the day's work, never coming to anything! But Ellen had known a something different, a life that was her own; and now she had lost it. The effect was great; how could it be otherwise? She lost herself altogether for a little while, and when she came to again, as all worthy souls must come, she was another Ellen; older than her age as the other had been younger, and prepared for everything. No longer trying to evade suffering; rather desirous, if that might be, to forestall it, to discount it—if I may use the word—before it was due, and know the worst. She never told me this in words, but I felt that it was so. It is not only in a shipwreck that the unfortunate on the verge of death plunge in to get it over a few hours, a few minutes, sooner. In life there are many shipwrecks which we would forestall, if we could, in the same way, by a

plunge—by a voluntary putting on of the decisive moment. Some, I suppose, will always put it off by every expedient that despair can suggest; but there are also those who can bear anything but to wait, until slowly, surely, the catastrophe comes. Ellen wanted to make the plunge, to get it over, partly for John's sake, whose infidelity she began to calculate upon—to (she believed) wish for. "He will never be able to live without a home to go to, without a woman to speak to, now," she said once, in a moment of incaution—for she was very guarded, very reticent, about all this part of her mind, and rarely betrayed herself. It is curious how little faith women in general, even the most tender, have in a man's constancy. Either it is because of an inherent want of trust in their own power to secure affection, which might be called humility; or else it is quite the reverse—a pride of sex too subtle to show, in any conscious way—overweening confidence in the power over a man of any other

woman who happens to be near him, and want of confidence in any power on his part to resist these fascinations. Ellen had made up her mind that her lover when he was absent from her would be, as she would have said, "like all the rest." Perhaps, in a kind of wild generosity, she wished it, feeling that she herself never might be free to make him happy; but, anyhow, she was persuaded that this was how it would be. She looked out for signs of it in his very first letter. She wanted to have it over—to cut off remorselessly out of her altered being all the agitations of hope.

But I need not say that John's letters were everything a lover's, or rather a husband's letters should be. They were more like a husband's letters, with very few protestations in them, but a gentle continued reference to her, and to their past life together, which was more touching than any rhapsodies. She brought them to me often, folding down, with a

blush which made her look like the blooming Ellen of old, some corner of especial tenderness, something that was too sacred for a stranger's eye, but always putting them back in her pocket with a word which sounded almost like a grudge, as who should say, "For this once all is well, but next time you shall see." Thus she held on to her happiness as by a strained thread, expecting every moment when it would snap, and defying it to do so, yet throbbing all the time with a passion of anxiety, as day after day it held out, proving her foreboding vain. That winter, though I constantly saw her, my mind was taken up by other things than Ellen. It was then that the children finally prevailed upon me to leave the Road. A row of cheap advertising shops had sprung up facing us where had been the great garden I have so often mentioned, and the noise and flaring lights were more than I could put up with, after all my resistance to their wishes. So that at last, to my great regret, but the exulta-

tion of the young ones, it was decided that we must go away.

The removal, and the bustle there was, the change of furniture—for our old things would not do for the new house, and Chatty, Heaven save us! had grown artistic, and even the little ones and Fräulein Stimme knew a great deal better than I did—occupied my mind and my time; and it took a still longer time to settle down than it did to tear up our old roots. So that there was a long interval during which we saw little of Ellen; and though we never forgot her, or ceased to take an interest in everything that concerned her, the distance of itself threw us apart. Now and then she paid us a visit, always with John's letter in her pocket, but her time was so limited that she never could stay long. And sometimes I, and sometimes Chatty, made a pilgrimage to the old district to see her. But we never could have an uninterrupted long talk in Pleasant Place. Either Ellen was called away, or Mrs. Harwood

would come in and sit down with her work, always anxiously watching her daughter. This separation from the only people to whom she could talk of her own private and intimate concerns was a further narrowing and limitation of poor Ellen's life. But what could I do? I could not vex my children for her sake. She told us that she went and looked at the old house almost every day, and at the square window in which I used to sit and see John pass. John passed no longer, nor was I there to see. But Ellen remained bound in the same spot, seeing everything desert her—love, and friendship, and sympathy, and all her youth and her hope. Can you not fancy with what thoughts this poor girl (though she was a girl no longer) would pause, as she passed, to look at the abandoned place so woven in with the brightest episode of her life, feeling herself stranded there, impotent, unable to make a step—her breast still heaving with all the vigour of existence, yet her life bound down in the

narrowest contracted circle? Her mother, who had got to watch her narrowly, told me afterwards that she always knew when Ellen had passed No. 16; and indeed I myself was rather glad to hear that at length No. 16 had shared the general fate, that my window existed no longer, and that a great shop with plate-glass windows was bulging out where our house had been. Better when a place is desecrated that it should be desecrated wholly, and leave no vestige of its old self at all.

Thus more than a year glided away, spring and winter, summer and autumn, and then winter again. Chatty came in one November morning, when London was half invisible, wrapped in mist and fog, with a very grave face, to tell me that she had met Ellen, and Ellen had told her there was bad news from John. "I can't understand her," Chatty said. "I couldn't make out what it was; that business had been bad, and things had gone wrong; and then something with a sort of laugh that he had got other thoughts in

his mind at last, as she knew all along he would, and that she was glad. What could she mean?" I did not know what she could mean, but I resolved to go and see Ellen to ascertain what the change was. It is easier however to say than to do when one is full of one's own affairs, and so it happened that for a full week, though intending to go every day, I never did so. It was partly my fault. The family affairs were many, and the family interests engrossing. It was not that I cared for Ellen less, but my own claimed me on every hand. When one afternoon, about a fortnight after, I was told that Miss Harwood was in the drawing-room and wished to speak to me, my heart upbraided me with my neglect. I hurried to her and led her away from that public place where everybody came and went, to my own little sitting-room, where we might be alone. Ellen was very pale; her eyes looked very dry and bright, not dewy and soft as they used to be. There was a feverish look of

unrest and excitement about her. "There is something wrong," I cried. "What is it? Chatty told me—something about John."

"I don't know that it is anything wrong," she said. The smile that had frightened Chatty came over her face—a smile that made one unhappy, the lip drawn tightly over the teeth in the most ghastly mockery of amusement. "No; I don't know that it is anything wrong. You know I always expected—always from the moment he went away—that between him and me things would soon be at an end. Oh, yes, I expected it, and I did not wish it otherwise; for what good is it to me that a man should be engaged to me, and waste his life for me, when I never could do anything for him?"

Here she made a little breathless pause, and laughed. "Oh, don't, Ellen, don't!" I cried. I could not bear the laugh; the smile was bad enough.

"Why not?" she said with a little defiance; "would you have me cry? I

expected it long ago. The wonder is that it should have been so long coming. That is," she cried suddenly after a pause, "that is if this is really what it means. I took it for granted at first; but I cannot be certain. I cannot be certain! Read it, you who know him, and tell me, tell me! Oh, I can bear it quite well. I should be rather glad if this is what it means."

She thrust a letter into my hand, and going away with a rapid step to the window, stood there with her hack to me, looking out. I saw her standing against the light, playing restlessly with the tassel of the blind. In her desire to seem composed, or else in the mere excitement which boiled in her veins, she began to hum a tune. I don't think she knew herself what it was.

The letter which she professed to have taken so easily was worn with much reading, and it had been carried about, folded and refolded a hundred times. There was no sign of indifference in all that—and this is what it said:—

"I got your last letter, dear Ellen, on Tuesday. I think you must have written in low spirits. Perhaps you had a feeling, such as we used to talk about, of what was happening here. As for me, nobody could be in lower spirits than this leaves me. I have lost heart altogether. Everything has gone wrong; the business is at an end: I shut up the office to-day. If it is in any way my fault, God forgive me! But the conflict in my heart has been so great that I sometimes fear it must be my fault. I had been low enough before, thinking and thinking how the end was to come between you and me. Everything has gone wrong inside and out. I had such confidence, and now it is all going. What I had most faith in has deceived me. I thought I never was the man to change or to fail, and that I could have trusted myself in any circumstances; but it does not seem so. And why should I keep you hanging on when all's wrong with me? I always thought I could redeem it; but it

hasn't proved so. You must just give me up, Ellen, as a bad job. Sometimes I have thought you wished it. Where I am to drift to, I can't tell; but there's no prospect of drifting back, or, what I hoped for, sailing back in prosperity to you. You have seen it coming, I can see by your letters, and I think, perhaps, though it seems strange to say so, that you won't mind. I shall not stay here; but I have not made up my mind where to go. Forget a poor fellow that was never worthy to be yours.—JOHN RIDGWAY."

My hands dropped with the letter in them. The rustle it made was the only sign she could have had that I had read it, or else instinct or inward vision. That instant she turned upon me from the window with a cry of wild suspense: "Well?"

"I am confounded. I don't know what to think. Ellen, it looks more like guilt to the office than falsehood to you."

"Guilt—to the office!" Her face blazed up

at once in scorching colour. She looked at me in fierce resentment and excitement, stamping her foot. "Guilt—to the office! How dare you? How dare you?" she cried like a fury. She clenched her hands at me, and looked as if she could have torn me in pieces. "Whatever he has done," she cried, "he has done nothing he had not a right to do. Do you know who you are speaking of? John! You might as well tell me I had broken into your house at night and robbed you. *He* have anything to blame himself for with the office?—never! nor with any one. What he has done is what he had a right to do—I am the first to say so. He has been wearied out. You said it once yourself, long, long before my eyes were opened; and at last he has done it—and he had a good right!" She stood for one moment before me in the fervour of this fiery address; then, suddenly, she sank and dropped on her knees by my side. "You think it means that? You see it—don't

you see it? He has grown weary, as was so natural. He thought he could trust himself; but it proved different; and then he thought he could redeem it. What can that mean but one thing?—he has got some one else to care for him. There is nothing wrong in that. It is not I that will ever blame him. The only thing was that a horrible doubt came over me this morning—if it should not mean what I thought it did! That is folly, I know; but you, who know him—put away all that about wrong to the office, which is out of the question, and you will see it cannot be anything but one thing."

"It is not that," I said.

She clasped her hands, kneeling by my side. "You always took his part," she said in a low voice. "You will not see it." Why did she tremble so? Did she want to believe it, or not to believe it? I could not understand Ellen. Just then, from the room below, there came a voice singing. It was

Chatty's voice, the child whom she had taught, who had been the witness of their wooing. She knew nothing about all this; she did not even know that Ellen was in the house. What so natural as that she should sing the song her mistress had taught her? It was that which Ellen herself had been humming as she stood at the window.

"Listen!" I said. "You are answered in his own words—'I will come again.'"

This was more than Ellen could bear. She made one effort to rise to her feet, to regain her composure; but the music was too much. At that moment I myself felt it to be too much. She fell down at my feet in a passion of sobs and tears.

Afterwards I knew the meaning of Ellen's passionate determination to admit no meaning but one to the letter. She had taken him at his word. In her certainty that this was to happen, she had seen no other interpretation to it, until it was too late. She

had never sent any reply ; and he had not written again. It was now a month since the letter had been received, and this sudden breaking off of the correspondence had been so far final on both sides. To satisfy myself, I sent to inquire at the office, and found that no blame was attached to John ; but that he had been much depressed, unduly depressed, by his failure to remedy the faults of his predecessor, and had left as soon as his accounts were forwarded and all the business details carefully wound up : and had not been heard of more. I compelled, I may say, Ellen to write, now that it was too late ; but her letter was returned to her some time after. He had left the place, and nothing was known of him there ; nor could we discover where he had gone.

Chapter VIII.

This little tragedy, as it appeared to me at the time, made a great impression on my mind. It did not make me ill; that would have been absurd. But still it helped, I suppose, to depress me generally and enhance the effect of the cold that had hung about me so long, and for which the elder ones, taking counsel together, decided that the desire of the younger ones should be gratified, and I should be made to go to Italy for the spring. The girls were wild to go, and my long-continued lingering cold was such a good excuse. For my own part, I was not willing at all; but what can one woman, especially when she is their mother, do against

so many? I had to give in and go. I went to see Ellen before we started, and it was a very painful visit. She was still keeping up with a certain defiance of everybody. But in the last two months she had changed wonderfully. For one thing, she had shrunk into half her size. She was never anything but a little woman; but now she seemed to me no bigger than a child. And those cheerful, happy brown eyes, which had so triumphed over and smiled at all the privations of life, looked out from two hollow caverns, twice as large as they had ever been before, and with a woeful look that broke one's heart. It was not always that they had this woeful look. When she was conscious of inspection she played them about with an artificial activity as if they had been lanterns, forcing a smile into them which sometimes looked almost like a sneer; but when she forgot that any one was looking at her, then both smile and light went out, and there was in them a woeful doubt

and question which nothing could solve. Had she been wrong? Had she misjudged him whom her heart could not forget or relinquish? Was it likely that she could give him up lightly even had he been proved unworthy? And oh, Heaven! was he proved unworthy, or had she done him wrong? This was what Ellen was asking herself, without intermission, for ever and ever; and her mother, on her side, watched Ellen piteously with much the same question in her eyes. Had she, too, made a mistake? Was it possible that she had exacted a sacrifice which she had no right to exact, and in mere cowardice, and fear of loneliness, and desire for love and succour on her own part, spoiled two lives? This question, which was almost identical in both, made the mother and daughter singularly like each other; except that Ellen kept asking her question of the air, which is so full of human sighs, and the sky, whither so many ungranted wishes go

up, and the darkness of space, in which is no reply—and the mother asked hers of Ellen, interrogating her countenance mutely all day long, and of every friend of Ellen's who could throw any light upon the question. She stole into the room when Ellen left me for a moment, and whispered, coming close to me, lest the very walls should hear—

"How do you think she is looking? She will not say a word to me about him—not a word. Don't you think she has been too hasty? Oh! I would give everything I have if she would only go with you and look for John, and make it up with him again."

"I thought you could not spare her," I said with perhaps some cruelty in my intention. She wrung her hands, and looked piteously in my face.

"You think it is all my fault! I never thought it would come to this; I never thought he would go away. Oh, if I had only let them marry at first! I often think

if she had been happy in her own home, coming to see her father every day, it would have been more of a change for him, more company than having her always. Oh! if one could only tell what is going to happen. She might have had a nice family by this time, and the eldest little girl big enough to run in and play at his feet and amuse her grandpa. He always was fond of children. But we'll never see Ellen's children now!" cried the poor woman. "And you think it is my fault!"

I could not reproach her; her black cap with the flowers, her little woollen shawl about her shoulders, grew tragic as she poured forth her trouble. It was not so dignified as the poet's picture, but yet, like him, she

> Saw the unborn faces shine
> Beside the never lighted fire;

and with a groan of misery felt herself the slayer of those innocents that had never

been. The tragic and the comic mingled in the vision of that "eldest little girl," the child who would have amused her grandpa had she been permitted to come into being; but it was all tragic to poor Mrs. Harwood. She saw no laugh, no smile, in the situation anywhere.

We went to Mentone, and stayed there till the bitterness of the winter was over, then moved along that delightful coast, and were in Genoa in April. To speak of that stately city as a commercial town seems insulting—and yet so it is nowadays. I recognized at once the type I had known in other days when I sat at the window of the hotel and watched the people coming and going. It reminded me of my window in the Road, where, looking out, I saw the respectable City people—clerks like John Ridgway, and merchants of the same cut though of more substantial comfort—wending their way to their business in the morning, and to their suburban homes in

the evening. I do not know that I love the commercial world; but I like to see that natural order of life—the man "going forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening." The fashion of it is different in a foreign town, but still the life is the same. We changed our quarters however after we had been for some time in that city, so-called of palaces, and were lodged in a suite of rooms very hard to get up to (though the staircase was marble), but very delightful when one was there; rooms which overlooked the high terrace which runs round a portion of the bay between the inns and the quays. I forget what it is called. It is a beautiful promenade, commanding the loveliest view of that most beautiful bay and all that is going on in it. At night, with all its twinkling semicircle of lights, it was a continual enchantment to me; but this or any of my private admirations are not much to the purpose of my story. Sitting at the window, always my

favourite post, I became acquainted with various individual figures among those who haunted this terrace. Old gentlemen going out to sun themselves in the morning before the heat was too great; children and nursemaids, Genoese women with their pretty veils, invalids who had got up the stairs, I cannot tell how, and sat panting on the benches, enjoying the sea air and the sunshine. There was one however among this panorama of passing figures, which gave me a startled sense of familiarity. It was too far off to see the man's face. He was not an invalid; but he was bent, either with past sickness or with present care, and walked with a drooping head and a languid step. After watching him for a time, I concluded (having always a great weakness for making out other people's lives, how they flow) that he had some occupation in the town from which he escaped, whenever he had leisure, to rest a little and refresh himself upon the

terrace. He came very regularly, just at the time when Italian shops and offices have a way of shutting up, in the middle of the day—very regularly, always, or almost always, at the same hour. He came up the steps slowly and languidly, stopped a little to take breath, and then walked half way round the terrace to a certain bench upon which he always seated himself. Sometimes he brought his luncheon with him and ate it there. At other times, having once gained that place, he sat quite still in a corner of it, not reading, nor taking any notice of the other passers-by. No one was with him, no one ever spoke to him. When I noticed him first he startled me. Who was he like? His bent figure, his languid step, resembled no one I could think of; but yet I said to myself, He is like somebody. I established a little friendship with him, though it was a friendship without any return; for though I could see him he could not see me, nor could I

distinguish his face ; and we never saw him anywhere else, neither at church, nor in the streets, not even on the *festas* when everybody was about ; but always just there on that one spot. I looked for him as regularly as the day came. "My mother's old gentleman," Chatty called him. Everybody is old who is not young to these children ; but though he was not young he did not seem to me to be old. And he puzzled as much as he interested me. Who was he like ? I never even asked myself, Who was he ? It would be no one I had any chance of acquaintance with. Some poor *employé* in a Genoa office ; how should I know him ? I could not feel at all sure, when I was cross-examined on the subject, whether I really remembered any one whom he was like ; but yet he had startled me more than I can say.

Genoa, where we had friends and family reasons for staying, became very hot as the spring advanced into early summer, and we

removed to one of the lovely little towns on the coast at a little distance, Santa Margherita. When we had been settled there for a few days, Chatty came in to me one evening with a pale face. "I have just seen your old gentleman," she said. "I think he must live out here;" but I saw by the expression of her eyes that there was more to say. She added after a moment, "And I know who he is like."

"Ah! you have seen his face," I said; and then, before she had spoken, it suddenly flashed on myself in a moment, "John Ridgway!" I cried.

"Mother," said Chatty, quite pale, "I think it is his ghost."

I went out with her instantly to where she had seen him, and we made some inquiries, but with no success. When I began to think it over, he was not like John Ridgway. He was bent and stooping, whereas John was erect; his head drooped, whereas how well I recollected poor John's head thrown

back a little, his hat upon the back of it, his visionary outlook rather to the skies than to the ground. No, no, not like him a bit; but yet it might be his ghost, as Chatty said. We made a great many inquiries, but for the moment with no success, and you may suppose that I watched the passers-by from my window with more devotion than ever. One evening in the sudden nightfall of the Italian skies, when darkness comes all at once, I was seated in my usual place, scarcely seeing however the moving figures outside, though all the population of the place seemed to be out, sitting round the doors, and strolling leisurely along enjoying the heavenly coolness and the breeze from the sea. At the further end of the room Chatty was at the piano, playing to me softly in the dark, which she knows is what I like, and now and then striking into some old song such as I love. She was sure to arrive sooner or latter at that one with which we now had so many associa-

tions ; but I was not thinking of the song, nor for the moment of Ellen or her faithful (as I was sure he was still) lover at all. A woman with so many children has always plenty to think of. My mind was busy with my own affairs. The windows were open, and the babble of the voices outside—high pitched, resounding Italian voices, not like the murmur of English—came in to us as the music floated out. All at once, I suddenly woke up from my thinking and my family concerns. In the dusk one figure detached itself from among the others with a start, and came forward slowly with bent head and languid step. Had he never heard that song since he heard Ellen break off, choked with tears unshed, and a despair which had never been revealed ? He came quite close under the window where I could see him no longer. I could not see him at all ; it was too dark. I divined him. Who could it be but he ? Not like John Ridgway, and yet John ; his ghost, as Chatty had said.

I did not stop to think what I was to do, but rose up in the dark room where the child was singing, only a voice, herself invisible in the gloom. I don't know whether Chatty saw me go; but, if so, she was inspired unawares by the occasion, and went on with her song. I ran down stairs and went out softly to the open door of the inn, where there were other people standing about. Then I saw him quite plainly by the light from a lower window. His head was slightly raised towards the place from which the song came. He was very pale in that pale, doubtful light, worn and old and sad; but as he looked up, a strange illumination was on his face. His hand beat the air softly, keeping time. As she came to the refrain his lips began to move as if he were repeating after his old habit those words, "I will come again." Then a sudden cloud of pain seemed to come over his face—he shook his head faintly, then bowed it upon his breast.

In a moment I had him by the arm.

"John," I said in my excitement; "John Ridgway! we have found you." For the moment, I believe, he thought it was Ellen who had touched him; his white face seemed to leap into light; then paled again. He took off his hat with his old formal, somewhat shy politeness—"I thought it must be you, madame," he said. He said "madame" instead of the old English madam, which he had always used: this little concession to the changed scene was all the difference. He made no mystery about himself, and showed no reluctance to come in with me, to talk as of old. He told me he had a situation in an office in Genoa, and that his health was bad. "After that *fiasco* in the Levant, I had not much heart for anything. I took the first thing that was offered," he said, with his old vague smile; "for a man must live—till he dies." "There must be no question of dying—at your age," I cried. This time his smile almost came the length of a momentary laugh. He shook his head

but he did not continue the subject. He was very silent for some time after. Indeed, he said nothing, except in reply to my questions, till Chatty left the room, and we were alone. Then all at once, in the middle of something I was saying—" Is she—married again ? " he said.

" Married—again ! "

" It is a foolish question. She was not married to me ; but it felt much the same : we had been as one for so long. There must have been some—strong inducement—to make her cast me off so at the end."

This he said in a musing tone, as if the fact were so certain, and had been turned over in his mind so often that all excitement was gone from it. But after it was said, a gleam of anxiety came into his half-veiled eyes. He raised his heavy, tired eyelids and looked at me. Though he seemed to know all about it, and to be resigned to it when he began to speak, yet it seemed to flash across him, before he ended, that there was

an uncertainty—an answer to come from me which would settle it, after all. Then he leaned forward a little, in this sudden sense of suspense, and put his hand to his ear as if he had been deaf, and said "What?" in an altered tone.

"There is some terrible mistake," I said. "I have felt there was a mistake all along. She has lost her hold on life altogether because she believes you to be changed."

"Changed!" His voice was quite sharp and keen, and had lost its languid tone. "In what way—in what way? how could I be changed?"

"In the only way that could matter between her and you. She thought, before you left the Levant, that you had got to care for some one else—that you had ceased to care for her. Your letter," I said, "your letter!" —half frightened by the way in which he rose, and his threatening, angry aspect— "would bear that interpretation."

"My letter!" He stood before me for a moment with a sort of feverish, fierce energy; then he began to laugh, low and bitterly, and walk about as if unable to keep still. "My letter!" The room was scarcely lighted—one lamp upon the table, and no more; and the half-darkness, as he paced about, made his appearance more threatening still. Then he suddenly came and stood before me as if it had been I that had wronged him. "I am a likely man to be a gay Lothario," he cried, with that laugh of mingled mockery and despair which was far more tragical than weeping. It was the only expression that such an extreme of feeling could find. He might have cried out to heaven and earth, and groaned and wept; but it would not have expressed to me the wild confusion, the overturn of everything, the despair of being so misunderstood, the miserable sum of suffering endured and life wasted for nothing, like this laugh. Then he dropped again into the chair opposite me, as if with

the consciousness that even this excitement was vain.

"What can I say? What can I do? Has she never known me all along?—Ellen!" He had not named her till now. Was it a renewal of life in his heart that made him capable of uttering her name?

"Do not blame her," I cried. "She had made up her mind that nothing could ever come of it, and that you ought to be set free. She thought of nothing else but this; that for her all change was hopeless—that she was bound for life; and that you should be free. It became a fixed idea with her; and when your letter came, which was capable of being misread——"

"Then the wish was father to the thought," he said, still bitterly. "Did she show it to you? did you misread it also? Poor cheat of a letter! My heart had failed me altogether. Between my failure and her slavery—— But I never thought she would take me at my word," he went on piteously,

"never! I wrote, don't you know, as one writes longing to be comforted, to be told it did not matter so long as we loved each other, to be bidden come home. And there never came a word—not a word."

"She wrote afterwards, but you were gone; and her letter was returned to her."

"Ah!" he said, in a sort of desolate assent. "Ah! was it so? then that was how it had to be, I suppose; things were so settled before ever we met each other. Can you understand that?—all settled that it was to end just so in misery, and confusion, and folly, before ever we met."

"I do not believe it," I cried. "There is no need that it should end so, even now; if—if you are unchanged still."

"I—changed?" He laughed at this once more, but not so tragically, with sham ridicule of the foolishness of the doubt. And then all of a sudden he began to sing—oh, it was not a beautiful performance! he had no voice, and not much ear; but never has the love-

liest of music moved me more—"I will come again, my sweet and bonnie; I will come——" Here he broke down as Ellen had done, and said, with a hysterical sob, "I'm ill; I think I'm dying. How am I, a broken man, without a penny, to come again?"

Chatty and I walked with him to his room through the soft darkness of the Italian night. I found he had fever—the wasting, exhausting ague fever—which haunts the most beautiful coasts in the world. I did my best to reassure him, telling him that it was not deadly, and that at home he would soon be well; but I cannot say that I felt so cheerfully as I spoke, and all that John did was to shake his head. As we turned home again through all the groups of cheerful people, Chatty with her arm clasped in mine, we talked, it is needless to say, of nothing else. But not even to my child did I say what I meant to do. I am not rich, but still I can afford myself a luxury now and

then. When the children were in bed I wrote a short letter, and put a cheque in it for twenty pounds. This was what I said. I was too much excited to write just in the ordinary way :—

"Ellen, I have found John, ill, heart-broken, but as faithful and unchanged as I always knew he was. If you have the heart of a mouse in you come out instantly —don't lose a day—and save him. It may be time yet. If he can be got home to English air and to happiness it will still be time.

"I have written to your mother. She will not oppose you, or I am much mistaken. Take my word for all the details. I will expect you by the earliest possibility. Don't write, but come."

In less than a week after I went to Genoa, and met in the steamboat from Marseilles, which was the quickest way of travelling then, a trembling, large-eyed, worn-out creature, not knowing if she were dead or alive,

confused with the strangeness of everything, and the wonderful change in her own life. It was one of John's bad days, and nobody who was not acquainted with the disease would have believed him other than dying. He was lying in a kind of half-conscious state when I took Ellen into his room. She stood behind me clinging to me, undistinguishable in the darkened place. The flush of the fever was going off; the paleness as of death and utter exhaustion stealing over him. His feeble fingers were moving faintly upon the white covering of his bed; his eyelids half shut, with the veins showing blue in them and under his eyes. But there was a faint smile on his face. Wherever he was wandering in those confused fever dreams, he was not unhappy. Ellen held by my arm to keep herself from falling. "Hope! you said there was hope," she moaned in my ear, with a reproach that was heartrending. Then he began to murmur with his almost colourless yet smiling lips, "I will come

again, my sweet and bonnie; I will come—again." And then the fingers faintly beating time were still.

But no, no! Do not take up a mistaken idea. He was not dead; and he did not die. We got him home after a while. In Switzerland, on our way to England, I had them married safe and fast under my own eye. I would allow no more shilly-shally. And, indeed, it appeared that Mrs. Harwood, frightened by all the results of her totally unconscious domestic despotism, was eager in hurrying Ellen off, and anxious that John should come home. He never quite regained his former health, but he got sufficiently well to take another situation, his former employers, anxiously aiding him to recover his lost ground. And they took Montpellier Villa after all, to be near Pleasant Place, where Ellen goes every day, and is, Mrs. Harwood allows, far better company for her father, and a greater relief to the tedium of his life, than when she was more constantly

his nurse and attendant. I am obliged to say however that the mother has had a price to pay for the emancipation of the daughter. There is nothing to be got for nought in this life. And sometimes Ellen has a compunction, and sometimes there is an unspoken reproach in the poor old lady's tired eyes. I hope for my own part that when that "eldest little girl" is a little older Mrs. Harwood's life will be greatly sweetened and brightened. But yet it is she that has to pay the price; for no argument, not even the last severe winter, and many renewed "attacks," will persuade that old tyrant, invisible in his upper chamber, to die.

A song needs no story perhaps; but a story is always the better for a song; so that after all I need not perhaps apologize to Beethoven and his interpreters, as I meant to do, for taking their lovely music as a suggestion of the still greater harmonies of life.

THE END.

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