

# O M B R A .

BY

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“THE MINISTER’S WIFE,”  
&c., &c.

*Simon.*— . . . . . “Your tale, my friend,  
Is made from nothing, and of nothings spun—  
Foam on the ocean, hoar-frost on the grass,  
The gossamer threads that sparkle in the sun  
Patterned with morning dew—things that are born  
And die, are come and gone, blossom and fade  
Ere day mature has drawn one sober breath.”

*Philip.*—“’Tis so; and so is life; and so is youth;  
Foam, frost, and dew; what would you? Maidens call  
That filmy gossamer the Virgin’s threads,  
And virgins’ lives are woven of threads like those.”  
*The Two Poor Maidens.*



IN THREE VOLUMES.

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## CHAPTER I.

**K**ATE'S eighteenth birthday was in Easter-week; and on the day before that anniversary a letter arrived from her uncle Courtenay, which filled the Cottage with agitation. During all this time she had written periodically and dutifully to her guardian, Mrs. Anderson being very exact upon that point, and had received occasional notes from him in return; but something had pricked him to think of his duties at this particular moment, though it was not an agreeable subject to contemplate. He had not seen her for three years, and it cannot be affirmed that the old man of the world would

have been deeply moved had he never seen his ward again ; but something had suggested to him the fact that Kate existed—that she was now eighteen, and that it was his business to look after her. Besides, it was the Easter recess, and a few days' quiet and change of air were recommended by his doctor. For this no place could possibly be more suitable than Shanklin ; so he sent a dry little letter to Kate, announcing an approaching visit, though without specifying any time.

The weather was fine, and the first croquet-party of the season was to be held at the Cottage in honour of Kate's birthday, so that the announcement did not perhaps move her so much as it might have done. But Mrs. Anderson was considerably disturbed by the news. Mr. Courtenay was her natural opponent—the representative of the other side of the house—a man who unquestionably thought himself of higher condition, and better blood than herself ; he was used to great houses and good living, and would probably scorn the Cottage and

Francesca's cooking, and Jane's not very perfect waiting; and then his very name carried with it a suggestion of change. He had left them quiet all this time, but it was certain that their quiet could not last for ever, and the very first warning of a visit from him seemed to convey in it a thousand intimations of other and still less pleasant novelties to come. What if he were coming to intimate that Kate must leave the pleasant little house which had become her home?—what if he were coming to take her away? This was a catastrophe which her aunt shrank from contemplating, not only for Kate's sake, but for other reasons, which were important enough. She had sufficient cause for anxiety in the clouded life and confused mind of her own child—but if such an alteration as this were to come in their peaceable existence!

Mrs. Anderson's eyes ran over the whole range of possibilities, as over a landscape. How it would change the Cottage! Not only the want of Kate's bright face, but the absence of so many comforts and luxuries which her wealth

had secured. On the other side, it was possible that Ombra might be happier in her present circumstances without Kate's companionship, which threw her own gloom and irritability into sharper relief. She had always been, not jealous—the mother would not permit herself to use such a word—but *sensitive* (this was her tender paraphrase of an ugly reality), in respect to Kate's possible interference with the love due to herself. Would she be better alone?—better without the second child, who had taken such a place in the house. It was a miserable thought—miserable not only for the mother who had taken this second child into her heart, but shameful to think of for Ombra's own sake. But still it might be true; and in that case, notwithstanding the pain of separation, notwithstanding the loss of comfort, it might be better that Kate should go. Thus in a moment, by the mere reading of Mr. Courtenay's dry letter, which meant chiefly, "By-the-way, there is such a person as Kate—I suppose I ought to go and see her," Mrs. Anderson's mind was

driven into such sudden agitation and convulsion as happens to the sea when a whirlwind falls upon it, and lashes it into sudden fury. She was driven this way and that, tossed up to the giddy sky, and down to the salt depths; her very sight seemed to change, and the steady sunshine wavered and flickered before her on the wall."

"Oh! what a nuisance!" Kate had exclaimed on reading the letter; but as she threw it down on the table, after a second reading aloud, her eye caught her aunt's troubled countenance. "Are you vexed, auntie? Don't you like him to come? Then let me say so—I shall be so glad!" she cried.

"My dearest Kate, how could I be anything but glad to see your guardian?" said Mrs. Anderson, recalling her powers; "not for his sake, perhaps, for I don't know him, but to show him that, whatever the sentiments of your father's family may have been, there has been no lack of proper feeling on *our* side. The only thing that troubles me is——The best room is

so small ; and will Francesca's cooking be good enough ? These old bachelors are so particular. To be sure, we might have some things sent in from the hotel."

"If Uncle Courtenay comes, he must be content with what we have," said Kate, flushing high. "Particular indeed ! If it is good enough for us, I should just think—I suppose he knows you are not the Duchess of Shanklin, with a palace to put him in. And nobody wants him. He is coming for his own pleasure, not for ours."

"I would not say that," said Mrs. Anderson, with dignity. "*I* want him. I am glad that he should come, and see with his own eyes how you are being brought up."

"*Being* brought up ! But I am eighteen. I have stopped growing. I am not a child any longer. *I am* brought up," said Kate.

Mrs. Anderson shook her head ; but she kissed the girl's bright face, and looked after her, as she went out, with a certain pride. "He must see how Kate is improved—she looks a different



creature," she said to Ombra, who sat by in her usual languor, without much interest in the matter.

"Do you think he will see it, mamma? She was always blooming and bright," said neutral-tinted Ombra, with a sigh. And then she added, "Kate is right, she is grown up—she is a woman, and not a child any longer. I feel the difference every day."

Mrs. Anderson looked anxiously at her child.

"You are mistaken, dear," she said. "Kate is very young in her heart. She is childish even in some things. There is the greatest difference between her and you—what you were at her age."

"Yes, she is brighter, gayer, more attractive to everybody than ever I was," said Ombra. "As if I did not see that—as if I did not feel every hour——"

Mrs. Anderson placed herself behind Ombra's chair, and drew her child's head on to her bosom, and kissed her again and again. She was a woman addicted to caresses: but there

was meaning in this excess of fondness. "My love! my own darling!" she said; and then, very softly, after an interval, "My only one!"

"Not your only one now," said Ombra, with tears rushing to her eyes, and a little indignant movement; "you have Kate——"

"Ombra!"

"Mamma, I am a little tired—a little—out of temper—I don't know—what it is; yes, it is temper—I do know——"

"Ombra, you never had a bad temper. Oh! if you would put a little more confidence in me! Don't you think I have seen how depressed you have been ever since—ever since——"

"Since when?" said Ombra, raising her head, her twilight-face lighting up with a flush and sparkle, half of indignation, half of terror "Do you mean that I have been making a show of—what I felt—letting people see——"

"You made no show, darling; but surely it would be strange if I did not see deeper than

others. Ombra, listen.”—She put her lips to her daughter’s cheek, and whispered—“Since we heard they were coming back. Oh! Ombra, you must try to overcome it, to be as you used to be. You repel him, dear, you thrust him away from you as if you hated him! And they are coming here to-day.”

Ombra’s shadowy cheek coloured deeper and deeper, her eyelashes drooped over it; she shrank from her mother’s eye.

“Don’t say anything more,” she said, with passionate deprecation. “Don’t! Talking can only make things worse. I am a fool! I am ashamed! I hate myself! It is temper—only temper, mamma!”

“My own child—my only child!” said the mother, caressing her; and then she whispered once more, “Ombra, would it be better for you if Kate were away?”

“Better for me!” The girl flushed up out of her languor and paleness like a sudden storm. “Oh! do you mean to insult me?” she cried, with passionate indignation. “Do you think

so badly of me? Have I fallen so low as that?"

"My darling, forgive me! I meant that you thought she came between us—that you had need of all *my* sympathy," cried the mother, in abject humiliation. But it was some time before Ombra would listen. She was stung by a suggestion which revealed to her the real unacknowledged bitterness in her heart.

"You must despise me," she said, "you, my own mother! You must think—oh! how badly of me! That I could be so mean, so miserable, such a poor creature! Oh! mother, how could you say such a dreadful thing to me?"

"My darling!" said the mother, holding her in her arms; and gradually Ombra grew calm, and accepted the apologies which were made with so heavy a heart. For Mrs. Anderson saw by her very vehemence, by the violence of the emotion produced by her words, that they were true. She had been right, but she could not speak again on the subject. Perhaps Ombra had never before quite identified and detected the evil

feeling in her heart; but both mother and daughter knew it now. And yet nothing more was to be said. The child was bitterly ashamed for herself, the mother for her child. If she could secretly and silently dismiss the other from her house, Mrs. Anderson felt it had become her duty to do it; but never to say a word on the subject, never to whisper, never to make a suggestion of why it was done.

It may be supposed that after this conversation there was not very much pleasure to either of them in the croquet-party, when it assembled upon the sunny lawn. Such a day as it was!—all blossoms, and brightness, and verdure, and life! the very grass growing so that one could see it, the primroses opening under your eyes, the buds shaking loose the silken foldings of a thousand leaves. The garden of the Cottage was bright with all the Spring flowers that could be collected into it, and the cliff above was strewed all over with great patches of primroses, looking like planets new-dropped out of heaven. Under the shelter of that cliff, with

the sunshine blazing full upon the Cottage-garden, but lightly shaded as yet by the trees which had not got half their Summer garments, the atmosphere was soft and warm as June; and the girls had put on their light dresses, rivalling the flowers, and everything looked like a sudden outburst of Summer, of light, and brightness, and new existence. Though the mother and daughter had heavy hearts enough, the only cloud upon the brightness of the party was in their secret consciousness. It was not visible to the guests. Mrs. Anderson was sufficiently experienced in the world to keep her troubles to herself, and Ombra was understood to be "not quite well," which accounted for everything, and earned her a hundred pretty attentions and cares from the others who were joyously well, and in high spirits, feeling that Summer, and all their outdoor pleasures, had come back.

Nothing could be prettier than the scene altogether. The Cottage stood open, all its doors and windows wide in the sunshine; and now

and then a little group became visible from the pretty verandah, gathering about the piano in the drawing-room, or looking at something they had seen a hundred times before, with the always-ready interest of youth. Outside, upon a bench of state, with bright parasols displayed, sat two or three mothers together, who were neither old nor wrinkled, but such as (notwithstanding the presumption to the contrary) the mothers of girls of eighteen generally are, women still in the full bloom of life, and as pleasant to look upon, in their way, as their own daughters. Mrs. Anderson was there, as in duty bound, with a smile, and a pretty bonnet, smiling graciously upon her guests. Then there was the indispensable game going on on the lawn, and supplying a centre to the picture; and the girls and the boys who were not playing were wandering all about, climbing the cliff, peeping through the telescope at the sea, gathering primroses, putting themselves into pretty attitudes and groups, with an unconsciousness which made the combinations delightful. They

all knew each other intimately, called each other by their Christian names, had grown up together, and were as familiar as brothers and sisters. Ombra sat in a corner, with some of the elder girls, "keeping quiet," as they said, on the score of being "not quite well;" but Kate was in a hundred places at once, the very centre of the company, the soul of everything, enjoying herself, and her friends, and the sunshine, and her birthday, to the very height of human enjoyment. She was as proud of the little presents she had received that morning as if they had been of unutterable value, and eager to show them to everybody. She was at home—in Ombra's temporary withdrawal from the eldest daughter's duties, Kate, as the second daughter, took her place. It was the first time this had happened, and her long-suppressed social activity suddenly blossomed out again in full flower. With a frankness and submission which no one could have expected from her, she had accepted the second place; but now that the first had fallen to her, naturally Kate occupied



that too, with a thrill of long-forgotten delight. Never in Ombra's day of supremacy had there been such a merry party. Kate inspired and animated everybody. She went about from one group to another with feet that danced and eyes that laughed, an impersonation of pleasure and of youth.

“What a change there is in Kate! Why, she is grown up—she is a child no longer!” the Rector's wife said, looking at her from under her parasol. It was the second time these words had been said that morning. Mrs. Anderson was startled by them, and she, too, looked up, and her first glance of proud satisfaction in the flower which she had mellowed into bloom was driven out of her eyes all at once by the sudden conviction which forced itself upon her. Yes, it was true—she was a child no longer. Ombra's day was over, and Kate's day had begun.

A tear forced itself into her eye with this poignant thought; she was carried away from herself, and the bright groups around her, by the alarmed consideration, what would come of

it?—how would Ombra bear it?—when, suddenly looking up, she saw the neat, trim figure of an old man, following Jane, the housemaid, into the garden, with a look of mingled amazement and amusement. Instinctively she rose up, with a mixture of dignity and terror, to encounter the adversary. For of course it must be he! On that day of all days!—at that moment of all moments!—when the house was overflowing with guests, everything in disorder, Francesca's hands fully occupied, high tea in course of preparation, and no possibility of a dinner—it was on that day, we repeat, of all others, with a malice sometimes shown by Providence, that Mr. Courtenay had come!

## CHAPTER II.

WITH a malice sometimes shown by Providence, we have said; and we feel sure that we are but expressing what many a troubled housewife has felt, and blamed herself for feeling. Is it not on such days—days which seem to be selected for their utter inconvenience and general wretchedness—that troublesome and “particular” visitors always do come? When a party is going on, and all the place is in gay disorder, as now it was, is it not then that the sour and cynical guest—the person who ought to be received with grave looks and sober aspect—suddenly falls upon us, as from the unkind skies? The epicure comes when we are sitting down to cold mutton—when the tablecloth is not so fresh as it might be. Everything

of this accidental kind, or almost everything, follows the same rule, and therefore it is with a certain sense of malicious intention in the untoward fate which pursues us that so many of us regard such a hazard as this which had befallen Mrs. Anderson. She rose with a feeling of impatient indignation which almost choked her. Yes, it was "just like" what must happen. Of course it was he, because it was just the moment when he was not wanted—when he was unwelcome—of course it must be he! But Mrs. Anderson was equal to the occasion, notwithstanding the horrible consciousness that there was no room ready for him, no dinner cooked or cookable, no opportunity, even, of murmuring a word of apology. She smoothed her brows bravely, and put on her most cheerful smile.

"I am very glad to see you—I am delighted that you have made up your mind to come to see us at last," she said, with dauntless courage.

Mr. Courtenay made her his best bow, and looked round upon the scene with raised eye-

brows, and a look of criticism which went through and through her. "I did not expect anything so brilliant," he said, rubbing his thin hands. "I was not aware you were so gay in Shanklin."

Gay! If he could only have seen into her heart!

For at that very moment the two Berties had joined the party, and were standing by Ombra in her corner; and the mother's eye was drawn aside to watch them, even though this other guest stood before her. The two stood about in an embarrassed way, evidently not knowing what to do or say. They paid their respects to Ombra with a curious humility and deprecating eagerness; they looked at her as if to say, "Don't be angry with us—we did not mean to do anything to offend you;" whereas Ombra, on her side, sat drawn back in her seat, with an air of consciousness and apparent displeasure, which Mrs. Anderson thought everybody must notice. Gay!—this was what she had to make her so; her daughter cold, estranged,

pale with passion and disappointment, and an inexpressible incipient jealousy, betraying herself and her sentiments; and the young men so disturbed, so bewildered, not knowing what she meant. They lingered for a few minutes, waiting, it seemed, to see if perhaps a kinder reception might be given them, and then withdrew from Ombra with almost an expression of relief, to find more genial welcome elsewhere; while she sank back languid and silent, in a dull misery, which was lit up by jealous gleams of actual pain, watching them from under her eyelids, noting, as by instinct, everyone they spoke to or looked at. Poor Mrs. Anderson! she turned from this sight, and kept down the ache in her heart, and smiled and said,

“Gay!—oh! no; but the children like a little simple amusement, and this is Kate’s birthday.” If he had but known what kind of gaiety it was that filled her!—but had he known, Mr. Courtenay fortunately would not have understood. He had outgrown all such foolish imaginations. It never would have occurred to him to tor-

ment himself as to a girl's looks ; but there seemed to him much more serious matters concerned, as he looked round the pretty lawn. He had distinguished Kate now, and Kate had just met the two Berties, and was talking to them with a little flush of eagerness. Kate, like the others, did not know which Bertie it was who had thrust himself so perversely into her cousin's life ; but it had seemed to her, in her self-communings on the subject, that the thing to do was to be "very civil" to the Berties, to make the Cottage very pleasant to them, to win them back, so that Ombra might be unhappy no more. Half for this elaborate reason, and half because she was in high spirits and ready to make herself agreeable to everybody, she stood talking gaily to the two young men, with three pair of eyes upon her. When had they come ?—how nice it was of them to have arrived in time for her party !—how kind of Bertie Hardwick to bring her those flowers from Langton !—and was it not a lovely day, and delightful to be out in the air, and begin Summer again !

All this Kate went through with smiles and pleasant looks, while they looked at her. Three pair of eyes, all with desperate meaning in them. To Ombra it seemed that the most natural thing in the world was taking place. The love which she had rejected, which she had thrown away, was being transferred before her very face to her bright young cousin, who was wiser than she, and would not throw it away. It was the most natural thing in the world, but, oh, heaven, how bitter!—so bitter that to see it was death! Mrs. Anderson watched Kate with a sick consciousness of what was passing through her daughter's mind, a sense of the injustice of it and the bitterness of it, yet a poignant sympathy with poor Ombra's self-inflicted suffering.

Mr. Courtenay's ideas were very different, but he was not less impressed by the group before his eyes. And the other people about looked too, feeling that sudden quickening of interest in Kate which her guardian's visit naturally awakened. They all knew by instinct



that this was her guardian who had appeared upon the scene, and that something was going to happen. Thus, all at once, the gay party turned into a drama, the secondary personages arranging themselves intuitively in the position of the chorus, looking on and recording the progress of the tale.

“I suppose Kate’s guardian must have come to fetch her away. What a loss she will be to the Andersons!” whispered a neighbouring matron, full of interest, in Mrs. Eldridge’s ear.

“One never can tell,” said that thoughtful woman. “Kate is quite grown up now, and with two girls, you never know when one may come in the other’s way.”

This was so oracular a sentence, that it was difficult to pick up the conversation after it; but after a while, the other went on—

“Let us take a little walk, and see what the girls are about. I understand Kate is a great heiress—she is eighteen now, is she not? Perhaps she is of age at eighteen.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Mrs. Eldridge.

“The Courtenays don’t do that sort of thing; they are staunch old Tories, and keep up all the old traditions. But still Mr. Courtenay might think it best; and perhaps, from every point of view, it might be best. She has been very happy here; but still these kind of arrangements seldom last.”

“Ah, yes!” said the other, “there is no such dreadful responsibility as bringing up other people’s children. Sooner or later it is sure to bring dispeace.”

“And a girl is never so well anywhere,” added Mrs. Eldridge, “as in her father’s house.”

Thus far the elder chorus. The young ones said to each other, with a flutter of confused excitement and sympathy—“Oh, what an old ogre Kate’s guardian looks!” “Has he come to carry her off, I wonder?” “Will he eat her up if he does?” “Is she fond of him? Will she go to live with him when she leaves the Cottage?” “How she stands talking and laughing to the two Berties, without ever knowing he is here!”

Mrs. Anderson interrupted all this by a word. "Lucy," she said, to the eldest of the Rector's girls, "call Kate to me, dear. Her uncle is here, and wants her—say she must come at once."

"Oh, it is her uncle!" Lucy whispered to the group that surrounded her.

"It is her uncle," the chorus went on. "Well, but he is an old ogre all the same!" "Oh, look at Kate's face!" "How surprised she is!" "She is glad." "Oh no, she doesn't like it." "She prefers talking nonsense to the Berties." "Don't talk so—Kate never flirts!" "Oh, doesn't she flirt?" "But you may be sure the old uncle will not stand that."

Mr. Courtenay followed the movements of the young messenger with his eyes. He had received Mrs. Anderson's explanations smilingly, and begged her not to think of him.

"Pray, don't suppose I have come to quarter myself upon you," he said. "I have rooms at the hotel. Don't let me distract your attention from your guests. I should like only to have

two minutes' talk with Kate." And he stood, urbane and cynical, and looked round him, wondering whether Kate's money was paying for the entertainment, and setting down every young man he saw as a fortune-hunter. They had all clustered together like ravens, to feed upon her, he thought. "This will never do—this will never do," he said to himself. How he had supposed his niece to be living, it would be difficult to say; most likely he had never attempted to form any imagination at all on the subject; but to see her thus surrounded by other young people, the centre of admiration and observation, startled him exceedingly.

It was not, however, till Lucy went up to her that he quite identified Kate. There she stood, smiling, glowing, a radiant, tall, well-developed figure, with the two young men standing by. It required but little exercise of fancy to believe that both of them were under Kate's sway. Ombra thought so, looking on darkly from her corner; and it was not surprising that Mr. Courtenay should think so too. He stood petri-

fied, while she turned round, with a flush of genial light on her face. She was glad to see him, though he had not much deserved it. She would have been glad to see anyone who had come to her with the charm of novelty. With a little exclamation of pleasant wonder, she turned round, and made a bound towards him—her step, her figure, her whole aspect light as a bird on the wing. She left the young men without a word of explanation, in her old eager, impetuous way, and rushed upon him. Before he had roused himself up from his watch of her, she was by his side, putting out both her hands, holding up her peach-cheek to be kissed. Kate!—was it Kate? She was not only tall, fair, and woman grown—that was inevitable—but some other change had come over her, which Mr. Courtenay could not understand. She was a full-grown human creature, meeting him, as it were, on the same level; but there was another change less natural and more confusing, which Mr. Courtenay could make nothing of. An air of celestial childhood, such as had never been seen

in Kate Courtenay, of Langton, breathed about her now. She was younger as well as older; she was what he never could have made her, what no hireling could ever have made her. She was a young creature, with natural relationships, filling a natural place in the earth, obeying, submitting, influencing, giving and receiving, loving and being loved. Mr. Courtenay, poor limited old man, did not know what it meant; but he saw the change, and he was startled. Was it—could it be Kate?

“I am so glad to see you, Uncle Courtenay. So you have really, truly come? I am very glad to see you. It feels so natural—it is like being back again at Langton. Have you spoken to auntie? How surprised she must have been! We only got your letter this morning; and I never supposed you would come so soon. If we had known, we would not have had all those people, and I should have gone to meet you. But never mind, uncle, it can't be helped. To-morrow we shall have you all to ourselves.”

“I am delighted to find you are so glad to see me,” said Mr. Courtenay. “I scarcely thought you would remember me. But as for the enjoyment of my society, that you can have at once, Kate, notwithstanding your party. Take me round the garden, or somewhere. The others, you know, are nothing to me ; but I want to have some talk with you, Kate.”

“I don’t know what my aunt will think,” said Kate, somewhat discomfited. “Ombra is not very well to-day, and I have to take her place among the people.”

“But you must come with me in the meantime. I want to talk to you.”

She lifted upon him for a moment a countenance which reminded him of the unmanageable child of Langton-Courtenay. But after this she turned round, consulted her aunt by a glance, and was back by his side instantly, with all her new youthfulness and grace.

“Come along, then,” she said, gayly. “There is not much to show you, uncle—everything is so small ; but such as it is, you shall have all

the benefit. Come along, you shall see everything—kitchen-garden and all.”

And in another minute she had taken his arm, and was walking by his side along the garden path, elastic and buoyant, slim and tall—as tall as he was, which was not saying much, for the great Courtenays were not lofty of stature; and Kate’s mother’s family had that advantage. The blooming face she turned to him was on a level with his own; he could no longer look down upon it. She was woman grown, a creature no longer capable of being ordered about at any one’s pleasure. Could this be the little wilful busybody, the crazy little princess, full of her own grandeur, the meddling little gossip, Kate?



## CHAPTER III.

“**D**OES this sort of thing happen often?” said Mr. Courtenay, leading Kate away round the further side of the garden, much to the annoyance of the croquet players. The little kitchen-garden lay on the other side of the house, out of sight even of the pretty lawn. He was determined to have her entirely to himself.

“What sort of thing, Uncle Courtenay?”

Mr. Courtenay indicated with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder the company they had just left.

“Oh! the croquet,” said Kate, cheerfully. “No, not often here—more usually it is at the Rectory, or one of the other neighbours’. Our lawn is so small; but sometimes, you know, we must take our turn.”

“Oh! you most take your turn, must you?” he said. “Are all these people your Rectors, or neighbours, I should like to know?”

“There are more Eldridges than anything else,” said Kate. “There are so many of them—and then all their cousins.”

“Ah! I thought there must be cousins,” said Mr. Courtenay. “Do you know you have grown quite a young woman, Kate?”

“Yes, Uncle Courtenay, I know; and I hope I give you satisfaction,” she said, laughing, and making him a little curtsy.

How changed she was! Her eyes, which were always so bright, had warmed and deepened. She was beautiful in her first bloom, with the blush of eighteen coming and going on her cheeks, and the fresh innocence of her look not yet harmed by any knowledge of the world. She was eighteen, and yet she was younger as well as older than she had been at fifteen, fresher as well as more developed. The old man of the world was puzzled, and did not make it out.

“You are altered,” he said, somewhat coldly ; and then, “I understood from your aunt that you lived very quietly, saw nobody——”

“Nobody but our friends,” explained Kate.

“Friends! I suppose you think everybody that looks pleasant is your friend. Good lack! good lack!” said the Mentor. “Why, this is society—this is dissipation. A season in town would be nothing to it.”

Kate laughed. She thought it a very good joke ; and not the faintest idea crossed her mind that her uncle might mean what he said.

“Why, there are four, five, six grown-up young men,” he said, standing still and counting them as they came in sight of the lawn. “What is that but dissipation? And what are they all doing idle about here? Six young men! And who is that girl who is so unhappy, Kate?”

“The girl who is unhappy, uncle!” Kate changed colour ; the instinct of concealment came to her at once, though the stranger could have no way of knowing that there was anything to conceal. “Oh! I see,” she added.

“ You mean my cousin Ombra. She is not quite well ; that is why she looks so pale.”

“ I am not easily deceived,” he said. “ Look here, Kate, I am a keen observer. She is unhappy, and you are in her way.”

“ I, uncle !”

“ You need not be indignant. You, and no other. I saw her before you left your agreeable companions yonder. I think, Kate, you had better do your packing and come away with me.”

“ With you, uncle ?”

“ These are not very pleasant answers. Precisely—with me. Am I so much less agreeable than that pompous aunt ?”

“ Uncle Courtenay, you seem to forget who I am, and all about it !” cried Kate, reddening, her eyes brightening. “ My aunt ! Why, she is like my mother. I would not leave her for all the world. I will not hear a word that is not respectful to her. Why, I belong to her ! You must forget—— I am sure I beg your pardon, Uncle Courtenay,” she added, after a pause, subduing herself. “ Of course you don’t

mean it; and now that I see you are joking about my aunt, of course you were only making fun of me about Ombra too."

"I am a likely person to make fun," said Mr. Courtenay. "I know nothing about your Ombras; but I am right, nevertheless, though the fact is of no importance. I have one thing to say, however, which is of importance, and that is, I can't have this sort of thing. You understand me, Kate? You are a young woman of property, and will have to move in a very different sphere. I can't allow you to begin your career with the Shanklin tea-parties. We must put a stop to that."

"I assure you, Uncle Courtenay," cried Kate, very gravely, and with indignant state, "that the people here are as good as either you or I. The Eldridges are of very good family. By-the-by, I forgot to mention, they are cousins of our old friends at the Langton Rectory—the Hardwicks. Don't you remember, uncle? And Bertie and the rest—you remember Bertie?—visit here."

“Oh! they visit here, do they?” said Mr. Courtenay, with meaning looks.

Something kept Kate from adding, “He is here now.” She meant to have done so, but could not, somehow. Not that she cared for Bertie, she declared loftily to herself; but it was odious to talk to anyone who was always taking things into his head! So she merely nodded, and made no other reply.

“I suppose you are impatient to be back to your Eldridges, and people of good family?” he said. “The best thing for you would be to consider all this merely a shadow, like your friend with the odd name. But I am very much surprised at Mrs. Anderson. She ought to have known better. What! must I not say as much as that?”

“Not to me, if you please, uncle,” cried Kate, with all the heat of a youthful champion.

He smiled somewhat grimly. Had the girl taken it into her foolish head to have loved him, Mr. Courtenay would have been much embarrassed by the unnecessary sentiment. But yet

this foolish enthusiasm for a person on the other side of the house—for one of the mother's people, who was herself an interloper, and had really nothing to do with the Courtenay stock, struck him as a robbery from himself. He felt angry, though he was aware it was absurd.

“I shall take an opportunity, however, of making my opinion very clear,” he said, deliberately, with a pleasurable sense that at least he could make this ungrateful, unappreciative child unhappy. The latter half of this talk was held at the corner of the lawn, where the two stood together, much observed and noted by all the party. The young people all gazed at Kate's guardian with a mixture of wonder and awe. What could he be going to do to her? They felt his disapproval affect them somehow like a cold shade; and Mrs. Anderson felt it also, and was disturbed more than she would show, and once more felt vexed and disgusted indeed with Providence, which had so managed matters as to send him on such a day.

“He looks as if he were displeased,” she said

to Ombra, when her daughter came near her, and she could indulge herself in a moment's confidence.

"What does it matter how he looks?" said Ombra, who herself looked miserable enough.

"My darling, it is for poor Kate's sake."

"Oh! Kate!—always Kate! I am tired of Kate!" said Ombra, sinking down listlessly upon a seat. She had the look of being tired of all the rest of the world. Her mother whispered to her, in a tone of alarm, to bestir herself, to try to exert herself, and entertain their guests.

"People are asking me what is the matter with you already," said poor Mrs. Anderson, distracted with these conflicting cares.

"Tell them it is temper that is the matter," said poor Ombra. And then she rose, and made a poor attempt once more to be gay.

This, however, was not long necessary, for Kate came back, flushed, and in wild spirits, announcing that her uncle had gone, and took the whole burden of the entertainment on her own shoulders. Even this, though it was a



relief to her, Ombra felt as an injury. She resented Kate's assumption of the first place; she resented the wistful looks which her cousin directed to herself, and all her caressing words and ways.

"Dear Ombra, go and rest, and I will look after these tiresome people," Kate said, putting her arm round her.

"I don't want to rest—pray take no notice of me—let me alone!" cried Ombra. It was temper—certainly it was temper—nothing more.

"But don't think you have got rid of him, aunty, dear," whispered Kate, in Mrs. Anderson's ear. "He says he is coming back to-night, when all these people are gone—or if not to-night, at least to-morrow morning—to have some serious talk. Let us keep everybody as late as possible, and balk him for to-night."

"Why should I wish to balk him, my dear?" said Mrs. Anderson, with all her natural dignity. "He and I can have but one meeting-ground, one common interest, and that is your welfare, Kate."

“Well, auntie, I want to balk him,” cried the girl, “and I shall do all I can to keep him off. After tea we shall have some music,” she added, with a laugh, “for the Berties, auntie, who are so fond of music. The Berties must stay as long as possible, and then everything will come right.”

Poor Mrs. Anderson! she shook her head with a kind of mild despair. The Berties were as painful a subject to her as Mr. Courtenay. She was driven to her wits' end. To her the disapproving look of the latter was a serious business; and if she could have done it, instead of tempting them to stay all night, she would fain have sent off the two Berties to the end of the world. All this she had to bear upon her weighted shoulders, and all the time to smile, and chat, and make herself agreeable. Thus the pretty Elysium of the Cottage—its banks of early flowers, its flush of Spring vegetation and blossom, and the gay group on the lawn—was like a rose with canker in it—plenty of canker—and seated deep in the very heart of the bloom.

But Kate managed to carry out her intention, as she generally did. She delayed the high tea which was to wind up the rites of the afternoon. When it was no longer possible to put it off, she lengthened it out to the utmost of her capabilities. She introduced music afterwards, as she had threatened—in short, she did everything an ingenious young woman could do to extend the festivities. When she felt quite sure that Mr. Courtenay must have given up all thought of repeating his visit to the Cottage, she relaxed in her exertions, and let the guests go—not reflecting, poor child, in her innocence, that the lighted windows, the music, the gay chatter of conversation which Mr. Courtenay heard when he turned baffled from the Cottage door at nine o'clock, had confirmed all his doubts, and quickened all his fears.

“Now, aunty, dear, we are safe—at least, for to-night,” she said; “for I fear Uncle Courtenay means to make himself disagreeable. I could see it in his face—and I am sure you are not able for any more worry to-night.”

“I have no reason to be afraid of your uncle Courtenay, my dear.”

“Oh! no—of course not; but you are tired. And where is Ombra?—Ombra, where are you? What has become of her?” cried Kate.

“She is more tired than I am—perhaps she has gone to bed. Kate, my darling, don’t make her talk to-night.”

Kate did not hear the end of this speech; she had rushed away, calling Ombra through the house. There was no answer, but she saw a shadow in the verandah, and hurried there to see who it was. There, under the green climbing tendrils of the clematis, a dim figure was standing, clinging to the rustic pillar, looking out into the darkness. Kate stole behind her, and put her arm round her cousin’s waist. To her amazement, she was thrust away, but not so quickly as to be unaware that Ombra was crying. Kate’s consternation was almost beyond the power of speech.

“Oh! Ombra, what is wrong?—are you ill?”

—have I done anything? Oh! I cannot bear to see you cry!”

“I am not crying,” was the answer, in a voice made steady by pride.

“Don’t be angry with me, please. Oh! Ombra, I am so sorry! Tell me what it is!” cried wistful Kate.

“It is temper,” cried Ombra, after a pause, with a sudden outburst of sobs. “There, that is all; now leave me to myself, after you have made me confess. It is temper, temper, temper—nothing! I thought I had not any, but I have the temper of a fiend, and I am trying to struggle against it. Oh! for heaven’s sake, let me alone!”

Kate took away her arm, and withdrew herself humbly, with a grieved and wondering pain in her heart. Ombra with the temper of a fiend!—Ombra repulsing her, turning away from her, rejecting her sympathy! She crept to her little white bedroom, all silent, and frightened in her surprise, not knowing what to think. Was it a mere caprice—a cloud that

would be over to-morrow?—was it only the result of illness and weariness?—or had some sudden curtain been drawn aside, opening to her a new mystery, an unsuspected darkness in this sweet life ?

## CHAPTER IV.

LONG after Kate's little bedchamber had fallen into darkness, the light still twinkled in the windows of the Cottage drawing-room. The lamp was still alight at midnight, and Ombra and her mother sat together, with the marks of tears on their cheeks, still talking, discussing, going over their difficulties.

"I could bear him to go away," Ombra had said in her passion; "I could bear never to see him again. Sometimes I think I should be glad. Oh! I am ashamed—ashamed to the bottom of my heart to care for one who perhaps cares no longer for me! If he would only go away; or if I could run away, and never more see him again! It is not that, mamma—it is not that. It is my own fault that I am un-

happy. After what he said to me, to see him with—her! Yes, though I should die with shame, I will tell you the truth. He comes and looks at me as if I were a naughty child, and then he goes and smiles and talks to *her*—after all he said. Oh! it is temper, mamma, vile temper and jealousy, and I don't know what! I hate her then, and him; and I detest myself. I could kill myself, so much am I ashamed!"

"Ombra! Ombra! my darling, don't speak so!—it is so unlike you!"

"Yes," she said, with a certain scorn, "it is so unlike me that I was appalled at myself when I found it out. But what do you know about me, mother? How can you tell I might not be capable of anything that is bad, if I were only tempted, as well as this?"

"My darling! my darling!" said the mother, in her consternation, not knowing what to say.

"Yes," the girl went on, "your darling, whom you have brought up out of the reach of evil, who was always so gentle, and so quiet, and so good. I know—I remember how I have



heard people speak of me. I was called Ombra because I was such a shadowy, still creature, too gentle to make a noise. Oh! how often I have heard that I was good; until I was tempted. If I were tempted to murder anybody, perhaps I should be capable of it. I feel half like it sometimes now."

Mrs. Anderson laid her hand peremptorily on her daughter's arm.

"This is monstrous!" she said. "Ombra, you have talked yourself into a state of excitement. I will not be sorry for you any longer. It is mere madness, and it must be brought to a close."

"It is not madness!" she cried—"I wish it were. I sometimes hope it will come to be. It is temper!—temper! and I hate it! And I cannot struggle against it. Every time he goes near her—every time she speaks to him! Oh! it must be some devil, do you think—like the devils in the Bible—that has got possession of me?"

"Ombra, you are ill—you must go to bed,"

said her mother. "Why do you shake your head? You will wear yourself into a fever; and what is to become of me? Think a little of me. I have troubles, too, though they are not like yours. Try to turn your mind, dear, from what vexes you, and sympathise with me. Think what an unpleasant surprise to me to see that disagreeable old man; and that he should have come to-day, of all days; and the interview I shall have to undergo to-morrow——"

"Mamma," said Ombra, with reproof in her tone, "how strange it is that you should think of such trifles. What is he to you? A man whom you care nothing for—whom we have nothing to do with."

"My dear," said Mrs. Anderson, with eyes steadily fixed upon her daughter, "I have told you before it is for Kate's sake."

"Oh! Kate!" Ombra made a gesture of impatience. In her present mood, she could not bear her cousin's name. But her mother had been thinking over many things during this long afternoon, which had been so gay, and

dragged so heavily. She had considered the whole situation, and had made up her mind, so far as it was practicable, to a certain course of action. Neither for love's sake, nor for many other considerations, could she spare Kate. Even Ombra's feelings *must* yield, though she had been so indiscreet even as to contemplate the idea of sacrificing Kate for Ombra's feelings. But now she had thought better of it, and had made up her mind to take it for granted that Ombra too could only feel as a sister to Kate.

"Ombra, you are warped and unhappy just now ; you don't do justice either to your cousin or yourself. But, even at this moment, surely you cannot have thrown aside everything ; you cannot be devoid of all natural feeling for Kate."

"I have no natural feeling," she said, hoarsely. "Have not I told you so ? I would not allow myself to say it till you put it into my head. But, mamma, it is true. I want her out of my way. Oh, you need not look so horrified ; you thought so yourself this morning. From the first, I felt she was in my way. She

deranged all our plans—she came between you and me. Let her go! she is richer than we are, and better off. Why should she stay here, interfering with our life? Let her go! I want her out of my way!”

“Ombra!” said Mrs. Anderson, rising majestically from her chair. She was so near breaking down altogether, and forgetting every other consideration for her child’s pleasure, that it was necessary to her to be very majestic. “Ombra, I should have thought that proper feeling alone— Yes, *proper* feeling! a sense of what was fit and becoming in our position, and in hers. You turn away—you will not listen. Well, then, it is for me to act. It goes to my heart to feel myself alone like this, having to oppose my own child. But, since it must be so, since you compel me to act by myself, I tell you plainly, Ombra, I will not give up Kate. She is alone in the world; she is my only sister’s only child; she is——”

Ombra put her hands to her ears in petulance and anger.

“I know,” she cried; “spare me the rest. I know all her description, and what she is to me.”

“She is five hundred a year,” said Mrs. Anderson, secretly in her heart, with a heavy sigh, for she was ashamed to acknowledge to herself that this fact would come into the foreground. “I will not give the poor child up,” she said, with a voice that faltered. Bitter to her in every way was this controversy, almost the first in which she had ever resisted Ombra. Though she looked majestic in conscious virtue, what a pained and faltering heart it was which she concealed under that resolute aspect! She put away the books and work-basket from the table, and lighted the candles, and screwed down the lamp with indescribable inward tremors. If she considered Ombra alone in the matter, and Ombra was habitually, invariably her first object, she would be compelled to abandon Kate, whom she loved—and loved truly!—and five hundred a year would be taken out of their housekeeping at once.

Poor Mrs. Anderson ! she was not mercenary, she was fond of her niece, but she knew how much comfort, how much modest importance, how much ease of mind, was in five hundred a year. When she settled in the Cottage at first, she had made up her mind and arranged all her plans on the basis of her own small income, and had anxiously determined to "make it do," knowing that the task would be difficult enough. But Kate's advent had changed all that. She had brought relief from many petty cares, as well as many comforts and elegancies with her. They could have done without them before she came, but now what a difference this withdrawal would make ! Ombra herself would feel it. "Ombra would miss her cousin a great deal more than she supposes," Mrs. Anderson said to herself, as she went upstairs ; "and, as for me, how I should miss her !" She went into Kate's room that night with a sense in her heart that she had something to make up to Kate. She had wronged her in thinking of the five hundred a year ; but, for all that, she loved

her. She stole into the small white chamber very softly, and kissed the sleeping face with most motherly fondness. Was it her fault that two sets of feelings—two different motives, influenced her? The shadow of Kate's future wealth, of the splendour and power to come, stood by the side of the little white bed in which lay a single individual of that species of God's creation which appeals most forcibly to all tender sympathies—an innocent, unsuspecting girl; and the shadow of worldly disinterestedness came into the room with the kind-hearted woman, who would have been good to any motherless child, and loved this one with all her heart. And it is so difficult to discriminate the shadow from the reality; the false from the true.

Mr. Courtenay came to the Cottage next morning, and had a solemn and long interview with Mrs. Anderson. Kate watched about the door, and hovered in the passages, hoping to be called in. She would have given a great deal to be able to listen at the keyhole, but reluct-

antly yielded to honour, which forbade such an indulgence. When she saw her uncle go away without asking for her, her heart sank ; and still more did her heart sink when she perceived the solemn aspect with which her aunt came into the drawing-room. Mrs. Anderson was very solemn and stately, as majestic as she had been the night before, but there was relief and comfort in her eyes. She looked at the two girls as she came in with a smile of tenderness which looked almost like pleasure. Ombra was writing at the little table in the window—some of her poetry, no doubt. Kate, in a most restless state, had been dancing about from her needle-work to her music, and from that to three or four books, which lay open, one here and one there, as she had thrown them down. When her aunt came in she stopped suddenly in the middle of the room, with a yellow magazine in her hand, almost too breathless to ask a question ; while Mrs. Anderson seated herself at the table, as if in a pulpit, brimful of something to say.

“What is it, auntie ?” cried Kate.



“My dear children, both of you,” said Mrs. Anderson, “I have something very important to say to you. You may have supposed, Kate, that I did not appreciate your excellent uncle; but now that I know his real goodness of heart, and the admirable feeling he has shown—Ombra, do give up your writing for a moment. Kate, your uncle is anxious to give us all a holiday—he wishes me to take you abroad.”

“Abroad!” cried both the girls together, one in a shrill tone, as of bewilderment and desperation, one joyous as delight could make it. Mrs. Anderson expanded gradually, and nodded her head.

“For many reasons,” she said, significantly, “your uncle and I, on talking it over, decided that the very best thing for you both would be to make a little tour. He tells me you have long wished for it, Kate. And to Ombra, too, the novelty will be of use—”

“Novelty!” said Ombra, in a tone of scorn. “Where does he mean us to go, then? To Japan, or Timbuctoo, I suppose.”

“Not quite so far,” said her mother, trying to smile. “We have been to a great many places, it is true, but not all the places in the world; and to go back to Italy, for instance, will be novelty, even though we have been there before. We shall go with every comfort, taking the pleasantest way. Ombra, my love!”

“Oh! you must settle it as you please,” cried Ombra, rising hastily. She put her papers quickly together; then, with her impetuous movements, swept half of them to the ground, and rushed to the door, not pausing to pick them up. But there she paused, and turned round, her face pale with passion. “You know you don’t mean to consult me,” she said, hurriedly. “What is the use of making a pretence? You must settle it as you please.”

“What is the matter?” said Kate, after she had disappeared, growing pale with sympathy. “Oh! auntie dear, what is the matter? She was never like this before.”

“She is ill, poor child,” said the mother, who was distracted, but dared not show it. And

then she indulged herself in a few tears, giving an excuse for them which betrayed nothing. "Oh! Kate, what will become of me if there is anything serious the matter? She is ill, and I don't know what to do!"

"Send for the doctor, aunt," suggested Kate.

"The doctor can do nothing, dear. It is a— a complaint her father had. She would not say anything to the doctor. She has been vexed and bothered—"

"Then this is the very thing for her," said Kate. "This will cure her. They say change is good for everyone. We have been so long shut up in this poky little place."

On other occasions Kate had sworn that the island and the cottage were the spots in all the world most dear to her heart. This was the first effect of novelty upon her. She felt, in a moment, that her aspirations were wide as the globe, and that she had been cooped up all her life.

"Yes," said Mrs. Anderson, fervently, "I have felt it. We have not been living, we have been

vegetating. With change she will be better. But it is illness that makes her irritable. You must promise me to be very gentle and forbearing with her, Kate."

"I gentle and forbearing to Ombra!" cried Kate, half laughing, half crying—"I! When I think what a cub of a girl I must have been, and how good—how good you both were! Surely everybody in the world should fail you sooner than I!"

"My dear child," said Mrs. Anderson, kissing her with true affection; and once more there was a reason and feasible excuse for the tears of pain and trouble that would come to her eyes.

The plan was perfect—everything that could be desired; but if Ombra set her face against it, it must come to nothing. It was with this thought in her mind that she went upstairs to her troublesome and suffering child.

## CHAPTER V.

OMBRA, however, did not set her face against it. What difficulty the mother might have had with her, no one knew, and she appeared no more that day, having "a bad headache," that convenient cause for all spiritual woes. But next morning, when she came down, though her face was pale, there was no other trace in her manner of the struggle her submission had cost her, and the whole business was settled, and even the plan of the journey had begun to be made. Already, in this day of Ombra's retirement, the news had spread far and wide. Kate had put on her hat directly, and had flown across to the Rectory to tell this wonderful piece of news. It was scarcely less

interesting there than in the Cottage, though the effect was different. The Eldridges raised a universal wail.

“Oh! what shall we do without you?” cried the girls and the boys—a reflection which almost brought the tears to Kate’s own eyes, yet pleased her notwithstanding.

“You will not mind so much when you get used to it. We shall miss you as much as you miss us—oh! I wish you were all coming with us!” she cried; but Mrs. Eldridge poured cold water on the whole by suggesting that probably Mrs. Anderson would let the Cottage for the Summer, and that some one who was nice might take it and fill up the vacant place till they came back; which was an idea not taken in good part by Kate.

On her way home, she met Mr. Sugden, and told him; she told him in haste, in the lightness of her heart and the excitement of the moment; and then, petrified by the effect she had produced, stood still and stared at him in alarm and dismay.

“Oh! Mr. Sugden, I am sure I did not mean—I did not think——”

“Going away?” he said, in a strange, dull, feelingless way. “Ah! for six months—I beg your pardon—I am a little confused. I have just heard some—some bad news. Did you say going away?”

“I am so sorry,” said Kate, faltering—“so very sorry. I hope it is not anything I have said——”

“You have said?” he answered, with a dull smile—“oh! no. I have had—bad news, and I am a little upset. You are going away? It is sudden, is it not?—or perhaps you thought it best not to speak. Shanklin will look odd without you,” he went on, looking at her. He looked at her with a vague defiance, as if daring her to find him out. He tried to smile; his eyes were very lacklustre and dull, as if all the vision had suddenly been taken out of them; and his very attitude, as he stood, was feeble, as if a sudden touch might have made him fall.

“Yes,” said Kate humbly, “I am sorry to

leave Shanklin and all my friends ; but my uncle wishes it for me, and as Ombra is so poorly, we thought it might do her good."

"Ah!" he said, drawing a long breath ; and then he added hurriedly—"Does she like it?—does *she* think it will do her good?"

"I don't think she likes it at all," said Kate—"she is so fond of home ; but we all think it is the best thing. Good-bye, Mr. Sugden. I hope you will come and see us. I must go home now, for I have so much to do."

"Yes, thanks. I will come and see you," said the Curate. And then he walked on mechanically—straight on, not knowing where he was going. He was stunned by the blow. Though he knew very well that Ombra was not for him, though he had seen her taken, as it were, out of his very hands, there was a passive strength in his nature which made him capable of bearing this. So long as no active step was taken, he could bear it. It had gone to his heart with a penetrating anguish by times to see her given up to the attentions of another,



receiving, as he thought, the love of another, and smiling upon it. But all the while she had smiled also upon himself; she had treated him with a friendly sweetness which kept him subject; she had filled his once unoccupied and languid soul with a host of poignant emotions. Love, pain, misery, consolation — life itself, seemed to have come to him from Ombra. Before he knew her, he had thought pleasantly of cricket and field-sports, conscientiously of his duties, piteously of the mothers' meetings, which were so sadly out of his way, and yet were supposed to be duty too.

But Ombra had opened to him another life—an individual world, which was his, and no other man's. She had made him very unhappy and very glad; she had awakened him to himself. There was that in him which would have held him to her with a pathetic devotion all his life. It was in him to have served the first woman that woke his heart with an ideal constancy, the kind of devotion—forgive the expression, O intellectual reader!—which makes a dull

man sublime, and which dull men most often exhibit. He was not clever, our poor Curate, but he was true as steel, and had a helpless, obstinate way of clinging to his loves and friendships. Never, whatever happened, though she had married, and even though he had married, and the world had rolled on, and all the events of life had sundered them, could Ombra have been to him like any other woman; and now she was the undisputed queen and mistress of his life. She was never to be his; but still she was his lady and his queen. He was ready to have saved her even by the sacrifice of all idea of personal happiness on his own part. His heart was glowing at the present moment with indignant sorrow over her, with fury towards one of the Berties—he did not know which—who had brought a mysterious shadow over her life; and yet he was capable of making an heroic effort to bring back that Bertie, and to place him by Ombra's side, though every step he took in doing so would be over his own heart.

All this was in him; but it was not in him to

brave this altogether unthought-of catastrophe. To have her go away ; to find himself left with all life gone out of him ; to have the heart torn, as it were, out of his breast ; and to feel the great bleeding, aching void which nothing could fill up. He had foreseen all the other pain, and was prepared for it ; but for this he was not prepared. He walked straight on, in a dull misery, without the power to think. Going away!—for six months ! Which meant simply for ever and ever. Where he would have stopped, I cannot tell, for he was young and athletic, and capable of traversing the entire island, if he had not walked straight into the sea over the first headland which came in his way—a conclusion which would not have been disagreeable to him in the present state of his feelings ; though he could scarcely have drowned had he tried. But fortunately he met the Berties ere he had gone very far. They were coming from Sandown Pier.

“Have you got the yacht here?” he asked, mechanically ; and then, before they could un-

derstand, broke into the subject of which his heart and brain were both full. "Have you heard that the ladies of the Cottage are going away?"

This sudden introduction of the subject which occupied him so much, was indeed involuntary. He could not have helped talking about it; but at the same time it was done with a purpose—that he might, if possible, make sure *which it was*.

"The ladies at the Cottage!" They both made this exclamation in undeniable surprise. And he could not help, even in his misery, feeling a little thrill of satisfaction that he knew better than they.

"Yes," he said, made bolder by this feeling of superiority, "they are going to leave Shanklin for six months."

The two Berties exchanged looks. He caught their mutual consultation with his keen and jealous eyes. What was it they said to each other? He was not clever enough to discover; but Bertie Hardwick drew a long breath, and said,

“It is sudden, surely,” with an appearance of dismay which Mr. Sugden, in his own suffering, was savagely glad to see.

“Very sudden,” he said. “I only heard it this morning. It will make a dreadful blank to us.”

And then the three stood gazing at each other for nearly a minute, saying nothing; evidently the two cousins did not mean to commit themselves. Bertie Eldridge switched his boot with his cane. “Indeed!” had been all he said; but he looked down, and did not meet the Curate’s eye.

“Have you got the yacht here?” Mr. Sugden repeated, hoping that if he seemed to relax his attention something might be gained.

“Yes, she is lying at the pier, ready for a long cruise,” said Bertie Hardwick. “We are more ambitious than last year. We are going to—”

“Norway, I think,” said Eldridge, suddenly. “There is no sport to be had now but in out-of-the-way places. We are bound for Scandi-

navia, Sugden. Can you help us? I know you have been there."

"Scandinavia," the other Bertie echoed, with a half whistle, half exclamation; and an incipient smile came creeping about the corners of the bran-new moustache of which he was so proud.

"I am rather out of sorts to-day," said the Curate. "I have had disagreeable news from home; but another time I shall be very glad. Scandinavia! Is the *Shadow* big enough and steady enough for the northern seas?"

And then, as he pronounced the name, it suddenly occurred to him why the yacht was called the *Shadow*. The thought brought with it a poignant sense of contrast, which went through and through him like an arrow. They could call their yacht after her, paying her just such a subtle, inferred compliment as girls love. And they could go away now, lucky fellows, to new places, to savage seas, where they might fight against the elements, and delude their sick hearts (if they possessed such things) by a struggle with nature. Poor Curate!—he had

to stay and superintend the mothers' meetings—which also was a struggle with nature, though after a different kind.

“Oh! she will do very well,” said Bertie Eldridge, hastily. “Look sharp, Bertie, here is the dogcart. We are going to Ryde for a hundred things she wants. I shall send her round there to-morrow. Will you come?”

“I can't,” said the Curate, almost rudely; and then even his unoffending hand seized upon a dart that lay in his way. “How does all this yachting suit your studies?” he said.

Bertie Hardwick laughed. “It does not suit them at all,” he said, jumping into the dogcart. “Good-bye, old fellow. I think you should change your mind, and come with us to-morrow!”

“I won't,” said the Curate, under his breath; but they did not hear him—they dashed off, in very good spirits, apparently nowise affected by his news. As for Mr. Sugden, he ground his teeth in secret. That which he would have given his life, almost his soul for, had been

thrown away upon one of these two—and to them it was as nothing. It did not cloud their looks for more than a minute, if, indeed, it affected them at all; whereas to him it was everything. They were the butterflies of life; they had it in their power to pay pretty compliments, to confer little pleasures, but they were not true to death, as he was. And yet Ombra would never find that out; she would never know that his love, which she did not even take the trouble to be conscious of, was for life and death, and that the other's was an affair of a moment. They had driven off laughing—they had not even pretended to be sorry for the loss which the place was about to suffer. It was no loss to them. What did they care? They were heartless, miserable, without sense or feeling—yet one of them was Ombra's choice.

This incident, however, made Mr. Sugden take his way back to the village. He had walked a great deal further than he had any idea of, and had forgotten all about the poor women who were waiting with their subscrip-



tions for the penny club. And it chafed him, poor fellow, to have to go into the little dull room, and to take the pennies. "Good heavens! is this all I am good for?" he said to himself. "Is there no small boy or old woman who could manage it better than I? Was this why the good folks at home spent so much money on me, and so much patience?" Poor young Curate, he was tired and out of heart, and he was six feet high, and strong as a young lion—yet there seemed nothing in heaven or earth for him to do but to keep the accounts of the penny club and visit the almshouses. He had done that very placidly for a long time, having the Cottage always to fall back upon, and being a kindly, simple soul at bottom—but now! Were there no forests left to cut down—no East-end lanes within his reach to give him something to fight with, and help him to recover his life?

## CHAPTER VI.

THE Berties drove away laughing; but when they had got quite out of the Curate's sight, Bertie Eldridge turned to his cousin with indignation.

"How could you be such an ass?" he said. "You were just going to let out that the yacht was bound for the Mediterranean, and then, of course, their plans would have been instantly changed."

"You need not snap me up so sharply," said the other; "I never said a word about the Mediterranean; and if I had, he would have taken no notice. What was it to him, one way or another? I see no good in an unnecessary fib."

"What was it to him? How blind you are! Why, it is as much to him as it is— Did you never find *that* out?"

“You don’t mean to say—” said the other Bertie, with confusion. “But, by Jove, I might have known—and that’s how he found out! He is not such a slow beggar as he looks. Did you hear that about my studies? I daresay he said it with a bad motive, but he has reason, heaven knows! My poor studies!”

“Nonsense! You can’t apply adjectives, my dear fellow, to what does not exist.”

“That is all very well for you,” said Bertie Hardwick. “You have no occasion to trouble yourself. You can’t come to much harm. But I am losing my time, and forming habits I ought not to form, and disappointing my parents, and all that. You know it, Bertie, and I know it, and even such a dull, good-humoured slug as Sugden sees it. I ought not to go with you on this trip—that is as plain as daylight.”

“Stuff!” said the other Bertie.

“It is not stuff. He was quite right. I ought not to go, and I won’t!”

“Look here,” said the other; “if you don’t,

you'll be breaking faith with me. You know we have always gone halves in everything all our lives. We are not just like any two other fellows—we are not even like brothers. Sometimes I think we have but one soul between us. You are pledged to me, and I to you, for whatever may happen. If it is harm, we will share it; and if it is good, why—there is no telling what advantages to you may be involved as well. You cannot forsake me, Bertie; it would be a treachery not only to me, but to the very nature of things.”

Bertie Hardwick shook his head; a shade of perplexity crossed his face.

“I never was your equal in argument, and never will be,” he said; “and, besides, you have certain stock principles which floor a fellow. But it is no use struggling, I suppose it is my fate. And a very jolly fate, to tell the truth; though what the people at home will say, and all my godfathers and godmothers, who vowed I was to be honest and industrious, and work for my living——”

“I don’t much believe in that noble occupation,” said the other; “but meantime let us think over what we want at Ryde, which is a great deal more important. Going abroad! I wonder if the old fellow was thinking of you and me when he signed that sentence. It is the best thing, the very best, that could have happened. Everything will be new, and yet there will be the pleasure of bringing back old associations and establishing intercourse afresh. How lucky it is! Cheer up, Bertie. I feel my heart as light as a bird.”

“Mine is like a bird that is fluttering just before its fall,” said Bertie, with gravity which was half mock and half real, shaking his head.

“You envy me my good spirits,” said his companion; “and I suppose there is not very much ground for them. Thank heaven I don’t offend often in that way. It is more your line than mine. But I do feel happier about the chief thing of all than I have done since Easter. Courage, old boy, we’ll win the battle yet.”

Bertie Hardwick shook his head again.

“I don’t think I shall ever win any battle,” he said dolorously; “but, in the meantime, here’s the lists for fitting out the *Shadow*. I suppose you think more of that now than of anything else.”

The other Bertie laughed long and low at his cousin’s mournful tone; but they were soon absorbed in the lists, as they bowled along towards Ryde, with a good horse, and a soft breeze blowing in their faces. All the seriousness dispersed from Bertie Hardwick’s face as they went on—or rather a far more solemn seriousness came over it as he discussed the necessity of this and that, and all the requirements of the voyage. Very soon he forgot all about the momentary curb that had stopped his imagination in full course. “My studies!” he said, when the business of the day was over, with a joyous burst of laughter more unhesitating even than his cousin’s. He had surmounted that little shock, and his amusement was great at the idea of being reproached with neglect of anything so entirely nominal. He had taken his

degree, just saving it, with no honour, nor much blame either; and now for a whole year he had been afloat in the world, running hither and thither, as if that world were but one enormous field of amusement. He ought not to have done so. When he decided to give up the Church, he ought, as everybody said, to have turned his mind to some other profession; and great and many were the lamentations over his thoughtlessness in the Rectory of Langton-Courtenay. But somehow the two Berties had always been as one in the minds of all their kith and kin; and even the Hardwicks regarded with a vague indulgence the pleasant idleness which was thus shared. Sir Herbert Eldridge was rich, and had influence and patronage, and the other Bertie was his only son. It would be no trouble to him to provide "somehow" for his nephew when the right moment came. And thus, though the father and mother shook their heads, and Mrs. Hardwick would sometimes sigh over the waste of Bertie's abilities and his time, yet they had made no very earnest remonstrances

up to this moment ; and all had gone on merrily, and all had seemed well.

That evening, however, as it happened, he received an energetic letter on the subject from his father—a letter pointing out to him the folly of thus wasting his best years. Mr. Hardwick reminded his son that he was three and twenty, that he had his way to make in the world, and that it was his duty to make up his mind how he was going to do it.

“I don’t insist upon the Church,” he said, “if your mind is not inclined that way—for that is a thing I would never force ; but I cannot see you sink into a state of dependence. Your cousin is very kind ; but you ought, and you must know it, to be already in the way of supporting yourself.”

Bertie wrote an answer to this letter at once that evening, without waiting to take counsel of the night ; perhaps he felt that it was safe to do it at once, while the idea of work still looked and felt like a good joke. This was his reply :—



“MY DEAR FATHER,

“I am very sorry to see that you feel so strongly about my idleness. I know I am an idle wretch, and always was ; but it can't last, of course ; and after this bout I will do my best to mend. The fact is that for this cruise I am pledged to Bertie. I should be behaving very shabbily to him, after all his kindness, if I threw him over at the last moment. And, besides, we don't go without an object, neither he nor I, of which you will hear anon. I cannot say more now. Give my love to Mamma and the girls ; and don't be vexed if I find there is no time to run home before we start. I shall write from the first port we touch at. Home without fail before Christmas. Good-bye.

“ Yours affectionately,

“ H. H.”

Bertie was much pleased with this effusion ; and even when he read it over in the morning, though it did not appear to strike so perfectly the golden line between seriousness and levity

as it had appeared to do at night, it was still a satisfactory production. And it pleased him, in the vanity of his youth, to have made the obscure yet important suggestion that his voyage was "not without an object." What would they all think if they ever found out what that object was? He laughed at the thought, though with a tinge of heightened colour. The people at home would suppose that some great idea had come to the two—that they were going on an antiquarian or a scientific expedition; for Bertie Eldridge was a young man full of notions, and had made attempts in both these branches of learning. Bertie laughed at this very comical idea; but though he was thus satisfied with his own cleverness in baffling his natural guardians, there was a single drop of shame, a germ of bitterness somewhere at the bottom of his heart. He could fence gaily with his father, and forget the good advice which came to him from those who had a right to give it; but that chance dart thrown by the Curate had penetrated a weak point in his

armour. Mr. Sugden's suggestion, who was a young man on his own level, a fellow whom he had laughed at, and had no lofty opinion of, clung to him like an obstinate bit of thistle-down. It was of no consequence, said with an intention to wound—a mere spiteful expression of envy; but it clung to him, and pricked him vaguely, and made him uncomfortable, in spite of himself.

For Bertie was only thoughtless, not selfish. He was running all the risks involved by positive evil in his levity; but he did not mean it. Had he known what real trouble was beginning to rise in the minds of his "people" in respect to him, and how even his uncle Sir Herbert growled at the foolish sacrifice he was making, Bertie had manhood enough to have pulled himself up, and abandoned those delights of youth. And indeed a certain uneasiness had begun to appear faintly in his own mind—a sense that his life was not exactly what it might be, which, of itself, might have roused him to better things. But temptation was strong,

and life was pleasant; and at twenty-three there still seems so much of it to come, and such plenty of time to make amends for all one's early follies. Then there were a hundred specious excuses for him, which even harder judges than he acknowledged. From their cradles, his cousin Bertie and himself had been as one—they had been born on the same day; they had taken every step of their lives together; they resembled each other as twin-brothers sometimes do; and something still more subtle, still more fascinating than the bond between twin-brothers existed between them. This had been the admiration of their respective families when they were children; and it was with some pride that Lady Eldridge and Mrs. Hardwick had told their friends of the curious sympathy between the boys; how when one was ill, the other was depressed and wretched, though his cousin was at a distance from him, and he had no knowledge, except by instinct, of the malady.

“ We know directly when anything is wrong

with the other Bertie," the respective mothers would say, with that pride which mothers feel in any peculiarity of their children.

This strange tie was strengthened by their education ; they went to school together on the same day ; they kept side by side all through, and though one Bertie might be at the head of the form, and another at the bottom, still in the same form they managed to keep, all tutors, masters, and aids to learning promoting, so far as in them lay, the twinship, which everybody found "interesting." And they went to the same college, and day for day, and side by side, took every successive step. Bertie Eldridge was the cleverest ; it was he who was always at the top ; and then he was—a fact which he much plumed himself upon—the eldest by six hours, and accordingly had a right to be the guide and teacher. Thus the very threads of their lives were twisted so close together that it was a difficult thing to pull them asunder ; and though all the older people had come by this time to regret the natural

weakness which had prompted them to allow this bond to knit itself closer with every year of life, none of them had yet hit upon a plan for breaking it. The reader will easily perceive what a fatal connection this was for the poorer of the two—he who had to make his own way, and had no hereditary wealth to fall back upon. For Bertie Eldridge it was natural and suitable, and as innocent and pleasant as a life without an object can be; but for Bertie Hardwick it was destruction. However, it was difficult, very difficult, for him to realize this. He laughed at his father's remonstrances, even while he assented to them, and allowed that they were perfectly true; yes, everything that was said was quite true—and yet the life itself was so natural, so inevitable. How could he tear himself from it—"break faith with Bertie?" He resolved indefinitely that some time or other it would have to be done, and then plunged, with a light heart, into the victualling and the preparation of the *Shadow*. But, nevertheless, that arrow of Mr. Sugden's stuck between the

joints of his armour. He felt it prick him when he moved ; he could not quite forget it, do what he would.

## CHAPTER VII.

THE next day the whole population of the place surged in and out of the Cottage, full of regrets and wonders. "Are you really going?" the ladies said—"so soon? I suppose it was quite a sudden idea? And how delightful for you!—but you can't expect us to be pleased. On the contrary, we are all inconsolable. I don't know what we shall do without you. How long do you intend to stay away?"

"Nothing is settled," said Mrs. Anderson, blandly. "We are leaving ourselves quite free. I think it is much better not to be hampered by any fixed time for return."

"Oh! much better," said the chorus. "It is



such a bore generally ; just when one is beginning to know people, and to enjoy oneself, one has to pack up and go away ; but there are few people, of course, who are so free as you are, dear Mrs. Anderson—you have no duty to call you back. And then you know the Continent so well, and how to travel, and all about it. How I envy you ! But it will be such a loss for us. I don't know what we shall do all the Summer through without you and dear Ombra and Kate. All our pic-nics and our water-parties, and our croquet, and everything—I don't know what we shall do——”

“I suppose you will let the Cottage for the Summer ?” said Mrs. Eldridge, who was of a practical mind ; “and I hope nice people may come. That will be always some consolation for the rest of us ; and we cannot grudge our friends their holiday, can we ?” she added, with fine professional feeling, reading a mild lesson to her parishioners, to which everybody replied, with a flutter of protestation, “Oh ! of course not—of course not.”

Mr. Courtenay assisted at the little ceremonial. He sat all the afternoon in an easy-chair by the window, noting everything with a smile. The tea-table was in the opposite corner, and from four till six there was little cessation in the talk, and in the distribution of cups of tea. He sat and looked on, making various sardonic remarks to himself. Partly by chance, and partly by intention, he had drawn his chair close to that of Ombra, who interested him. He was anxious to understand this member of the household, who gave Kate no caresses, who did nothing to conciliate or please her, but rather spoke sharply to her when she spoke at all. He set this down frankly and openly as jealousy, and determined to be at the bottom of it. Ombra was not a "locust." She was much more like a secret enemy. He made up his mind that there was some mischief between them, and that Ombra hated the girl whom everybody else, from interested motives, pretended to love; therefore, he tried to talk to her, first, because her gloom amused him, and

second, that he might have a chance of finding something out.

"I have been under a strange delusion," he said. "I thought there was but a very small population in the Isle of Wight."

"Indeed, I don't know what the number is," said Ombra.

"I should say it must be legion. The room has been three times filled, and still the cry is, they come! And yet I understand you live very quietly, and this is an out-of-the-way place. Places which are in the way must have much more of it. It seems to me that Mayfair is less gay."

"I don't know Mayfair."

"Then you have lived always in the country," said Mr. Courtenay, blandly. This roused Ombra. She could have borne a graver imputation better, but to be considered a mere rustic, a girl who knew nothing—!

"On the contrary, I have lived very little in the country," she said, with a tone of irritation. "But then the towns I have lived in have be-

longed to a different kind of society than that which, I suppose, you meet with in Mayfair. I have lived in Madrid, Lisbon, Genoa, and Florence—”

“Ah! in your father’s time,” said Mr. Courtenay, gently; and the sound of his voice seemed to say to Ombra, “In the Consul’s time! Yes, to be sure. Just the sort of places he would be sure to live in.” Which exasperated her more than she dared show.

“Yes, that was our happy time!” she cried, hotly. “The time when we were free of all interference. My father was honoured and loved by everybody.”

“Oh! I don’t doubt it—I don’t doubt it,” said Mr. Courtenay, hurriedly, for she looked very much as if she might be going to cry. “Spain is very interesting, and so is Italy. It will be pleasant for you to go back.”

“I don’t think it will,” she said, bluntly. “Things will be so different.” And then, after a pause, she added, with nervous haste, “Kate may like it, perhaps, but not I.”

Mr. Courtenay thought it best to pause. He

had no wish to be made a confidant, or to have Ombra's grievances against Kate poured into his ears. He leaned back in his chair, and watched with grim amusement, while the visitors went and came. Mr. Sugden had come in while he had been talking, and was now to be seen standing like a tall shadow by the other side of the window, looking down upon Ombra; and a nervous expectation had become visible in her, which caught Mr. Courtenay's eye. She did not look up when the door opened, but, on the contrary, kept her eyes fixed on the work she held in her hand, with a rigidity which betrayed her more than curiosity would have done. She would not look up—but she listened, with a hot, hectic flush on the upper part of her cheeks, just under her drooped eyelids, holding her breath, and sitting motionless in the suspense which devoured her. The needle shook in her hand, and all the efforts she made to keep it steady did but reveal the more the excitement of all her nerves. Mr. Courtenay watched her with growing curiosity; he was not sympa-

thetic; but it was something new to him, and entertaining, and he watched as if he had been at a theatre. He did not mean to be cruel—it was to him like a child's fit of pouting. It was something about love, no doubt, he said to himself. Poor little fool! somebody had interfered with her love, her last plaything—perhaps Kate, who looked very capable of doing mischief in such matters—and how unhappy she was making herself about nothing at all!

At last the anxiety came to a sudden stop; the hand gave one jerk more violent than before, the eyes shot out a sudden gleam, and then Ombra was suddenly, significantly still. Mr. Courtenay looked up, and saw that two young men had come into the room, so much like each other that he was startled, and did not know what to make of it. As he looked up, with an incipient smile on his face, he caught the eye of the tall Curate on the other side of the window, who was looking at him threateningly. “Good Heavens! what have I done?” said Mr. Courtenay to himself, much amazed. “*I have not*

fallen in love with the irresistible Ombra!" He was still more entertained when he discovered that the look which he had thus intercepted was on its way to the new-comers, whom Ombra did not look at, but whose coming had affected her so strangely. Here was an entire drama in the smallest possible space. An agitated maiden on the eve of parting with her lover; a second jealous lover looking on. "Thank Heaven it is not Kate!" Mr. Courtenay said, from the bottom of his heart. The sight of this little scene made him feel more and more the danger from which he had escaped. He had escaped it, but only by a hair's-breadth; and, thank the kind fates, was looking on with amusement at a story which did not concern him—not with dismay and consternation at a private embarrassment and difficulty of his own. This sense of a hairbreadth escape gave the little spectacle zest. He looked on with genuine amusement, like a true critic, delighted with the show of human emotion which was taking place before his eyes.

“Who are these two young fellows?” he asked Ombra, determined to have the whole advantage of the situation, and draw her out to the utmost of his power.

“What two?” she said, looking up suddenly, with a dull red flush on her cheek, and a choked voice. “Oh! they are Mr. Hardwick and Mr. Eldridge; two—gentlemen—mamma knows.”

They were both talking to Kate, standing one on either side of her in the middle of the room. Ombra gave them a long, intent look, with the colour deepening in her face, and the breath coming quick from her lips. She took in the group in every detail, as if it had been drawn in lines of fire. How unconscious Kate looked standing there, talking easily, in all the freedom of her unawakened youth. “Heaven be praised!” thought Mr. Courtenay once more, pious for the first time in his life.

“What! not brothers? What a strange likeness, then!” he said, tranquilly. “I suppose one of them is young Hardwick, from Langton-Courtenay, whom Kate knew at home.



He is a parson, like his father, I suppose?"

"No," said Ombra, dropping her eyes once more upon her work.

"Not a parson? That is odd, for the elder son, I know, has gone to the Bar. I suppose he has relations here? Kate and he have met before?"

"Yes."

It was all that Ombra could say; but in her heart she added, "Always Kate—Kate knew him—Kate has met him! Is there nobody, then, but Kate in the world to be considered? *They* think so too."

The old man, for the first time, had a little pity. He asked no more questions, seeing that she was past all power of answering them; and half in sympathy, half in curiosity, drew his chair back a little, and left the new-comers room to approach. When they did so after some minutes, Ombra's feverish colour suddenly forsook her cheeks, and she grew very pale. Bertie Eldridge was the first to speak. He came up with a little air of deprecation and

humility, which Mr. Courtenay, not knowing the *fin mot* of the enigma, did not understand.

“I am so sorry to hear you are going away,” he said. “Is it not very sudden, Miss Anderson? You did not speak of it on Wednesday, I think.”

“Did I see you on Wednesday?” said Ombra. “Oh! I beg your pardon, I know you were here; but I did not think we had any talk.”

“A little, I believe,” said the young man, colouring. His self-possession seemed to fail him, which was amazing to Mr. Courtenay, for the young men of the period do not often fail in self-possession. He got confused, spoke low, and faltered something about knowing he had no right to be told.

“No,” she replied, with nervous colour and a flash of sudden pride; “out of our own little cottage I do not know anyone who has a right to be consulted—or cares either,” she added, in an undertone.

“Miss Anderson, you cannot think *that!*”

“Ah, but I do!” Then there was a little

pause; and after some moments, Ombra resumed, "Kate's movements are important to many people. She will be a great lady, and entitled to have her comings and goings recorded in the newspapers; but we have no such claim upon the public interest. It does not matter to any one, so far as I know, whether we go or stay."

A silence again. Ombra bent once more over her work, and her needle flew through it, working as if for awager. The other Bertie, who was behind, had been moving about, in mere idleness, the books on Ombra's writing-table. At him she suddenly looked up with a smile,

"Please, Mr. Hardwick! all my poor papers and books which I have just been putting in order—don't scatter them all over the table again."

"I beg your pardon," he said, looking up. He had borne the air of the stage-confidant, till that moment, in Mr. Courtenay's eyes, which were those of a connoisseur in such matters. But now his belief on this subject was shaken.

When he glanced up and saw the look which was exchanged by the two, and the gloom with which Mr. Sugden was regarding both, a mist seemed to roll away from the scene. How different the girl's aspect was now!—soft, with a dewy brightness in her eyes, and a voice that trembled with some concealed agitation; and there was a glow upon Bertie's face, which made him handsomer. "My cousins are breaking their hearts over your going," he said.

"Oh, no fear of their hearts," said Ombra, lightly, "they will mend. If the Cottage is let, the new tenants will probably be gayer people than we are, and do more to amuse their neighbours. And if we come back——"

"If?" said the young man.

"Nothing is certain, I suppose, in this world—or, at least, so people say."

"It is very true," said Mr. Courtenay. "It is seldom a young lady is so philosophical—but, as you say, if you come back in a year, the chances are you will find your place filled up, and your friends changed."

Ombra turned upon him with sparks of fire suddenly flashing from her eyes. Philosopher, indeed!—say termagant, rather.

“It is vile and wretched and horrible to say so!” she cried; “but I suppose it is true.”

And all this time the tall Curate never took his eyes off the group, but stood still and listened and watched. Mr. Courtenay began to feel very uncomfortable. The scene was deadly real, and not as amusing as he had hoped.

## CHAPTER VIII.

IN the little bustle of preparation which ensued, there was, of course, a good deal of dressmaking to do; and Miss Richardson, the dressmaker from the village, who was Mr. Sugden's landlady, was almost a resident at the Cottage for the following week. She set out every morning in her close black bonnet and black shawl, with her little parcel of properties—including the last fashion-book, done up in a very tight roll. She helped Maryanne, and she helped Francesca, who was more difficult to deal with; and she was helped in her turn by the young ladies themselves, who did not disdain the task. It was very pleasant to Miss Richardson, who was a person of refined tastes, to find herself in such refined society. She was

never tired remarking what a pleasure it was to talk to ladies who could understand you, and who were not proud, and took an interest in their fellow-creatures; and it was during this busy week that Kate acquired that absolute knowledge of Miss Richardson's private history with which she enlightened her friends at a later period. She sat and sewed and talked in the little parlour which served for Kate's studies, and for many other miscellaneous purposes; and it was there, in the midst of all the litter of dressmaking, that Mrs. Anderson and the girls took their afternoon tea, and that even Mrs. Eldridge and some other intimate friends were occasionally introduced. Mrs. Eldridge knew Miss Richardson intimately, as was natural, and liked to hear from her all that was going on in the village; but the dressmaker's private affairs were not of much interest to the Rector's wife—it required a lively and universal human interest like Kate's to enter into such details.

It was only on the last evening of her labours,

however, that Miss Richardson made so bold as to volunteer a little private communication to Mrs. Anderson. The girls had gone out into the garden, after a busy day. All was quiet in the soft April evening; even Mr. Sugden had not come that night. They were all alone, feeling a little excited by the coming departure, a little wearied with their many occupations, a little sad at the thought of leaving the familiar place. At least, such were Mrs. Anderson's feelings, as she stood in the verandah looking out. It was a little more than twilight, and less than night. Ombra was standing in a corner of the low garden wall, looking out upon the sea. Kate was not visible—a certain wistfulness, sadness, farewell feeling, seemed about in the very air. What may have happened before we come back? Mrs. Anderson sighed softly, with this thought in her mind. But she was not unhappy. There was enough excitement in the new step about to be taken to keep all darker shades of feeling in suspense. "If I might make so bold, ma'am," said Miss Richardson, suddenly, by her side.



Mrs. Anderson started, but composed herself immediately. "Surely," she said, with her habitual deference to other people's wishes. The dressmaker coughed, cleared her throat, and made two or three inarticulate beginnings. At length she burst forth—

"The comfort of speaking to a real lady is, as she don't mistake your meaning, nor bring it up against you after. I'm not one as interferes in a general way. I do think, Mrs. Anderson, ma'am, as I'm well enough known in Shanklin to take upon me to say that. But my heart does bleed for my poor young gentleman; and I must say, even if you should be angry, whatever he is to do, when you and the young ladies go away, is more than I can tell. When I saw his face this morning, though he's a clergyman, and as good as gold, the thing as came into my head—and I give you my word for it, ma'am—was as he'd do himself some harm!"

"You mean Mr. Sugden? I do not understand this at all," said Mrs. Anderson, who had found time to collect herself. "Why should he

do himself any harm? You mean he will work too much, and make himself ill?"

"No, ma'am," said Miss Richardson, with dignity. "I don't apologize for saying it, for you've eyes, ma'am, and can see as well as me what's been a-going on. He's been here, ma'am, spending the evenings, take one week with another, five nights out of the seven—and now you and the young ladies is going away. And Miss Ombra—but I don't speak to one as can't take notice, and see how things is going as well as me."

"Miss Richardson, I think we all ought to be very careful how we talk of a young man, and a clergyman. I have been very glad to see him here. I have always thought it was good for a young man to have a family circle open to him. But if any gossip has got up about the young ladies, it is perfectly without foundation. I should not have expected from you——"

"Oh! Mrs. Anderson, ma'am!" cried the dress-maker, carried away by her feelings. "Talk to me of gossip, when I was speaking as a friend! an 'umble friend, I don't say different,

but still one that takes a deep interest. Foundation or no foundation, ma'am, that poor young gentleman is a-breaking of his heart. I see it before I heard the news. I said to myself, 'Miss Ombra's been and refused him;' and then I heard you and the young ladies were going away. Whether he's spoken, and been refused, or whether he haven't had the courage to speak, it ain't for me to guess; but, oh! Mrs. Anderson, ma'am, speak a word of comfort to the poor young gentleman! My heart is in it. I can't stop, even if I make you angry. I'm not one to gossip, and, when I'm trusted, wild horses won't drag a word out of me; but I make bold to speak to you—though you're a lady, and I work for my bread—as one woman to another, ma'am. If you hadn't been a real lady, I wouldn't have dared to a-done it. Oh, if you'd but give him a word of good advice! such as we can't have everything we want; and there's a deal of good left, even though Miss Ombra won't have him; and he oughtn't to be ungrateful to God, and that. He'd take it from you.

Oh! ma'am, if you'd give him a word of good advice!"

Miss Richardson wept while she spoke; and at length her emotion affected her companion.

"You are a good soul," said Mrs. Anderson, holding out her hand; "you are a kind creature. I will always think better of you for this. But you must not say a word about Miss Ombra. He has never spoken to me; and till a man speaks, you know, a lady has no right to take such a thing for granted. But I will not forget what you have said; and I will speak to him, if I can find an opportunity—if he will give me the least excuse for doing it. He will miss us, I am sure."

"Oh! miss you, ma'am!" cried Miss Richardson; "all the parish will miss you, and me among the first, as you've always been so good to; but as for my poor young gentleman, what I'm afraid of is as he'll do himself some harm!"

"Hush! my daughter is coming!" said Mrs. Anderson; and she added, in a louder tone, "I

will see that you have everything you want to-morrow ; and you must try to give us two days more. I think two days will be enough, Ombra, with everybody helping a little. Good night. To-morrow, when you come, you must make us all work."

"Thank you very kindly, ma'am," said the dressmaker, with a curtsey ; "and good night."

"What was she talking to you about, mamma ?" said Ombra's languid voice, in the soft evening gloom ; not that she cared to know—the words came mechanically to her lips.

"About the trimming of your travelling-dress, my dear," said her mother, calmly, with that virtuous composure which accompanies so many gentle fibs. ("And so she was, though not just now," Mrs. Anderson added to herself, in self-exculpation.)

And then Kate joined them, and they went indoors and lit the lamp. Mr. Sugden had been taking a long walk that night. Some one was sick at the other end of the parish, to whom the Rector had sent him ; and he was

glad. The invalid was six miles off, and he had walked there and back. But every piece of work, alas! comes to an end, and so did this; and he found himself in front of the Cottage, he could not tell how, just after this soft domestic light began to shine under the verandah, as under an eyelid. He stood and looked at it, poor fellow! with a sick and sore heart. A few nights more, and that lamp would be lit no longer; and the light of his life would be gone out. He stood and looked at it in a rapture of love and pain. There was no one to see him; but if there had been a hundred, he would not have known nor cared, so lost was he in this absorbing passion and anguish. He had not the heart to go in, though the times were so few that he would see her again. He went away, with his head bent on his breast, saying to himself that if she had been happy he could have borne it; but she was not happy; and he ground his teeth, and cursed the Berties, those two butterflies, those two fools, in his heart!

There was one, however, who saw him, and

that was Francesca, who was cutting some salad in the corner of the kitchen-garden, in the faint light which preceded the rising of the moon. The old woman looked over the wall, and saw him, and was sorry. "The villains!" she said to herself. But though she was sorry, she laughed softly as she went in, as people will, while the world lasts, laugh at such miseries. Francesca was sorry for the young man—so sorry, even, that she forgot that he was a priest, and, therefore, a terrible sinner in thinking such thoughts; but she was not displeased with Ombra this time. This was natural. "What is the good of being young and beautiful if one has not a few victims?" she said to herself. "Time passes fast enough, and then it is all over, and the man has it his own way. If *nostra* Ombra did no more harm than that!" And, on the whole, Francesca went in with the salad for her ladies' supper rather exhilarated than otherwise by the sight of the hopeless lover. It was the woman's revenge upon man for a great deal that he makes her

suffer; and in the abstract women are seldom sorry for such natural victims.

Next evening, however, Mr. Sugden took heart, and went to the Cottage, and there spent a few hours of very sweet wretchedness, Ombra being unusually good to him—and to the Curate she always was good. After the simple supper had been eaten and Francesca's salad, Mrs. Anderson contrived that both the girls should be called away to try on their travelling-dresses, at which Miss Richardson and Maryanne were working with passion. The window was open; the night was warm, and the moon had risen over the sea. Mrs. Anderson stepped out upon the verandah with the Curate, and they exchanged a few sentences on the beauty of the night, such as were consistent with the occasion; then she broke off the unreal, and took up the true. "Mr. Sugden," she said, "I wanted to speak to you. It seems vain to take such a thing for granted, but I am afraid you will miss us when we go away."

"*Miss you!*" he cried; and then tears came



into the poor fellow's eyes, and into his voice, and he took her hand with despairing gratitude. "Thanks for giving me a chance to speak," he said—"it is like yourself. Miss you!—I feel as if life would cease altogether after Monday—it won't, I suppose, and most things will go on as usual; but I cannot think it—everything will be over for me."

"You must not think so," she said; "it will be hard upon you at first, but you will find things will arrange themselves better than you expect—other habits will come in instead of this. No, indeed I am not unkind, but I know life better than you do. But for that, you know, we could not go on living, with all the changes that happen to us. We should be killed at the first blow."

"And so I shall be killed," he said, turning from her with heavier gloom than before, and angry with the consolation. "Oh! not bodily, I suppose. One can go on and do one's work all the same; and one good thing is, it will be of importance to nobody but myself."

“Don’t say so,” said kind Mrs. Anderson, with tears in her eyes. “Oh! my dear boy—if you will let me call you so—think what your visionary loss is in comparison with so many losses that people have to bear every day.”

“It is no visionary loss to me,” he said bitterly. “But if she were happy, I should not mind. I could bear it, if all were well with her. I hope I am not such a wretch as to think of myself in comparison. Don’t think I am too stupid to see how kind you are to me; but there is one thing—only one that could give me real comfort. Promise that, if the circumstances are ever such as to call for a brother’s interference, you will send for me. It is not what I would have wished, God knows!—not what I would have wished—but I will be a brother to her, if she needs a brother. Promise. There are some things which a man can do best, and if she is wronged, if her brother could set things right——”

“Dear Mr. Sugden, I don’t understand you,” said Mrs. Anderson, faltering.

“But you will, if such a time should come? You will remember that you have promised. I will say good night now. I can't go in again after this and see her without making a fool of myself, and it is best she should keep some confidence in me. Good night.”

Had she fulfilled Miss Richardson's commission?—or had she pledged herself to appeal to him instead, in some incomprehensible contingency? Mrs. Anderson looked after him bewildered, and did not know.

## CHAPTER IX.

SUNDAY was their last evening at Shanklin, and they were all rather melancholy—even Kate, who had been to church three times, and to the Sunday school, and over the almshouses, and had filled up the interstices between these occupations by a succession of tearful rambles round the Rectory garden with Lucy Eldridge, whose tears flowed at the smallest provocation. “I will remember everything you have told me,” Lucy protested. “I will go to the old women every week, and take them their tea and sugar—for oh! Kate, you know papa does *not* approve of money—and I will see that the little Joliffes are kept at school—and I will go every week to see after your flowers; but oh! what shall I do without you? I shan’t care

about my studies, or anything; and those duets which we used to play together, and our German, which we always meant to take up—I shall not have any heart for them now. Oh! Kate, I wish you were not going! But that is selfish. Of course I want *you* to have the pleasure; only——”

“I wish *you* were going,” said Kate—“I wish everybody was coming; but as that is impossible, we must just make the best of it; and if anybody should take the Cottage, and you should go and make as great friends with them as you ever did with me——”

“How can you think so?” said Lucy, with fresh tears.

“Well,” said Kate, “if I were very good, I suppose I ought to hope you would make friends with them; but I am not so frightened of being selfish as you are. One must be a little selfish—but for that, people would have no character at all.”

“Oh! Kate, if mamma were to hear you——”

“I should not mind. Mrs. Eldridge knows

as well as I do. Giving in to other people is all very well ; but if you have not the heart or the courage to keep something of your very own, which you won't give away, what is the good of you ? I don't approve of sacrificing like that."

"I am sure you would sacrifice yourself, though you speak so," said Lucy. "Oh ! Kate, you would sacrifice anything—even a—person—you loved—if some one else loved him."

"I should do nothing of the sort," said Kate, stoutly. "In the first place, you mean a man, I suppose, and it is only women who are called persons. I should do nothing of the sort. What right should I have to sacrifice him if he were fond of me, and hand him over to some one else ? That is not self-sacrifice—it is the height of impertinence ; and if he were not fond of me, of course there would be nothing in my power. Oh, no, I am not that sort of person. I will never give up any one's love or any one's friendship to give it to another. Now, Lucy, remember that. And if you are as great

friends with the new people as you are with me——”

“What odd ideas you have!” said Lucy. “I suppose it is because you are so independent and a great lady; and it seems natural that everybody should yield to you.”

Upon which Kate flushed crimson.

“How mean you must think me! To stand up for my own way because I shall be rich. But never mind, Lucy. I don’t suppose you can understand, and I am fond of you all the same. I am fond of you *now*; but if you go and forget me, and go off after other people, you don’t know how different I can be. I shall hate you—I shall——”

“Oh! Kate, don’t be so dreadful!” cried Lucy. “What would mamma say?”

“Then don’t provoke me,” said Kate. And then they fell back upon more peaceful details, and the hundred commissions which Lucy undertook so eagerly. I am not sure that Kate was quite certain of the sincerity of her self-sacrificing friend. She made a great many

wise reflections on the subject when she had left her, and settled it with a philosophy unusual to her years.

“She does not mean to be insincere,” Kate mused to herself. “She does not understand. If there is nothing deeper in it, how can she help it? When the new people come, she will be quite sure she will not care for them; and then they will call, and she will change her mind. I suppose I will change my mind too. How queer people are! But, at all events, I don’t pretend to be better than I am.” And with a little premonitory smart, feeling that her friend was already, in imagination, unfaithful, Kate walked home, looking tenderly at everything.

“Oh! how lovely the sea is!” she said to herself—“how blue, and grey, and green, and all sorts of colours! I hope it will not be rough when we cross to-morrow. I wonder if the voyage from Southampton will be disagreeable, and how Ombra will stand it. Is Ombra really ill now, or is it only her mind? Of course she cannot turn round to my aunt and say it is her



mind, or that the Berties had anything to do with it. I wonder what really happened *that* night; and I wonder which it is. She cannot be in love with them both at once, and they cannot be both in love with her, or they would not be such friends. I wonder—— but, there, I am doing nothing but wondering, and there are so many things that are queer. How beautiful that white headland is with a little light about it, as if the day had forgotten to carry all that belonged to it away! And perhaps I may never see it any more. Perhaps I may never come back to the Cottage, or the cliffs, or the sea. What a long time I have been here—and what a horrid, disagreeable girl I was! I think I must be a little better now. I am not so impertinent, at all events, though I do like to meddle. I suppose I shall always like to meddle. Oh, I wonder how I shall feel when I go back again to Langton-Courtenay? I am eighteen *past*, and in three years I shall be able to do whatever I like. Lucy said a great lady

—a great lady! I think, on the whole, I like the idea. It is so different from most other people. I shall not require to marry unless I please, or to do anything that is disagreeable. And if I don't set the parish to rights! The poor folk shall be all as happy as the day is long," cried Kate to herself, with energy. "They shall have each a nice garden, and a bit of potato-ground, and grass for a cow. And what if I were to buy a quantity of those nice little Brittany cows when we are abroad? Aunty thinks they are the best. How comfortable everybody will be with a cow and a garden! But, oh dear! what a long time it will be first; and I don't know if I shall ever see this dear cottage, and the bay, and the headland, and all the cliffs and the landslips, and the ups and the downs again."

"Mees Katta, you vill catzh ze cold," said Francesca, coming briskly up to her. "It is not so beautiful this road, that you should take the long looks, and have the air so dull. Sorry, no, she is not sorry—my young lady is

not sorry to go to see Italy, and ze mountains, and ze world——”

“Not quite that, Francesca,” said Kate; “but I have been so happy at the Cottage, and I was thinking what if I should never see it again!”

“That is what you call non-sense,” said Francesca. “Why should not Mademoiselle, who is verra young, comm back and zee all she lofs? If it was an old, like me—but I think nothink, nothink of ze kind, for I always comms back, like what you call ze bad penny. This is pretty, but were you once to see Italy, Mees Katta, you never would think no more of this—never no more!”

“Indeed, I should!” cried Kate, indignantly; “and if this was the ugliest place in England, and your Italy as beautiful as heaven, I should still like this best.”

Francesca laughed, and shook her little brown head.

“Wait till my young lady see,” she said—“wait till she see. The air is never damp like this, but sweet as heaven, as Mees Katta says;

and the sea blue, all blue ; you never see nozing like it. It makes you well, you English, only to see Italy. What does Mademoiselle say?"

"Oh! do you think the change of air will cure Ombra?" cried Kate.

"No," said Francesca, turning round upon her, "not the change of air, but the change of mind, will cure Mees Ombra. What she wants is the change of mind."

"I do not understand you," said Kate. "I suppose you mean the change of scene, the novelty, the——"

"I mean the change of ze mind," said Francesca; "when she will understand herself, and the ozer people's; when she knows to do right, and puts away her face of stone, then she will be well—quite well. It is not sickness; it is her mind that makes ill, Mees Katta. When she will put ze ice away and be true, then she shall be well."

"Oh, Francesca, you talk like an old witch, and I am frightened for you!" cried Kate. "I

don't believe in illness of the mind ; you will see Ombra will get better as soon as we begin to move about."

"As soon as she change her mind she will be better," said the oracular Francesca. "There is nobody that tells her the truth but me. She is my child, and I lof her, and I tell her the trutt."

"I think I see my aunt in the garden," said Kate, hurrying on ; for though she was very curious, she was honourable, and did not wish to discover her cousin's secrets through Francesca's revelations.

"If your aunt kill me, I care not," said Francesca, "but my lady is the most good, the most sense— She knows Mees Ombra, and she lets me talk. She is cured when she will change the mind."

"I don't want to hear any more, please," said honourable Kate. But Francesca went on nodding her head, and repeating her sentiment : "When she change the mind, she will be well," till it got to honest Kate's ears, and mixed

with her dreams. The mother and daughter were in the garden, talking not too cheerfully. A certain sadness was in the air. The lamp burned dimly in the drawing-room, throwing a faint, desolate light over the emptiness. "This is what it will look like to-morrow," said Kate ; and she cried. And the others were very much disposed to follow her example. It was the last night—words which are always melancholy ; and presently poor Mr. Sugden stole up in the darkness, and joined them, with a countenance of such despair that poor Kate, excited, and tired, and dismal as she herself felt, had hard ado to keep from laughing. The new-comer added no cheer to the little party. He was dismal as Don Quixote, and, poor fellow, as simple-minded and as true.

And next morning they went away. Mr. Courtenay himself, who had lingered in the neighbourhood, paying a visit to some friends, either from excess of kindness, or determination to see the last of them, met them at Southampton, and put them into the boat for Havre,

the nearest French port. Kate had her Maryanne, who, confounded by the idea of foreign travel, was already helpless; and the two other ladies were attended by old Francesca, as brisk and busy as a little brown bee, who was of use to everybody, and knew all about luggage and steamboats. Mr. Sugden, who had begged that privilege from Mrs. Anderson, went with them so far, and pointed out the ships of the fleet as they passed, and took them about the town, indicating all its principal wonders to them, as if he were reading his own or their death-warrants.

“If it goes on much longer I shall laugh,” whispered Kate, in her aunt’s ear.

“It would be very cruel of you,” said that kind woman. But even her composure was tried. And in the evening they sailed, with all the suppressed excitement natural to the circumstances.

“You have the very best time of the year for your start,” said Mr. Courtenay, as he shook hands with them.

“And, thanks to you, every comfort in travelling,” said Mrs. Anderson.

Thus they parted, with mutual compliments. Mr. Sugden wrung her hand, and whispered hoarsely, “Remember—like her brother!” He stalked like a ghost on shore. His face was the last they saw when the steamboat moved, as he stood in the grey of the evening, grey as the evening, looking after them as long as they were visible. The sight of him made the little party very silent. They made no explanation to each other; but Kate had no longer any inclination to laugh. “Like a brother!—like her brother!” These words, the Curate, left to himself, said over and over in his heart as he walked back and forward on the pier for hours, watching the way they had gone. The same soft evening breeze which helped them on, blew about him, but refreshed him not. The object of his life was gone.



## CHAPTER X.

THE little party travelled as it is in the nature of the British tourist to travel, when he is fairly started, developing suddenly a perfect passion for sight-seeing, and for long and wearisome journeys. Mrs. Anderson, though she was old enough and experienced enough to have known better, took the plunge with the truest national enthusiasm. Even when they paused in Paris, which she knew as well as, or better than anything in her own country, she still felt herself a tourist, and went conscientiously over again and saw the sights—for Kate, she said, but also for herself. They rushed across France with the speed of an express train, and made a dash at Switzerland, though it was so early in

the year. They had it almost all to themselves, the routes being scarcely open, and the great rush of travellers not yet begun; and who, that does not know it, can fancy how beautiful it is among the mountains in May! Kate was carried entirely out of herself by what she saw. The Spring green brightening and enhancing those rugged heights, and dazzling peaks of snow; the sky of an ethereal blue, all dewy and radiant, and surprised into early splendour, like the blue eyes of a child; the paths sweet with flowers, the streams full with the melting snow, the sense of awakening and resurrection all over the land. Kate had not dreamed of anything so splendid and so beautiful. The weather was much finer than is usual so early in the year, and of course the travellers took it not for an exceptional season, as they ought, but gave the fact that they were abroad credit for every shining day. Abroad! Kate had felt for years (she said all her life) that in that word "abroad" every delight was included; and now she believed herself. The novelty and movement by

themselves would have done a great deal; and the wonderful beauty of this virgin country, which looked as if no crowd of tourists had ever profaned it, as if it had kept its stillness, its stateliness, and grandeur, and dazzling light and majestic glooms, all for their enjoyment, elevated her into a paradise of inward delight. Even Maryanne was moved, though chiefly by her mistress's many and oft-repeated efforts to rouse her. When Kate had exhausted everybody else, she rushed upon her handmaid.

"Oh! Maryanne, look! Did you ever see— did you ever dream of anything so beautiful?"

"No, miss," said Maryanne.

"Look at that stream rushing down the ravine. It is the melted snow. And look at all those peaks above. Pure snow, as dazzling as—as——"

"They looks for all the world like the sugar on a bride-cake, Miss," said Maryanne.

At which Kate laughed, but went on—

"Those cottages are called *châlets*, up there among the clouds. Look how green the grass

is—like velvet. Oh! Maryanne, shouldn't you like to live there—to milk the cows in the evening, and have the mountains all round you—nothing but snow-peaks, wherever you turned your eyes?"

Maryanne gave a shudder.

"Why, miss," she said, "you'd catch your death of cold!"

"Wait till Mees Katta see my *bella Firenze*," said old Francesca. "There is the snow quite near enough—quite near enough. You zee him on the tops of ze hills."

"I never, never shall be able to live in a town. I hate towns," said Kate.

"Ah!" cried the old woman, "my young lady will not always think so. This is pleasant now; but there is no balls, no parties, no croquée on ze mountains! Mees Katta shakes her head; but then the Winter will come, and, oh! how beautiful is Firenze, with all the palaces, and ze people, and processions that pass, and all that is gay. There will be the Opera," said Francesca, counting on her fingers, "and the

Cascine, and the Carnival, and the Veglioni, and the grand Corso with the flowers. Ah! I have seen many young English Mees, I know."

"I never could have supposed Francesca would be so stupid," cried Kate, returning to the party on the quarter-deck—for this conversation took place in a steamer on the Lake of Lucerne. "She does not care for the mountains as much as Maryanne does, even. Maryanne thinks the snow is like sugar on a bride-cake," she went on, with a laugh; "but Francesca does nothing but rave about Florenee, and balls, and operas. As if I cared for such things—and as if we were going there!"

"But Francesca is quite right, dear," said Mrs. Anderson, with hesitation. "When the Summer is over, we shall want to settle down again, and see our fellow-creatures; and really, as Francesca has suggested it, we might do a great deal worse. Florence is a very nice place."

"In Winter, aunty? Are not we going home?"

“My dear, I know your uncle would wish you to see as much as possible before returning home,” said Mrs. Anderson, faltering, and with considerable confusion. “I confess I had begun to think that—a few months in Italy—as we are here——”

Kate was taken by surprise. She did not quite know whether she was delighted or disappointed by the idea; but before she could reply, she met the eye of her cousin, whose whole face had kindled into passion. Ombra sprang to her feet, and drew Kate aside with a nervous haste that startled her. She grasped her arm tight, and whispered in her ear, “We are to be kept till you are of age—I see it all now—we are prisoners till you are of age. Oh! Kate, will you bear it? You can resist, but I can’t—they will listen to you.”

It is impossible to describe the shock which was given to Kate’s loyalty by this speech. It was the first actual suggestion of rebellion which had been made to her, and it jarred her every nerve. She had not been a submissive

child, but she had never plotted—never done anything in secret. She said aloud, in painful wonder—

“Why should we be prisoners?—and what has my coming of age to do with it?” turning round, and looking bewildered into her cousin’s face.

Ombra made no reply ; she went back to her seat, and retired into herself for the rest of the day. Things had gone smoothly since the journey began up to this moment. She had almost ceased to brood, and had begun to take some natural interest in what was going on about her. But now all at once the gloom returned. She sat with her eyes fixed on the shore of the lake, and with the old flush of feverish red, half wretchedness, half anger, under her eyes. Kate, who had grown happy in the brightening of the domestic atmosphere, was affected by this change in spite of herself. She exchanged mournful looks with her aunt. The beautiful lake and the sunny peaks were immediately clouded over ; she was doubly

checked in the midst of her frank enjoyment.

“You are wrong, Ombra,” said Mrs. Anderson, after a long pause. “I don’t know what you have said to Kate, but I am sure you have taken up a false idea. There is no compulsion. We are to go only when we please, and to stay only as long as we like.”

“But we are not to return home this year?”

“I did not say so; but I think, perhaps, on the whole, that to go a little further, and see a little more, would be best both for you and Kate.”

“Exactly,” said Ombra, with bitterness, nodding her head in a derisive assent.

Kate looked on with wistful and startled eyes. It was almost the first time that the idea of real dissension between these two had crossed her mind; and still more this infinitely startling doubt whether all that was said to her was true. At least there had been concealment; and was it really, truly the good of Ombra and Kate, or some private arrangement with Uncle Courtenay, that was in her aunt’s mind? This



suggestion came suddenly into her very heart, wounding her as with an arrow; and from that day, though sometimes lessening and sometimes deepening, the cloud upon Ombra's face came back. But as she grew less amiable, she grew more powerful. Henceforward the party became guided by her wayward fancies. She took a sudden liking for one of the quietest secluded places—a village on the little blue lake of Zug—and there they settled for some time, without rhyme or reason. Green slopes, with grey stone peaks above, and glimpses of snow beyond, shut in this lake-valley. I agree with Ombra that it is very sweet in its stillness, the lake so blue, the air so clear, and the noble, nut-bearing trees so umbrageous, shadowing the pleasant chalets. In the centre was a little white-washed village church among its graves, its altar all decked with stately May lilies, the flowers of the Annunciation. The church had no beauty of architecture, no fine pictures—not even great antiquity to recommend it; but Ombra was fond of the sunshiny, still place. She

would go there when she was tired, and sit down on one of the rush-bottomed chairs, and sometimes was to be seen kneeling furtively on the white altar steps.

Kate, who roamed up and down everywhere, and had soon all the facility of a young mountaineer, would stop at the open church-door as she came down from the hills, Alpenstock in hand, sunburnt and agile as a young Diana.

“You are not going to turn a Roman Catholic, Ombra?” she said. “I think it would make my aunt very unhappy.”

“I am not going to turn anything,” said Ombra. “I shall never be different from what I am—never any better. One tries and tries, and it is no good.”

“Then stop trying, and come up on the hills and shake it off,” said Kate.

“Perhaps I might if I were like you; but I am not like you.”

“Or let us go on, and see people and do things again—do all sorts of things. I like this little lake,” said Kate. “One has a home-feel-

ing. I almost think I should begin to poke about the cottages, and find fault with the people, if we were to stay long. But that is not your temptation, Ombra. Why do you like to stay?"

"I stay because it is so still—because nobody comes here, nothing can happen here; it must always be the same for ever and for ever and ever!" cried Ombra. "The hills and the deep water, and the lilies in the church—which are artificial, you know, and cannot fade."

Kate did not understand this little bitter jibe at the end of her cousin's speech; but was overwhelmed with surprise when Ombra next morning suggested that they should resume their journey. They were losing their time where they were, she said; and as, if they were to go to Italy for the Winter, it would be necessary to return by Switzerland next year, she proposed to strike off from the mountains at this spot, to go to Germany, to the strange old historical cities that were within reach. "Kate should see Nüremberg," she said" and Kate, to

her amazement, found the whole matter settled, and the packing commenced that day. Ombra managed the whole journey, and was a practical person, handy and rational, until they came to that old-world place, where she became *revenue* and melancholy once more.

“Do you like this better than Switzerland?” Kate asked, as they looked down from their windows along the three-hundred-years-old street, where it was so strange to see people walking about in ordinary dresses and not in trunkhose and velvet mantles.

“I don’t care for any place. I have seen so many, and one is so much like another,” said Ombra. “But look, Kate, there is one advantage. Anything might happen here; anyone might be coming along those streets, and you would never feel surprised. If I were to see my father walking quietly this way, I should not think it at all strange.”

“But, Ombra—he is dead!” said Kate, shrinking a little, with natural uneasiness.

“Yes, he is dead; but that does not matter.

Look down that hazy street with all the gables. Anyone might be coming—people whom we have forgotten—even,” she said, pressing Kate’s arm, “people who have forgotten us.”

“Oh! Ombra, how strangely you speak! People that care for you don’t forget you,” cried Kate.

“That does not mend the matter,” said Ombra, and withdrew hurriedly from the window.

Poor Kate tried very hard to make something out of it, but could not; and therefore she shrugged her shoulders and gave her head a little shake, and went to her German, which she was working at fitfully, to make the best of her opportunities. The German, though she thought sometimes it would break her heart, was not so hard as Ombra; and even the study of languages had to her something amusing in it.

One of the young waiters in the hotel kept a dictionary in the staircase window, and studied it as he flew up and down stairs for a new word

to experiment with upon the young ladies ; and another had, by means of the same dictionary, set up a flirtation with Maryanne ; so fun was still possible, notwithstanding all ; and whether it was by the mountain paths, or in those hazy strange old streets, Kate walked with her head, as it were, in the clouds, in a soft rapture of delight and pleasantness, taking in all that was sweet and lovely and good, and letting the rest drop off from her like a shower of rain. She even ceased to think of Ombra's odd ways—not out of want of consideration, but with the facility which youth has for taking everything for granted, and consenting to whatever is. It was a great pity, but it could not be helped, and one must make the best of it all the same.

And thus the Summer passed on, full of wonders and delights. Mrs. Anderson and her daughter, and even Francesca, were invaluable to the ignorant girl. They knew how everything had to be done ; they were acquainted alike with picture-galleries and railway-tickets, and knew even what to say about every work

of Art, an accomplishment deeply amazing to Kate, who did not know what to say about anything, and who had several times committed herself by praising vehemently some daub, which was beyond the reach of praise. When she made such a mistake as this, her mortification and shame were great; but unfortunately her pride made her hold by her opinion. They saw so many pictures, so many churches, so much that was picturesque and beautiful, that her brain was in a maze, and her intellect had become speechless.

They took their way across the mountains in Autumn, getting entangled in the vast common tide of travellers to Italy; and, after all, Francesca's words came true, and it was a relief to Kate to get back into the stream—it relieved the strain upon her mind. Instead of thinking of more and lovelier pictures still, she was pleased to rest and see nothing; and even—a confession which she was ashamed to make to herself—Kate was as much delighted with the prospect of mundane pleasures as she had

been with the scenery. Society had acquired a new charm. She had never been at anything more than "a little dance," or a country concert, and balls and operas held out their arms to her. One of the few diplomatic friends whom Mrs. Anderson had made in her consular career was at Florence; and even Mr. Courtenay could not object to his niece's receiving the hospitalities of the Embassy. She was to "come out" at the Ambassador's ball—not in her full-blown glory, as an heiress and a great lady, but as Mrs. Anderson's niece, a pretty, young, undistinguished English girl. Kate knew nothing about this, nor cared. She threw herself into the new joys as she had done into the old. A new chapter, however it might begin, was always a pleasant thing in her fresh and genial life.



## CHAPTER XI.

FLORENCE altogether was full of pleasant novelty to the young traveller. To find herself living up two pair of stairs, with windows overlooking the Arno, and at a little distance the quaint buildings of the Ponte Vecchio, was as great a change as the first change had been from Langton-Courtenay to the little Cottage at Shanklin. Mrs. Anderson's apartment on the second floor of the Casa Graziana was not large. There was a drawing-room which looked to the front, and received all the sunshine which Florentine skies could give; and half a mile off, at the other end of the house, there was a grim and spare dining-room, furnished with the indispensable tables and chairs, and with a curious little fireplace in the

corner, raised upon a slab of stone, as on a pedestal. It would be difficult to tell how cold it was here as the Winter advanced; but in the *salone* it was genial as Summer whenever the sun shone. The family went, as it were, from Nice to Inverness when they went from the front to the back, for their meals. Perhaps it might have been inappropriate for Miss Courtenay of Langton-Courtenay to live up two pair of stairs; but it was not at all unsuitable for Mrs. Anderson; and, indeed, when Lady Barker, who was Mrs. Anderson's friend, came to call, she was much surprised by the superior character of the establishment. Lady Barker had been a Consul's daughter, and had risen immensely in life by marrying the foolish young *attache*, whom she now kept in the way he ought to go. She was not the Ambassadors, but the Ambassadors's friend, and a member of the Legation; and though she was now in a manner a great lady herself, she remembered quite well what were the means of the Andersons, and knew that even the *terzo piano* of a house on

the Lung-Arno was more than they could have ventured on in the ancient days.

“What a pretty apartment,” she said; “and how nicely situated! I am afraid you will find it rather dear. Florence is so changed since your time. Do you remember how cheap everything used to be in the old days? Well, if you will believe me, you pay just fifteen times as much for every article now.”

“So I perceive,” said Mrs. Anderson. “We give a thousand francs for these rooms, which ought not to be more than a hundred scudi—and without even the old attraction of a pleasant accessible Court.”

Lady Barker opened her eyes—at once, at the fact of Mrs. Anderson paying a thousand francs a month for her rooms, and at her familiar mention of the pleasant Court.

“Oh, there are some very pleasant people here now,” she said; “if your young ladies are fond of dancing, I think I can help them to some amusement. Lady Granton will send you cards for her ball. Is Ombra delicate?—do you

still call her Ombra? How odd it is that you and I, under such different circumstances, should meet here!"

"Yes—very odd," said Mrs. Anderson; "and yet I don't know. People who have been once in Italy always come back. There is a charm about it—a——"

"Ah, we didn't think so once," said Lady Barker, with a laugh. She could remember the time when the Andersons, like so many other people compelled to live abroad, looked upon everything that was not English with absolute enmity. "You used to think Italy did not agree with your daughter," she said; "have you brought her for her health now?"

"Oh no, Ombra is quite well; she is always pale," said Mrs. Anderson. "We have come rather on account of my niece—not for her health, but because she had never seen anything out of her own country. We think it right that she should make good use of her time before she comes of age."

"Oh, will she come of age?" said Lady

Barker, with a glance of laughing curiosity. She decided that the pretty girl at the window, who had two or three times broken into the conversation, was a great deal too pretty to be largely endowed by fortune; and smiled at her old friend's grandiloquence, which she remembered so well. She made a very good story of it at the little cosy dinner-party at the Embassy that evening, and prepared the good people for some amusement. "A pretty English country girl, with some property, no doubt," she said. "A cottage *ornée*, most likely, and some fields about it; but her aunt talks as if she were heiress to a Grand Duke. She has come abroad to improve her mind before she comes of age."

"And when she goes back there will be a grand assemblage of the tenantry, no doubt, and triumphal arches, and all the rest of it," said another of the fine people.

"So Mrs. Vice-Consul allows one to suppose," said Lady Barker. "But she is so pretty—prettier than anything I have seen for ages;

and Ombra, too, is pretty, the late Vice-Consul's heiress. They will *far furore*—two such new faces, and both so English; so fresh; so *gauche!*”

This was Lady Barker's way of backing her friends; but the friends did not know of it, and it procured them their invitation all the same, and Lady Granton's card to put on the top of the few other cards which callers had left. And Mrs. Anderson came to be, without knowing it, the favourite joke of the ambassadorial circle. Mrs. Vice-Consul had more wonderful sayings fastened upon her than she ever dreamt of, and became the type and symbol of the heavy British matron to that lively party. Her friend made her out to be a bland and dignified mixture of Mrs. Malaprop and Mrs. Nickleby. Meanwhile, she had a great many things to do, which occupied her, and drove even her anxieties out of her mind. There was the settling down—the hiring of servants and additional furniture, and all the trifles necessary to make their rooms “comfortable;” and then the dresses

of the girls to be put in order, and especially the dress in which Kate was to make her first appearance.

Mrs. Anderson had accepted Mr. Courtenay's conditions; she had acquiesced in the propriety of keeping silent as to Kate's pretensions, and guarding her from all approach of fortune-hunters. There was even something in this which was not disagreeable to her maternal feelings; for to have Kate made first, and Ombra second, would not have been pleasant. But still, at the same time, she could not restrain a natural inclination to enhance the importance of her party by a hint—an inference. That little intimation about Kate's coming of age, she had meant to tell, as indeed it did, more than she intended; and now her mind was greatly exercised about her niece's ball-dress. "White tarlatane is, of course, very nice for a young girl," she said, doubtfully, "it is all my Ombra has ever had; but, for Kate, with her pretensions——"

This was said rather as one talks to one's

self, thinking aloud, than as actually asking advice.

“But I thought Kate in Florence was to be simply your niece,” said Ombra, who was in the room. “To make her very fine would be bad taste; besides,” she added, with a little sigh, “Kate would look well in white calico. Nature has decked her so. I suppose I never, at my best, was anything like that.”

Ombra had improved very much since their arrival in Florence. Her fretfulness had much abated, and there was no envy in this sigh.

“At your best, Ombra! My foolish darling, do you think your best is over?” said the mother, with a smile.

“I mean the bloom,” said Ombra. “I never had any bloom—and Kate’s is wonderful. I think she gives a pearly, rosy tint to the very air. I was always a little shadow, you know!”

“You will not do yourself justice,” cried Mrs. Anderson. “Oh! Ombra, if you only knew how it grieves me. You draw back, and you droop into that dreamy, melancholy way; there is



always a mist about you. My darling, this is a new place, you will meet new people, everything is fresh and strange. Could you not make a new beginning, dear, and shake it off?"

"I try," said Ombra, in a low tone.

"I don't want to be hard upon you, my own child; but, then, dear, you must blame yourself, not anyone else. It was not his fault."

"Please don't speak of it," cried the girl. "If you could know how humbled I feel to think that it is *that* which has upset my whole life! Ill-temper, jealousy, envy, meanness—pleasant things to have in one's heart! I fight with them, but I can't overcome them. If I could only 'not care!' How happy people are who can take things easily, and who don't care!"

"Very few people do," said Mrs. Anderson. "Those who have command of themselves don't show their feelings, but most people *feel* more or less. The change, however, will do you good. And you must occupy yourself, my love. How nicely you used to draw, Ombra! and you have given up drawing. As for poetry, my

dear, it is very pretty—it is very, very pretty—but I fear it is not much good.”

“It does not sell, you mean, like novels.”

“I don’t know much about novels; but it keeps you always dwelling upon your feelings. And then, if they were ever published, people would talk. They would say, ‘Where has Ombra learned all this? Has she been as unhappy as she says? Has she been disappointed?’ My darling, I think it does a girl a great deal of harm. If you would begin your drawing again. Drawing does not tell any tales.”

“There is no tale to tell,” cried Ombra. Her shadowy face flushed with a colour which, for the moment, was as bright as Kate’s, and she got up hurriedly, and began to arrange some books at a side-table, an occupation which carried her out of her mother’s way; and then Kate came in, carrying a basket of fruit, which she and Francesca had bought in the market. There were scarcely any flowers to be had, she complained, but the grapes, with their picturesque stems, and great green leaves, stained

with russet, were almost as ornamental. A white alabaster tazza, which they had bought at Pisa, heaped with them, was almost more effective, more characteristic than flowers.

“I have been trying to talk to the market-women,” she said, “down in that dark, narrow passage, by the Strozzi Palace. Francesca knows all about it. How pleasant it is going with Francesca—to hear her chatter, and to see her brown little face light up. She tells me such stories of all the people as we go.”

“How fond you are of stories, Kate!”

“Is it wrong? Look, aunty, how lovely this vine-branch looks! England is better for some things, though. There will still be some clematis over our porch—not in flower, perhaps, but in that downy, fluffy stage, after the flower. Francesca promises me everything soon. Spring will begin in December, she says, so far as the flowers go, and then we can make the *salone* gay. Do you know there are quantities of English people at the hotel at the corner? I almost thought I heard some one say my name

as I went by. I looked up, but I could not see anybody I knew."

"I hope there is nobody we know," cried Ombra, under her breath.

"My dear children," said Mrs. Anderson, with solemnity, "you must recognise this principle in Italy, that there are English people everywhere; and wherever there are English people, there is sure to be some one whom you know, or who knows you. I have seen it happen a hundred times; so never mind looking up at the windows, Kate—you may be sure we shall find out quite soon enough."

"Well, I like people," said Kate, carelessly, as she went out of the room. "It will not be any annoyance to me."

"*She* does not care," said Ombra—"it is not in her nature. She will always be happy, because she will never mind. One is the same as another to her. I wish I had that happy disposition. How strange it is that people should be so different! What would kill me would scarcely move her—would not cost her a tear."

“Ombra, I am not so sure——”

“Oh! but I am sure, mamma. She does not understand how things can matter so much to me. She wonders—I can see her look at me when she thinks I don’t notice. She seems to say, ‘What can Ombra mean by it?—how silly she is to care!’”

“But you have not taken Kate into your confidence?” said Mrs. Anderson, in alarm.

“I have not taken anyone into my confidence—I have no confidence to give,” said Ombra, with the ready irritation which had come to be so common with her. The mother bore it, as mothers have to do, turning away with a suppressed sigh. What a difference the last year had made on Ombra!—oh! what a thing love was to make such a difference in a girl! This is what Mrs. Anderson said to herself with distress and pain; she could scarcely recognise her own child in this changed manifestation, and she could not approve, or even sympathize with her, in the degree, at least, which Ombra craved.

## CHAPTER XII.

THE fact was that Ombra, as she said, had not given her confidence to anyone; she had betrayed herself to her mother in her first excitement, when she had lost command of herself; but that was all. A real and full confidence she had never given. Ombra's love of sympathy was great, but it was not accompanied, as it generally is, by that open heart which finds comfort in disclosing its troubles. Her heart was not open. She neither revealed herself nor divined others; she was not selfish, nor harsh in temper and disposition; but all that she was certain of was her own feelings. She did not know how to find out what other people were feeling or thinking, consequently she had a very imperfect idea of those about her, and

seldom found out for herself what was going on in their minds. This limited her powers of sympathy in a wonderful way, and it was this which was at the root of all her trouble. She had been wooed, but only when it came to a conclusion had she really known what that wooing meant. In her ignorance she had refused the man whom she was already beginning to love, and then had gone on to think about him, after he had revealed himself—to understand all he had been meaning—to love him, with the consciousness that she had rejected him, and with the fear that his affections were being transferred to her cousin. This was what gave the sting to it all, and made poor Ombra complain so mournfully of her temper. She did not divine what her love meant till it was too late; and then she resented the fact that it was too late—resented the reserve which she had herself imposed upon him, the friendly demeanour she had enjoined. She had begged him, when she rejected him, as the greatest of favours to keep up his intercourse with the

family, and be as though this episode had never been. And when the poor fellow obeyed her she was angry with him. I do not know whether the minds of men are ever similarly affected, but this is a weakness not uncommon with women. And then she took his subdued tone, his wistful looks, his seldom approaches to herself, as so many instances that he had got over what she called his folly. Why should he continue to nourish his folly when she had so promptly announced her indifference? And then it was that it became apparent to her that he had transferred his affections to Kate. As it happened, by the fatality which sometimes attends such matters, the unfortunate young man never addressed Kate, never looked at her, but Ombra found him out. When Kate was occupied by others, her cousin took no notice, but when that one step approached, that one voice addressed her, Ombra's eyes and ears were like the lynx. Kate was unconscious of the observation, by means of being absolutely innocent; and the hero himself was unconscious for much the same



reason, and because he felt sure that his hopeless devotion to his first love must be so plain to her as to make any other theory on the subject out of the question. But Ombra, who was unable to tell what eyes meant, or to judge from the general scope of action, set up her theory, and made herself miserable. She had been wretched when watching "them;" she was wretched to go away and be able to watch them no longer. She had left home with a sense of relief, and yet the news that they were not to return home for the Winter smote her like a catastrophe. Even the fact that he had loved her once seemed a wrong to her, for then she did not know it; and since then had he not done her the cruel injury of ceasing to love her?

Poor Ombra! this was how she tormented herself; and up to this moment any effort she had made to free herself, to snap her chains, and be once more rational and calm, seemed but to have dug the iron deeper into her soul. Nothing cuts like an imaginary wrong. The sufferer would pardon a real injury a hundred

times while nursing and brooding over the supposed one. She hated herself, she was ashamed, disgusted, revolted by the new exhibitions of unsuspected wickedness, as she called it, in her nature. She tried and tried, but got no better. But in the meantime all outward possibilities of keeping the flame alight being withdrawn, her heart had melted towards Kate. It was evident that in Kate's lighter and more sunshiny mind there was no room for such cares as bowed down her own; and with a yearning for love which she herself scarcely understood, she took her young cousin, who was entirely guiltless, into her heart.

Kate and she were sitting together, the morning of the ball to which the younger girl looked forward so joyfully. Ombra was not unmoved by its approach, for she was just one year over twenty, an age at which balls are still great events, and not unapt to influence life. Her heart was a little touched by Kate's anxious desire that her dress and ornaments should be as fresh and pretty and

valuable as her own. It was good of her ; to be sure there was no reason why one should wish to outshine the other ; but still Kate had been brought up a great lady, and Ombra was but the Consul's daughter. Therefore her heart was touched, and she spoke.

“ It does not matter what dress I have, Kate, I shall look like a shadow all the same beside you. You are sunshine—that was what you were born to be, and I was born in the shade.”

“ Don't make so much of yourself, *Ombra mia*,” said Kate. “ Sunshine is all very well in England, but not here. Am I to be given over to the Englishmen and the dogs, who walk in the sun ?”

A cloud crossed Ombra's face at this untoward suggestion.

“ The Englishmen as much as you please,” she said ; and then, recovering herself with an effort, “ I wonder if I shall be jealous of you, Kate ? I am a little afraid of myself. You so bright, so fresh, so ready to make friends, and I so dull and heavy as I am, besides all the other

advantages on your side. I never was in society with you before."

"Jealous of me!" Kate thought it was an admirable joke. She laughed till the tears stood in her bright eyes. "But then there must be love before there is jealousy—or, so they say in books. Suppose some prince appears, and we both fall in love with him? But I promise you, it is I who shall be jealous. I will hate you! I will pursue you to the ends of the world! I will wear a dagger in my girdle, and when I have done everything else that is cruel, I will plunge it into your treacherous heart! Oh! Ombra, what fun!" cried the heroine, drying her dancing eyes.

"That is foolish—that is not what I mean," said serious Ombra. "I am very much in earnest. I am fond of you, Kate—"

This was said with a little effort; but Kate, unconscious of the effort, only conscious of the love, threw her caressing arm round her cousin's waist and kissed her.

"Yes," she said, softly; "how strange it is,

Ombra! I, who had nobody that cared for me," and held her close and fast in the tender gratitude that filled her heart.

"Yes, I am fond of you," Ombra continued; "but if I were to see you preferred to me—always first, and I only second, more thought of, more noticed, better loved! I feel—frightened, Kate. It makes one's heart so sore. One says to oneself, 'It is no matter what I do or say. It is of no use trying to be amiable, trying to be kind—she is sure to be always the first. People love her the moment they see her; and at me they never look.' You don't know what it is to feel like that."

"No," said Kate, much subdued; and then she paused. "But, Ombra, I am always so pleased—I have felt it fifty times; and I have always been so proud. Auntie and I go into a corner, and say to each other, 'What nice people these are—they understand our Ombra—they admire her as she should be admired.' We give each other little nudges, and nod at each other, and are so happy. You

would be the same, of course, if—though it don't seem likely—” And here Kate broke off abruptly, and blushed and laughed.

“ You are the youngest,” said Ombra—“ that makes it more natural in your case. And mamma, of course, is—mamma—she does not count. I wonder—I wonder how I shall take it—in my way or in yours ?”

“ Are you so sure it will happen ?” said Kate, laughing. Kate herself did not dislike the notion very much. She had not been brought up with that idea of self-sacrifice which is inculcated from their cradles on so many young women. She felt that it would be pleasant to be admired and made much of; and even to throw others into the shade. She did not make any resolutions of self-renunciation. The visionary jealousy which moved Ombra, which arose partly from want of confidence in herself, and partly from ignorance of others, could never have arisen in her cousin. Kate did not think of comparing herself with any one, or dwelling upon the superior attractions of another. If

people did not care for her, why, they did not care for her, and there was an end of it; so much the worse for them. To be sure she never yet had been subjected to the temptation which had made Ombra so unhappy. The possibility of anything of the kind had never entered her thoughts. She was eighteen and a half, and had lived for years on terms of sisterly amity with all the Eldridges, Hardwicks, and the "neighbours" generally; but as yet she had never had a lover, so far as she was aware. "The boys," as she called them, were all as yet the same to Kate—she liked some more than others, as she liked some girls more than others; but to be unhappy or even annoyed because one or another devoted himself to Ombra more than to her, such an idea had never crossed the girl's mind. She was fancy free; but it did not occur to her to make any pious resolution on the subject, or to decide beforehand that she would obliterate herself in a corner, in order to give the first place and all the triumph to Ombra. There are young

saints capable of doing this; but Kate Courtenay was not one of them. Her eyes shone; her rose-lips parted with just the lightest breath of excitement. She wanted her share of the triumphs too.

Ombra shook her head, but made no reply. "Oh," she said, to herself, "what a hard fate to be always the shadow!" She exerted all the imagination she possessed, and threw herself forward, as it were, into the evening which was coming. Kate was in all the splendour of her first bloom—that radiance of youth and freshness which is often the least elevated kind of beauty, yet almost always the most irresistible. The liquid brightness of her eyes, the wild-rose bloom of her complexion, the exquisite softness, downiness, deliciousness of cheek and throat and forehead, might be all as evanescent as the dew upon the sunny grass, or the down on a peach. It was youth—youth supreme and perfect in its most delicate fulness, the *beauté de diable*, as our neighbours call it. Ombra being still so young herself, did not



characterize it so; nor, indeed, was she aware of this glory of freshness which, at the present moment, was Kate's crowning charm. But she wondered at her cousin's beauty, and she did not realize her own, which was so different. "Shall I be jealous—shall I hate her?" she asked herself. At home she had hated her for a moment now and then. Would it be the same again?—was her own mind so mean, her character so low, as that? Thinking well of one's self, or thinking ill of one's self, requires only a beginning; and Ombra's experience had not increased her respect for her own nature. Thus she prepared for the Ambassadors's ball.

It was a strange manner of preparation, the reader will think. Our sympathy has been trained to accompany those who go into battle without a misgiving—who, whatever jesting alarm they may express, are never really afraid of running away; but, after all, the man who marches forward with a terrible dread in his mind that when the moment comes he will fail, ought to be as interesting and, certainly, makes

a much greater claim upon our compassion than he who is tolerably sure of his nerves and courage. The battle of the ball was to Ombra as great an event as Alma or Inkermann. She had never undergone quite the same kind of peril before, and she was afraid as to how she should acquit herself. She represented to herself all the meanness, misery, contemptibleness of what she supposed to be her besetting sin—that did not require much trouble. She summed it all up, feeling humiliated to the very heart by the sense that under other circumstances she had yielded to that temptation before, and she asked herself—shall I fail again? She was afraid of herself. She had strung her nerves, and set her soul firmly for this struggle, but she was not sure of success. At the last moment, when the danger was close to her, she felt as if she must fail.

## CHAPTER XIII.

**K**ATE thought she had never imagined anything so stately, so beautiful, so gay, so like a place for princes and princesses to meet, as the suite of rooms in the Palazzo occupied by the English Embassy, where the ball was held. The vista which stretched before her, one room within another, the lines of light infinitely reflected by the great mirrors—the lofty splendid rooms, rich in gold and velvet; the jewels of the ladies, the glow of uniforms and decorations; the beautiful dresses;—all moved her to interest and delight. Delight was the first feeling; and then there came the strangest sensation of insignificance, which was not pleasant to Kate. For three years she had

lived in little cottage rooms, in limited space, with very simple surroundings. But the first glance at this new scene brought suddenly before the girl's eyes her native dwelling-place, her own home, which, of course, was but an English country-house, yet was more akin to the size and splendour of the Palazzo than to the apartments on the Lung-Arno, or the little cottage on the Undercliff. Kate found herself, in spite of herself, making calculations how the rooms at Langton-Courtenay would look in comparison; and from that she went on to consider whether anyone here knew of Langton-Courtenay, or was aware that she herself was anything but Mrs. Anderson's niece. She was ashamed of herself for the thought, and yet it went quick as lightning through her excited mind.

Lady Granton smiled graciously upon them, and even shook hands with the lady whom she knew as Mrs. Vice-Consul, with more cordiality than usual, with a gratitude which would have given Mrs. Anderson little satisfaction had she

known it, to the woman who had already amused her so much; but then the group passed on like the other groups, a mother and two unusually pretty daughters, as people thought, but strangers, nobodies, looking a little *gauche*, and out of place, in the fine rooms, where they were known to no one. Ombra knew what the feeling was of old, and was not affronted by it; but Kate had never been deprived of a certain shadow of distinction among her peers. The people at Shanklin had, to their own consciousness, treated her just as they would have done any niece of Mrs. Anderson's; but, unconsciously to themselves, the fact that she was Miss Courtenay, of Langton-Courtenay, had produced a certain effect upon them. No doubt Kate's active and lively character had a great deal to do with it, but the fact of her heiress-ship, her future elevation, had much to do with it also. A certain pre-eminence had been tacitly allowed to her, a certain freedom of opinion, and even of movement, had been permitted, and felt to be natural. She was the natural leader in half the pastimes

going, referred to and consulted by her companions. This had been her lot for these three years past. She had never had a chance of learning that lesson of personal insignificance which is supposed to be so salutary. All at once, in a moment, she learned it now. Nobody looked up to her, nobody considered her, nobody knew or cared who she was. For the first half-hour Kate was astonished, in spite of all her philosophy, and then she tried to persuade herself that she was amused. But the greatest effort could not persuade her that she liked it. It made her tingle all over with the most curious mixture of pain, and irritation, and nervous excitement. The dancing was going on merrily, and there was a hum of talking and soft laughter all around; people passing and repassing, greeting each other, shaking hands, introducing to each other their common friends. But the three ladies who knew nobody stood by themselves, and felt anything but happy.

“If this is what you call a ball, I should much

rather have been at home," said Kate, with indignation.

"It is not cheerful, is it?" said Ombra. "But we must put up with it till we see somebody we know. I wish only we could find a seat for mamma."

"Oh! never mind me, my dear," said Mrs. Anderson. "I can stand very well, and it is amusing to watch the people. Lady Barker will come to us as soon as she sees us."

"Lady Barker! As if anyone cared for her!" said Kate; but even Kate, though she could have cried for mortification, kept looking out very sharply for Lady Barker. She was not a great lady, nor of any importance, so far as she herself was concerned, but she held the keys of the dance, of pleasure and amusement, and success, for that night, at least, for both Ombra and Kate. The two stood and looked on while the pairs of dancers streamed past them, with the strangest feelings—or at least Kate's feelings were very strange. Ombra had been prepared for it, and took it more calmly. She pointed

out the pretty faces, the pretty dresses to her cousin, by way of amusing her.

“What do you think of this toilette?” she said. “Look, Kate, what a splendid dark girl, and how well that maize becomes her! I think she is a Roman princess. Look at her diamonds. Don’t you like to see diamonds, Kate?”

“Yes,” said Kate, with a laugh at herself, “they are very pretty; but I thought we came to dance, not to look at the people. Let us have a dance, you and I together, Ombra—why shouldn’t we? If men won’t ask us, we can’t help that—but I must dance.”

“Oh! hush, my darling,” said Mrs. Anderson, alarmed. “You must not really think of anything so extraordinary. Two girls together! It was all very well at Shanklin. Try to amuse yourself for a little looking at the people. There are some of the great Italian nobility here. You can recognize them by their jewels. That is one, for instance, that lady in velvet—”

“It is very interesting, no doubt,” cried Kate, “and if they were in a picture, or on the stage,



I should like to look at them; but it is very queer to come to a ball only to see the people. Why, we might be their maids, standing in a corner to see the ladies pass. Is it right for the lady of the house to ask us, and then leave us like this? Do you call that hospitality? If this was Langton-Courtenay," said Kate, bringing her own dignity forward unconsciously, for the first time for years, "and it was I who was giving this ball, I should be ashamed of myself. Am I speaking loud? I am sure I did not mean it; but I should be ashamed—"

"Oh! hush, dear, hush!" cried Mrs. Anderson. "Lady Barker will be coming presently."

"But it was Lady Granton who invited us, aunty. It is her business to see——"

"Hush, my dearest child! How could she, with all these people to attend to? When you are mistress of Langton-Courtenay, and give balls yourself, you will find out how difficult it is——"

"Langton-Courtenay?" said some one near. The three ladies instantaneously roused up out

of their languor at the sound. Whose voice was it? It came through the throng, as if some one half buried in the crowd had caught up the name, and flung it on to some one else. Mrs. Anderson looked in one direction, Kate, all glowing and smiling, in another, while the dull red flush of old, the sign of surprised excitement and passion, came back suddenly to Ombra's face. Though they had not been aware of it, the little group had already been the object of considerable observation; for the girls were exceptionally pretty, in their different styles, and they were quite new, unknown, and piquant in their obvious strangeness. Even Kate's indignation had been noted by a quick-witted English lady, with an eyeglass, who was surrounded by a little court. This lady was slightly beyond the age for dancing, or, if not really so, had been wise enough to meet her fate half-way, and to retire gracefully from youth, before youth abandoned her. She had taken up her place, resisting all solicitations.

“Don't ask me—my dancing-days are over.

Ask that pretty girl yonder, who is longing to begin," she had said, with a smile, to one of her attendants half an hour before.

"*Je ne demande pas mieux*, if indeed you are determined," said he. "But who is she? I don't know them."

"Nobody seems to know them," said Lady Caryisfort; and so the observation began.

Lady Caryisfort was very popular. She was a widow, well off, childless, good-looking, and determined, people said, never to marry again. She was the most independent of women, openly declaring, on all hands, that she wanted no assistance to get through life, but was quite able to take care of herself. And the consequence was that everybody about was most anxious to assist in taking care of her. All sorts of people took all sorts of trouble to help her in doing what she never hesitated to say she could do quite well without them. She was something of a philosopher, and a good deal of a cynic, as such people often are.

"You would not be so good to me if I had

any need of you," she said habitually; and this was understood to be "Lady Caryisfort's way."

"Nobody knows them," she added, looking at the party through her eyeglass. "Poor souls, I daresay they thought it was very fine and delightful to come to Lady Granton's ball. And if they had scores of friends already, scores more would turn up on all sides. But because they know nobody, nobody will take the trouble to know them. The younger one is perfectly radiant. That is what I call the perfection or bloom. Look at her—she is a real rosebud! Now, what *fainéants* you all are!"

"Why are we *fainéants*?" said one of the court.

"Well," said Lady Caryisfort, who professed to be a man-hater, within certain limits, "I am aware that the nicest girl in the world, if she were not pretty, might stand there all the night, and nobody but a woman would ever think of trying to get any amusement for her. But there is what you are capable of admiring—there is

beauty, absolute beauty; none of your washy imitations, but real, undeniable loveliness. And there you stand and gape, and among a hundred of you she does not find one partner. Oh! what it is to be a man! Why, my pet retriever, who is fond of pretty people, would have found her out by this, and made friends with her, and here are half a dozen of you fluttering about me!"

There was a general laugh, as at a very good joke; and some one ventured to suggest that the flutterers round Lady Caryisfort could give a very good reason—

"Yes," said that lady, fanning herself tranquilly, "because I don't want you. In society that is the best of reasons; and that pretty creature there does want you, therefore she is left to herself. She is getting indignant. Why, she grows prettier and prettier. I wonder those glances don't set fire to something! Delicious! She wants her sister to dance with her. What a charming girl! And the sister is pretty, too, but knows

better. And mamma—oh! how horrified mamma is! This is best of all!”

Thus Lady Caryisfort smiled and applauded, and her attendants laughed and listened. But, curiously enough, though she was so interested in Kate, and so indignant at the neglect to which she was subjected, it did not occur to her to take the young stranger under her protection, as she might so easily have done. It was her way to look on—to interfere was quite a different matter.

“Now this is getting quite dramatic,” she cried; “they have seen some one they know—where is he?—or even where is she?—for any one they know would be a godsend to them. How do you do, Mr. Eldridge? How late you are! But please don’t stand between me and my young lady. I am excited about her; they have not found him yet—and how eager she looks! Mr. Eldridge—why, good heavens! where has he gone?”

“Who was it that said Langton-Courtenay?” cried Kate—“it must be some one who knows

the name, and I am sure I know the voice. Did you hear it, aunty? Langton-Courtenay! —I wonder who it could be?"

A whole minute elapsed before anything more followed. Mrs. Anderson looked one way, and Kate another. Ombra did not move. If the lively observer, who had taken so much interest in the strangers, could have seen the downcast face which Kate's bright countenance threw into the shade, her drama would instantly have increased in interest. Ombra stood without moving a hair's-breadth—without raising her eyes—without so much as breathing, one would have said. Under her eyes that line of hot colour had flushed in a moment, giving to her face the look of something suppressed and concealed. The others wondered who it was, but Ombra knew by instinct who had come to disturb their quiet once more. She recognised the voice, though neither of her companions did; and if there had not been any evidence so clear as that voice—had it been a mere shadow, an echo—she would have known. It was she

who distinguished in the ever-moving, ever-rustling throng, the one particular movement which indicated that some one was making his way towards them. She knew he—they—were there, without raising her eyes, before Kate's cry of joyful surprise informed her.

“Oh, the Berties!—I beg your pardon—Mr. Hardwick and Mr. Eldridge. Oh, fancy!—that you should be here!”

Ombra neither fell nor fainted, nor did she even speak. The room swam round and round, and then came back to its place; and she looked up, and smiled, and put out her hand.

The two pretty strangers stood in the corner no longer; they stood up in the next dance, Kate in such a glow of delight and radiance that the whole ball-room thrilled with admiration. There had been a little hesitation as to which of the two should be her partner—a pause during which the two young men consulted each other by a look; but she had herself so clearly indicated which Bertie she preferred, that the matter was speedily de-



cided. "I wanted to have you," she said frankly to Bertie Hardwick, as he led her off, "because I want to hear all about home. Tell me about home. I have not thought of Langton for two years at least, and my mind is full of it to-night—I am sure I don't know why. I keep thinking, if I ever give a ball at Langton, how much better I will manage it. Fancy!" cried Kate, flushing with indignation, "we have been here an hour, and no one has asked us to dance, neither Ombra nor me."

"That must have been because nobody knew you," said Bertie Hardwick.

"And whose fault was that? Fancy asking two girls to a dance, and then never taking the trouble to look whether they had partners or not! If I ever give a ball, I shall behave differently, you may be sure."

"I hope you will give a great many balls, and that I shall be there to see."

"Of course," said Kate, calmly; "but if you ever see me neglecting my duty like Lady

Granton, don't forget to remind me of to-night."

Lady Granton's sister was standing next to her, and, of course, heard what she said.

## CHAPTER XIV.

“IT was you who knew them, Mr. Eldridge,” said Lady Caryisfort. “Tell me about them—you can’t think how interested I am. She thinks Lady Granton neglected her duty, and she means to behave very differently when she is in the same position. She is delicious! Tell me who she is.”

“My cousin knows better than I do,” said Bertie Eldridge, drawing back a step. “She is an old friend and neighbour of his.”

“If your cousin were my son, I should be frightened of so very dangerous a neighbour,” said Lady Caryisfort. It was one of her ways to distinguish as her possible sons men a few years younger than herself.

“Even to think her dangerous would be a presumption in me,” said Bertie Hardwick. “She is the great lady at home. Perhaps, though you laugh, you may some day see whether she can keep the resolution to behave differently. She is Miss Courtenay, of Langton-Courtenay, Lady Caryisfort. You must know her well enough by name.”

“What!—the Vice-Consul’s niece! I must go and tell Lady Granton,” said an *attaché*, who was among Lady Caryisfort’s attendants.

She followed him with her eyes as he went away, with an amused look.

“Now my little friend will have plenty of partners,” she said. “Oh! you men, who have not even courage enough to ask a pretty girl to dance until you have a certificate of her position. But I don’t mean you two. You had the certificate, I suppose, a long time ago?”

“Yes. She has grown very pretty,” said Bertie Eldridge, in a patronizing tone.

“How kind of you to think so!—how good of you to make her dance! as the French say.

Mr. Hardwick, I suppose she is your father's squire? Are you as condescending as your cousin? Give me your arm, please, and introduce me to the party. I am sure they must be fun. I have heard of Mrs. Vice-Consul——”

“I don't think they are particularly funny,” said Bertie Hardwick, with a tone which the lady's ear was far too quick to lose.

“Ah!” she said to herself, “a victim!” and was on the alert at once.

“It is the younger one who is Miss Courtenay, I suppose?” she said. “The other is—her cousin. I see now. And I assure you, Mr. Hardwick, though she is not (I suppose?) an heiress, she is very pretty too.”

Bertie assented with a peculiar smile. It was a great distinction to Bertie Hardwick to be seen with Lady Caryisfort on his arm, and a very great compliment to Mrs. Anderson that so great a personage should leave her seat in order to make her acquaintance. Yet there were drawbacks to this advantage; for Lady Caryisfort had a way of making her own

theories on most things that fell under her observation ; and she did so at once in respect to the group so suddenly brought under her observation. She paid Mrs. Anderson a great many compliments upon her two girls.

“I hear from Mr. Hardwick that I ought to know your niece ‘at home,’ as the schoolboys say,” she said. “Caryisfort is not more than a dozen miles from Langton-Courtenay. I certainly did not expect to meet my young neighbour here.”

“Her uncle wishes her to travel ; she is herself fond of moving about,” murmured Mrs. Anderson.

“Oh ! to be sure—it is quite natural,” said Lady Caryisfort ; “but I should have thought Lady Granton would have known who her guest was—and—and all of us. There are so many English people always here, and it is so hard to tell who is who——”

“If you will pardon me,” said Mrs. Anderson, who was not without a sense of her own dignity, “it is just because of the difficulty in

telling who is who that I have brought Kate here. Her guardian does not wish her to be introduced in England till she is of age; and as I am anxious not to attract any special attention, such as her position might warrant——”

“Is her guardian romantic?” said Lady Caryisfort. “Does he want her to be loved for herself alone, and that sort of thing? For otherwise, do you know, I should think it was dangerous. A pretty girl is never quite safe——”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Anderson, gravely, “there are some risks, which one is obliged to run—with every girl.”

And she glanced at Bertie Hardwick, who was standing by; and either Bertie blushed, being an ingenuous young man, or Lady Caryisfort fancied he did; for she was very busy making her little version of this story, and every circumstance, as far as she had gone, fitted in.

“But an heiress is so much more dangerous than any other girl. Suppose she should fancy some one beneath—some one not quite suf-

ficiently—some one, in short, whom her guardians would not approve of? Do you know, I think it is a dreadful responsibility for you.”

Mrs. Anderson smiled; but she gave her adviser a sudden look of fright and partial irritation.

“I must take my chance with others,” she said. “We can only hope nothing will happen.”

“Nothing happen! When it is girls and boys that are in question something always happens!” cried Lady Caryisfort, elevating her eyebrows. “But here come your two girls, looking very happy. Will you introduce them to me, please? I hope you will not be affronted with me for an inquisitive old woman,” she went on, with her most gracious smile; “but I have been watching you for ever so long.”

She was watching them now, closely, scientifically, under her drooped eyelids. Bertie had brightened so at their approach, there could be no mistaking that symptom. And the pale girl, the dark girl, the quiet one, who, now



that she had time to examine her, proved almost more interesting than the beauty—had changed, too, lighting up like a sky at sunset. The red line had gone from under Ombra's eyes; there was a rose-tint on her cheek which came and went; her eyes were dewy, like the first stars that come out at evening. A pretty, pensive creature, but bright for the moment, as was the other one—the one who was all made of colour and light.

“This is my niece, Lady Caryisfort,” said Mrs. Anderson, with an effort; and she added, in a lower tone, “This is Ombra, my own child.”

“Do you call her Ombra? What a pretty name! and how appropriate! Then of course the other one is Sunshine,” said Lady Caryisfort. “I hope I shall see something of them while I stay here; and, young ladies, I hope, as I said, that you do not consider me a very impertinent old woman because I have been watching you.”

Kate laughed out the clearest, youthful laugh.

“Are you an old woman?” she said. “I should not have guessed it.”

Lady Caryisfort turned towards Kate with growing favour. How subtle is the effect of wealth and greatness, (she thought.) Kate spoke out frankly, in the confidence of her own natural elevation, which placed her on a level with all these princesses and great ladies; while Ombra, though she was older and more experienced, hung shyly back, and said nothing at all. Lady Caryisfort, with her quick eyes, perceived, or thought she perceived, this difference in a moment, and, half-unconsciously, inclined towards the one who was of her own caste.

“Old enough to be your grandmother,” she said; “and I am your neighbour, besides, at home, so I hope we shall be great friends. I suppose you have heard of the Caryisforts? No! Why, you must be a little changeling not to know the people in your own county. You know Bertie Hardwick, though?”

“Oh! yes—I have known him all my life,” said Kate, calmly, looking up at her.

How different the two girls were! The bright one (Lady Caryisfort remarked to herself) as calm as a Summer day; the shadowy one all changing and fluttering, with various emotions. It was easy to see what that meant.

This conversation, however, had to be broken up abruptly, for already the stream of partners which Lady Caryisfort had prophesied was pouring upon the girls. Lady Barker, indeed, had come to the rescue as soon as the appearance of the two Berties emancipated the cousins. When they did not absolutely require her help, she proffered it, according to Lady Caryisfort's rule; and even Lady Granton herself showed signs of interest. An heiress is not an every-day occurrence even in the highest circles; and this was not a common heiress, a mere representative of money, but the last of an old family, the possessor of fair and solid English acres, old, noble houses, a name any man might be proud of uniting to his own; and a beauty besides. This was filling the cup too high, most people felt—there was no justice in it.

Fancy, rich, well-born, and beautiful too! She had no right to have so much.

“I cannot think why you did not tell me,” said Lady Barker, coming to Mrs. Anderson’s side. She felt she had made rather a mistake with her Mrs. Vice-Consul; and the recollection of her jokes about Kate’s possible inheritance made her redden when she thought of them. She had put herself in the wrong so clearly that even her stupid *attaché* had found it out.

“I had no desire to tell anybody—I am sorry it is known now,” said Mrs. Anderson.

Long before this a comfortable place had been found for Kate’s aunt. Her heiress had raised her out of all that necessity of watching and struggling for a point of vantage which nobodies are compelled to submit to when they venture among the great. But it is doubtful whether Mrs. Anderson was quite happy in her sudden elevation. Her feelings were of a very mixed and uncertain character. So far as Lady Barker was concerned, she could not but feel a certain pride—she liked to show the old friend,

who was patornizing and kind, that she needed no exercise of condescension on her part ; and she was pleased, as that man no doubt was pleased, who, having taken the lower room at the feast, was bidden, " Friend, go up higher." That sensation cannot be otherwise than pleasant—the little commotion, the flutter of apologies and regrets with which she was discovered " to have been standing all this time ;" the slight discomfiture of the people round, who had taken no notice, on perceiving after all that she was somebody, and not nobody, as they thought. All this had been pleasant. But it was not so pleasant to feel in so marked and distinct a manner that it was all on Kate's account. Kate was very well ; her aunt was fond of her, and good to her, and would have been so independent of her heiress-ship. But to find that her own value, such as it was—and most of us put a certain value on ourselves—and the beauty and sweetness of her child, who, to her eyes, was much more lovely than Kate, should all go for nothing, and that an elevation

which was half contemptuous, should be accorded to them solely on Kate's account, was humiliating to the good woman. She took advantage of it, and was even pleased with the practical effect; but it wounded her pride, notwithstanding, in the tenderest point. Kate, whom she had scolded and petted into decorum, whom she had made with her own hands, so to speak, into the semblance she now bore, whose faults and deficiencies she was so sensible of! Poor Mrs. Anderson, the position of dignity "among all the best people" was pleasant to her; but the thought that she had gained it only as Kate's aunt put prickles in the velvet. And Ombra, her child, her first of things, was nothing but Kate's cousin. "But that will soon be set to rights," the mother said to herself, with a smile; and then she added aloud—

"I am very sorry it is known now. We never intended it. A girl in Kate's position has enough to go through at home, without being exposed to—to fortune-hunters and annoyances here. Had I known these boys

were in Florence, I should not have come. I am very much annoyed. Nothing could be further from her guardian's wishes—or my own."

"Oh, well, you can't help it," said Lady Barker. "It was not your fault. But you can't hide an heiress. You might as well try to put brown-holland covers on a lighthouse. By-the-by, young Eldridge is very well connected, and very nice—don't you think?"

"He is Sir Herbert Eldridge's son," said Mrs. Anderson, stiffly.

"Yes. Not at all bad-looking, and all that. Nobody could consider him, you know, in the light of a fortune-hunter. But if you take my advice, you will keep all those young Italians at arm's length. Some of them are very captivating in their way; and then it sounds romantic, and girls are pleased. There is that young Buoncompagni, that Miss Courtenay is dancing with now. He is one of the handsomest young fellows in Florence, and he has not a sou. Of course he is looking out for some one with

money. Positively you must take great care. Ah, I see it is Mr. Eldridge your daughter is dancing with. You are old friends, I suppose?"

"Very old friends," said Mrs. Anderson; and she was not sorry when her questioner was called away. Perhaps, for the moment, she was not much impressed by Kate's danger in respect to the young Count Buoncompagni. Her eyes were fixed upon Ombra, as was natural. In the abstract, a seat even upon velvet cushions (with prickles in them), against an emblazoned wall, for hours together, with no one whom you know to speak to, and only such crumbs of entertainment as are thrown to you when some one says, "A pretty scene, is it not? What a pretty dress! Don't you think Lady Cary is fortis charming? And dear Lady Granton, how well she is looking!" Even with such brilliant interludes of conversation as the above, the long vigil of a chaperon is not exhilarating. But when Mrs. Anderson's eye followed Ombra she was happy; she was content to sit against the wall, and gaze, and would not allow to herself that she was sleepy.



“Poor dear Kate, too!” she said to herself, with a compunction, “*she* is as happy as possible.” Thus nature gave a compensation to Ombra for being only Miss Courtenay’s cousin—a compensation which, for the moment, in the warmth of personal happiness, she did not need.

## CHAPTER XV.

“WHY should you get up this morning, Signora mia?” said old Francesca. “The young ladies are fast asleep still. And it was a grand success, *a che lo dite*. Did not I say so from the beginning? To be sure it was a grand success. The Signorine are divine. If I were a young Principe, or a Marchesino, I know what I should do. Mees Katta is charming, my dearest lady; but, *nostra* Ombra—ah! *nostra* Ombra——”

“Francesca, we must not be prejudiced,” said Mrs. Anderson, who was taking her coffee in bed—a most unusual indulgence—while Francesca stood ready for a gossip at the bedside. The old woman was fond of petting her mistress when she had an opportunity, and of persuad-

ing her into little personal indulgences, as old servants so often are. The extra trouble of bringing up the little tray, with the fragrant coffee, the little white roll from the English baker, which the Signora was so prejudiced as to prefer, and one white camelia out of last night's bouquet, in a little Venetian glass, to serve the purpose of decoration, was the same kind of pleasure to her as it is to a mother to serve a sick child who is not ill enough to alarm her. Francesca liked it. She liked the thanks, and the protest against so innocent an indulgence with which it was always accompanied.

“I must not be so lazy again. I am quite ashamed of myself. But I was fatigued last night.”

“*Si! si!*” cried Francesca. “To be sure the Signora was tired. What! sit up till four o'clock, she who goes to bed at eleven; and my lady is not twenty now, as she once was! Ah! I remember the day when, after a ball, Madame was fatigued in a very different way.”

“Those days are long past, Francesca,” said Mrs. Anderson, with a smile, shaking her head. She did not dislike being reminded of them. She had known in her time what it was to be admired and sought after; and after sitting for six hours against the wall, it was a little consolation to reflect that she too had had her day.

“As Madame pleases, so be it,” said Francesca; “though my lady could still shine with the best if she so willed it; but for my own part I think she is right. When one has a child, and such a child as our Ombra——”

“My dear Francesca, we must not be prejudiced,” said Mrs. Anderson. “Ombra is very sweet to you and me; and I think she is very lovely; but Kate is more beautiful than she is—Kate has such a bloom. I myself admire her very much—not of course so much as—my own child.”

“If the Signora had said it, I should not have believed her,” said Francesca. “I should be sorry to show any want of education to Madame, but I should not have believed her.

Mademoiselle Katta is good child—I love her—I am what you call fond ; but she is not like our Ombra. It is not necessary that I should draw the distinction. The Signora knows it is quite a different thing.”

“Yes, yes, Francesca, I know—I know only too well ; and I hope I am not unjust,” said Mrs. Anderson. “I hope I am not unkind—I cannot help it being different. Nothing would make me neglect my duty, I trust ; and I have no reason to be anything but fond of Kate—I love her very much ; but still, as you say——”

“The Signora knows that I understand,” said Francesca. “Two gentlemen have called already this morning—already, though it is so early. They are the same young Signorini who came to the Cottage in IsleofWite.” (This Francesca pronounced as one word.) “Now, if the Signora would tell me, it would make me happy. There is two, and I ask myself—which ?”

Mrs. Anderson shook her head.

“And so do I sometimes,” she said ; “and I

thought I knew ; but last night—My dear Francesca, when I am sure I will tell you. But, indeed, perhaps it is neither of them,” she added, with a sigh.

Francesca shook her head.

“Madame would say that perhaps it is bose.”

I have not thought it necessary always to put down Francesca’s broken English, nor the mixture of languages in which she spoke. It might be gratifying to the writer to be able to show a certain acquaintance with those tongues ; but it is always doubtful whether the reader will share that gratification. But when she addressed her mistress, Francesca spoke Italian, and consequently used much better language than when she was compelled to toil through all the confusing sibilants and *ths* of the English tongue.

“I do not know—I cannot tell,” said Mrs. Anderson. “Take the tray, *mia buona amica*. You shall know when I know. And now I think I must get up. One can’t stay in bed, you know, all day.”

When her mistress thus changed the subject, Francesca saw that it was no longer convenient to continue it. She was not satisfied that Mrs. Anderson did not know, but she understood that she was in the meantime to make her own observations. Keener eyes were never applied to such a purpose, but at the present moment Francesca was too much puzzled to come to any speedy decision on the subject; and notwithstanding her love for Ombra, who was supreme in her eyes, Francesca was moved to a feeling for Kate which had not occurred to the other ladies. "Santissima Madonna! it is hard—very hard for the little one," she said to herself, as she mused over the matter. "Who is to defend her from Fate? She will see them every day—she is young—they are young—what can anyone expect? Ah! Madonna mia, send some good young marchesino, some piccolo principe, to make the Signorina a great lady, and save her from breaking her little heart. It would be good for *la patria*, too,"

Francesca resumed, piously thinking of Kate's wealth.

She was a servant of the old Italian type, to whom it was natural to identify herself with her family. She did not even "toil for duty, not for meed," but planned and deliberated over all their affairs with the much more spontaneous and undoubting sentiment that their affairs were her own, and that they mutually belonged to each other. She said "our Ombra" with as perfect good-faith as if her young mistress had been her own child—and so indeed she was. The bond between them was too real to be discussed or even described—and consequently it was with the natural interest of one pondering her own business that Francesca turned it all over in her mind, and considered how she could best serve Kate, and keep her unharmed by Ombra's uncertainty.

When Count Antonio Buoncompagni came with his card and his inquiries, the whole landscape lighted up around her. Francesca was a Florentine of the Florentines. She knew all about



the Buoncompagni ; her aunt's husband's sister had been cameriera to the old Duchessa, Antonio's grandmother ; so that in a manner, she said to herself, she belonged to the family. The Contessina, his mother, had made her first communion along with Francesca's younger sister, Angiola. This made a certain spiritual bond between them. The consequence of all these important facts, taken together, was that Francesca felt herself the natural champion of Count Buoncompagni, who seemed thus to have stepped in at the most suitable moment, and as if in answer to her appeal to the Madonna, to lighten her anxieties, and free her child Ombra from the responsibility of harming another. The Count Antonio was young and very good-looking. He addressed Francesca in those frank and friendly tones which she had so missed in England ; he called her *amica mia*, though he had never seen her before. " Ah ! Santissima Madonna, *quella differenza!*" she said to herself, as he went down the long stair, and the young Englishmen, who had known her for

years, and were very friendly to the old woman, came up, and got themselves admitted without one unnecessary word. They had no caressing friendly phrase for her as they went and came. Francesca was true as steel to her mistress and all her house; she would have gone through fire and water for them; but it never occurred to her that to take the part of confidante and abettor to the young Count, should he mean to present himself as a suitor to Kate, would be treacherous to them or their trust. Of all things that could happen to the Signorina, the best possible thing—the good fortune most to be desired—would be that she should get a noble young husband, who would be very fond of her, and to whose house she would bring joy and prosperity. The Buoncompagni, unfortunately, though noble as the king himself, were poor; and Francesca knew very well what a difference it would make in the faded grand palazzo if Kate went there with her wealth. Even so much wealth as she had brought to her aunt would, Francesca thought, make a

great difference; and what, then, would not the whole fabulous amount of Kate's fortunes do? "It will be good for *la patria*, too," she repeated to herself; and this not guiltily, like a conscious conspirator, but with the truest sense of duty.

She carried in Count Antonio's card to the *salone* where the ladies were sitting with their visitors. Ombra was seated at one of the windows, looking out; beside her stood Bertie Hardwick, not saying much; while his cousin, scarcely less silent, listened to Kate's chatter. Kate's gay voice was in full career; she was going over all last night's proceedings, giving them a dramatic account of her feelings. She was describing her own anger, mortification, and dismay; then her relief, when she caught sight of the two young men. "Not because it was you," she said gaily, "but because you were men—or boys—things we could dance with; and because you knew us, and could not help asking us."

"That is not a pleasant way of stating it," said Bertie Eldridge. "If you had known our

delight and amaze and happiness in finding you, and how transported we were——”

“I suppose you must say that,” said Kate; “please don’t take the trouble. I know you could not help making me a pretty speech; but what *I* say is quite true. We were glad, not because it was you, but because we felt in a moment, here are some men we know, they cannot leave us standing here all night; we must be able to get a dance at last.”

“I have brought the Signora a card,” said Francesca, interrupting the talk. “Ah, such a beautiful young Signor! What a consolation to me to be in my own country; to be called *amica mia* once again. You are very good, you English signori, and very kind in your way, but you never speak as if you loved us, though we may serve you for years. When one comes like this handsome young Count Antonio, how different! ‘*Cara mia,*’ he says, ‘put me at the feet of their Excellencies. I hope the beautiful young ladies are not too much fatigued!’ Ah, my English gentlemen, you do not talk like

that! You say, ‘Are they quite well—Madame Anderson and the young ladies?’ And if it is old Francesca, or a new domestic, whom you never saw before, not one word of difference! You are cold; you are insensible; you are not like our Italian. Signorina Katta, do you know the name on the card?”

“It’s Count Antonio Buoncompagni!” said Kate, with a bright blush and smile. “Why, that was my partner last night! How nice of him to come and call—and what a pretty name! And he dances like an angel, Francesca—I never saw anyone dance so well!”

“That is a matter of course, Signorina. He is young; he is a Buoncompagni; his ancestors have all been noble and had education for a thousand years—what should hinder him to dance? If the Signorina will come to me when these gentlemen leave you, I will tell her hundreds of beautiful stories about the Buoncompagni. We are, as it were, connected—the sister-law of my aunt Filomena was once maid to the old Duchessa—besides other ties,” Fran-

cesca added, raising her head with a certain careless grandeur. "Nobody knows better than I do the history of the Buoncompagni; and the Signorina is very fond of stories, as Madame knows."

"My good Francesca, so long as you don't turn her head with your stories," said Mrs. Anderson, good-humouredly. And she added, when the old woman had left the room, "Often and often I have been glad to hear Francesca's stories myself. All these Italian families have such curious histories. She will go on from one to another, as if she never would have done. She knows everybody, and whom they all married, and all about them. And there is some truth, you know, in what she says—we are very kind, but we don't talk to our servants nor show any affection for them. I am very fond of Francesca, and very grateful to her for her faithful service, but even I don't do it. Kate has a frank way with everybody. But our English reserve is dreadful!"

"We don't say everything that comes upper-

most," said one of the young men. "We do not wear our hearts on our sleeves," said the other.

"No," said Ombra; "perhaps, on the contrary, you keep them so covered up that one never can tell whether you have any hearts at all."

Ombra's voice had something in it different from the sound of the others; it had a meaning. Her words were not lightly spoken, but fully intended. This consciousness startled all the little party. Mrs. Anderson flung herself, as it were, into the breach, and began to talk fast on all manner of subjects; and Ombra, probably repenting the seriousness of her speech, exerted herself to dissipate the effect of it. But Kate kept the Count's card in her hand, pondering over it. A young Italian noble; the sort of figure which appears in books and in pictures; the kind of person who acts as hero in tale and song. He had come to lay himself at the feet of the beautiful young ladies. Well! perhaps the two Berties meant just as much by the clumsy shy

visit which they were paying at that moment—but they never laid themselves at anybody's feet. They were well-dressed Philistines, never allowing any expression of friendship or affectionateness to escape them. Had they no hearts at all, as Ombra insinuated, or would they not be much pleasanter persons if they wore their said hearts on their sleeves, and permitted them to be pecked at? Antonio Buoncompagni! Kate stole out after a while, on pretence of seeking her work, and flew to the other end of the long, straggling suite of rooms to where Francesca sat. "Tell me all about them," she said, breathlessly. And Francesca clapped her hands mentally, and felt that her work had begun.



## CHAPTER XVI.

“IT is very interesting,” said Kate; “but it is about this Count’s grandfather you are talking, Francesca. Could not we come a little lower down?”

“Signorina mia, when one is a Buoncompagni, one’s grandfather is very close and near,” said Francesca. “There are some families in which a grandfather is a distant ancestor, or perhaps the beginning of the race. But with the Buoncompagni you do not adopt that way of reckoning. Count Antonio’s mother is living—she is a thing of to-day, like the rest of us. Then I ask, Signorina Katta, whom can one speak of? That is the way in old families. Doubtless in the Signorina’s own house—”

“Oh, my grandpapa is a thousand years off,” said Kate. “I don’t believe in him—he must have been so dreadfully old. Even papa was old. He married when he was about fifty, I suppose, and I never saw him. My poor little mother was different, but I never saw her either. Don’t speak of my family, please. I suppose they were very nice, but I don’t know much about them.”

“Mademoiselle would not like to be without them,” said Francesca, nodding her little grey head. “Mademoiselle would feel very strange if all at once it were said to her, ‘You never had a grandpapa. You are a child of the people, my young lady. You came from no one knows where.’ Ah, you prefer the old ones to that, Signorina Katta. If you were to go into the Buoncompagni Palazzo, and see all the beautiful pictures of the old Cavalieri in their armour, and the ladies with pearls and rubies upon their beautiful robes! The Contino would be rich if he could make up his mind to sell those magnificent pictures; but the Signorina will perceive in a moment that to sell one’s ances-

tors—that is a thing one could never do.”

“No, I should not like to sell them,” said Kate, thoughtfully. “But do you mean that? Are the Buoncompagni poor?”

“Signorina mia,” said Francesca, with dignity, “when were they rich—our grand nobili Italiani? Not since the days when Firenze was a queen in the world, and did what she would. That was ended a long, long time ago. And what, then, was it the duty of the great Signori to do? They had to keep their old palaces, and all the beautiful things the house had got when it was rich, for the good of *la patria*, when she should wake up again. They had to keep all the old names, and the recollections. Signorina Katta, a common race could not have done this. We poor ones in the streets we have done what we could; we have kept up our courage and our gaiety of heart for our country. The Buoncompagni, and such like, kept up the race. They would rather live in a corner of the old Palazzo than part with it to a stranger. They would not sell the pictures, and the *belle cose*, except now and

then one small piece, to keep the family alive. And now, look you, Signorina mia, *la patria* has woke up at last, and *ecco!* Her old names, and her old palaces, and the *belle cose* are here waiting for her. Ah! we have had a great deal to suffer, but we are not extinguished. Certainly they are poor, but what then? They exist; and every true Italian will bless them for that."

This old woman, with her ruddy-brown, dried-up little face, and her scanty hair, tied into a little knot at the top of it—curious little figure, whom Kate had found it hard work to keep from laughing at when she arrived first at Shanklin, was a politician, a visionary, a patriot-enthusiast. Kate now, at eighteen, looked at Francesca with respect, which was just modified by an inclination, far down at the bottom of her heart, to laugh. But for this she took herself very sharply to task. Kate had not quite got over the natural English inclination to be contemptuous of all "foreigners" who took a different view of their duty from that

natural to the British mind. If the Buoncompagni had tried to make money, and improve their position; if they had emigrated, and fought their way in the world; if they had done some active work, instead of vegetating and preserving their old palaces, she asked herself? Which was no doubt an odd idea to have got into the Tory brain of the young representative of an old family, bound to hate revolutionaries; but Kate was a revolutionary by nature, and her natural Toryism was largely tinged by the natural Radicalism of her age, and that propensity to contradict, and form theories of her own, which were part of her character. It was part of her character still, though it had been smoothed down, and brought under subjection, by her aunt's continual indulgence. She was not so much impressed as she felt she ought to have been by Francesca's speech.

“I am glad they exist,” she said. “Of course we must all really have had the same number of grandfathers and grandmothers, but still an old family is pleasant. The only thing is, Fran-

cesca,—don't be angry,—suppose they had done something, while the *patria*, you know, has been asleep; suppose they had tried to get on, to recover their money, to do something more than exist! It is only a suggestion—probably I am quite wrong, but——”

“The Signorina perhaps will condescend to inform me,” said Francesca, with lofty satire, “what, in her opinion, it would have been best for our nobles to do?”

“Oh! I am sure I don't know. I only meant—I don't know anything about it!” cried Kate.

“If the Signorina will permit me to say so, that is very visible,” said Francesca; and then, for full five minutes, she plied her needle, and was silent. This, perhaps, was rather a hard punishment for Kate, who had left the visitors in the drawing-room to seek a more lively amusement in Francesca's company, and who, after the excitement of the ball, was anxious for some other excitement. She revenged herself by pulling the old woman's work about, and asking what was this, and this. Francesca was making

a dress for her mistress, and Mrs. Anderson, though she did not despise the fashion, was sufficiently sensible to take her own way, and keep certain peculiarities of her own.

“Why do you make it like this?” said Kate. “Auntie is not a hundred. She might as well have her dress made like other people. She is very nice-looking, I think, for her age. Don’t you think so? She must have been pretty once, Francesca. Why, you ought to know—you knew her when she was young. Don’t you think she has been—?”

“Signorina, be so good as to let my work alone,” said Francesca. “What! do you think there is nothing but youth that is to be admired? I did not expect to find so little education in one of my Signorinas. Know, Mademoiselle Katta, that there are many persons who think Madame handsomer than either of the young ladies. There is an air of distinction and of intelligence. You, for instance, you have the *beauté de diable*—one admires you because you are so young; but how do you know that it

will last? Your features are not remarkable, Signorina Katta. When those roses are gone, probably you will be but an ordinary-looking woman; but my Signora Anderson, she has features, she has the grand air, she has distinction—”

“Oh! you spiteful old woman!” cried Kate, half vexed, half laughing. “I never said I thought I was pretty. I know I am just like a doll, all red and white; but you need not tell me so, all the same.”

“Mademoiselle is not like a doll,” said Francesca. “Sometimes, when she has a better inspiration, Mademoiselle has something more than red and white. I did not affirm that it would not last. I said how do you know? But my Signora has lasted. She is noble!—she is distinguished! And as for what she has been——”

“That is exactly what I said,” said Kate.

“We do not last in Italy,” said Francesca, pursuing the subject with the gravity of an abstract philosopher. “It is, perhaps, our



beautiful climate. Your England, which has so much of mist and of rain, keeps the grass green, and it preserves beauty. The Contessa Buoncompagni has lost all her beauty. She was of the Strozzi family, and made her first communion on the same day as my little Angiolina, who is now blessed in heaven. Allow me to say it to you, Signorina mia, they were beautiful as two angels in their white veils. But the Contessina has grown old. She has lost her hair, which does not happen to the English Signore, and—other things. I am more old than she, and when I see it I grieve. She does not go out, except, of course, which goes without saying, to the Duomo. She is a good woman—a very good woman. If she cannot afford to give the best price for her salad, is it her fault? She is a great lady, as great as anybody in all Firenze—Countess Buoncompagni, born Strozzi. What would you have more? But, dear lady, it is no shame to her that she is not rich. Santissima Madonna, why should one hesitate to say it? It is not her fault.”

“Of course it cannot be her fault; nobody would choose to be poor if they could help it,” said Kate.

“I cannot say, Signorina Katta—I have not any information on the subject. To be rich is not all. It might so happen—though I have no special information—that one would choose to be poor. I am poor myself, but I would not change places with many who are rich. I should esteem more,” said Francesca, raising her head, “a young galantuomo who was noble and poor, and had never done anything against the *patria*, nor humbled himself before the Tedeschi, a hundred and a thousand times more than those who hold places and honours. But then I am a silly old woman, most likely the Signorina will say.”

“Is Count Buoncompagni like that?” asked Kate; but she did not look for an answer.

And just then the bell rang from the drawing-room, and Francesca put down her work, and bustled away to open the door for the young Englishmen whose company Kate had

abandoned. The girl took up Francesca's work, and made half a dozen stitches ; and then went to her own room, where Maryanne was also at work. Kate gave a little sketch of the dresses at the ball to the handmaiden, who listened with breathless interest.

“I don't think anyone could have looked nicer than you and Miss Ombra in your fresh tarlatane, Miss,” said Maryanne.

“Nobody took the least notice of us,” said Kate. “We are not worth noticing among so many handsome, well-dressed people. We were but a couple of girls out of the nursery in our white. I think I will choose a colour that will make some show if I ever go to a ball again.”

“Oh ! Miss Kate, you will go to a hundred balls !” cried Maryanne, with fervour.

Kate shrugged her shoulders with sham disdain ; but she felt, with a certain gentle complacency, that it was true. A girl who has once been to a ball must go on. She cannot be shut up again in any nursery and school-room ; she is emancipated for ever and ever ; the

glorious world is thrown open to her. The tartane which marked her bread-and-butter days would no doubt yield to more splendid garments; but she could not go back—she had made her entry into life.

Lady Carysfort called next day—an event which filled Mrs. Anderson with satisfaction. No doubt Kate was the chief object of her visit; and as it was the first time that Kate's aunt and cousin had practically felt the great advantage which her position gave her over them, there was, without doubt, some difficulty in the situation. But, fortunately, Ombra's attention was otherwise occupied; and Mrs. Anderson, though she was a high-spirited woman, and did not relish the idea of deriving consequence entirely from the little girl whom she had brought up, had yet that philosophy which more or less is the accompaniment of experience, and knew that it was much better to accept the inevitable graciously, than to fight against it. And if anything could have neutralized the wound to her pride, it would have been the

“pretty manners” of Lady Caryisfort, and the interest which she displayed in Ombra. Indeed, Ombra secured more of her attention than Kate did—a consoling circumstance. Lady Caryisford showed every inclination to “take them up.” It was a thing she was fond of doing; and she was so amiable and entertaining, and so rich, and opened up such perfectly good society to her *protégées*, that few people at the moment of being taken up realized the fact that they must inevitably be let down again by-and-by—a process not so pleasant.

At this moment nothing could be more delightful than their new friend. She called for them when she went out driving, and took them to Fiesole, to La Pioggia, to the Cascine—wherever fashion went. She lent them her carriage when she was indolent, as often happened, and did not care to go out. She asked them to her little parties when she had “the best people”—a compliment which Mrs. Anderson felt deeply, and which was very different from the invitation to the big ball at the Em-

bassy, to which everybody was invited. In short, Lady Caryisfort launched the little party into the best society of English at Florence, such as it is. And the pretty English heiress became as well known as if she had gone through a season at home previous to this Italian season. Poor Uncle Courtenay! Had he seen Antonio Buoncompagni, who danced like an angel, leading his ward through the mazes of a cotillon, what would that excellent guardian's feelings have been?

## CHAPTER XVII.

WE have said that Ombra's attention was otherwise occupied. Had it not been so, it is probable that she would have resented and struggled against the new and unusual and humiliating consciousness of being but an appendage to her cousin; but fortunately all such ideas had been driven out of her head. A new life, a new world, seemed to have begun for Ombra. All the circumstances of their present existence appeared to lend themselves to the creation of this novel sphere. Old things seemed to have passed away, and all had become new. From the moment of the first call, made in doubt and tribulation, by the two Berties, they had resumed again, in the most natural manner, the habits of their former ac-

quaintance, but with an entirely new aspect. Here there was at once the common bond which unites strangers in a new place—a place full of beauty and wonder, which both must see, and which it is so natural they should see together. The two young men fell into the habit of constant attendance upon the ladies, with a naturalness which defeated all precautions; and an intercourse began to spring up, which combined that charming flavour of old friendship, and almost brotherhood, with any other sentiment that might arise by the way. This conjunction, too, made the party so independent and so complete. With such an escort the ladies could go anywhere; and they went everywhere accordingly—to picture-galleries, to all the sights of the place, and even now and then upon country excursions, in the bright, cold Winter days. “The boys,” as Kate called them, came and went all day long, bringing news of everything that was to be seen or heard, always with a new plan or suggestion for the morrow.



The little feminine party brightened up, as women do brighten always under the fresh and exhilarating influence of that breath from outside which only "the boys" can bring. Soon Mrs. Anderson, and even Ombra herself, adopted that affectionate phrase—to throw another delightful, half-delusive veil over all possibilities that might be in the future. It gave a certain "family feeling," a mutual right to serve and be served; and at times Mrs. Anderson felt as if she could persuade herself that "the boys," who were so full of that kindly and tender gallantry which young men can pay to a woman old enough to be their mother, were in reality her own as much as the girls were—if not sons, nephews at the least. She said this to herself, by way, I fear, of excusing herself, and placing little pleasant shields of pretence between her and the reality. To be sure, she was the soul of propriety, and never left the young people alone together; but, as she said, "at whatever cost to herself," bore them company in all their rambles. But yet sometimes a recol-

lection of Mr. Courtenay would cross her mind in an uncomfortable way. And sometimes a still more painful chill would seize her when she thought of Kate, who was thus thrown constantly into the society of the Berties. Kate treated them with the easiest friendliness, and they were sincerely (as Mrs. Anderson believed) brotherly to her. But, still, they were all young; and who could tell what fancies the girl might take into her head? These two thoughts kept her uncomfortable. But yet the life was happy and bright; and Ombra was happy. Her cloud of temper had passed away; her rebellions and philosophies had alike vanished into the air. She was brighter than ever she had been in her life—more loving and more sympathetic. Life ran on like a Summer day, though the Tramontana sometimes blew, and the dining-room was cold as San Lorenzo; but all was warm, harmonious, joyous within.

Kate for one never troubled her head to ask why. She accepted the delightful change with unquestioning pleasure. It was perfectly simple

to her that her cousin should get well—that the cloud should disperse. In her thoughtlessness she did not even attribute this to any special cause, contenting herself with the happy fact that so it was.

“How delightful it is that Ombra should have got so well!” she said, with genuine pleasure to her aunt.

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs. Anderson, looking at her wistfully. “It is the Italian air—it works like a charm.”

“I don’t think it is the air,” said Kate—“privately, aunty, I think the Italian air is dreadfully chilly—at least, when one is out of the sun. It is the fun, and the stir, and the occupation. Fun is an excellent thing, and having something to do— Now, don’t say no, please, for I am quite sure of it. I feel so much happier, too.”

“What makes you happier, my darling?” said Mrs. Anderson, with a very anxious look.

“Oh! I don’t know—everything,” said Kate; and she gave her aunt a kiss, and went off

singing, balancing a basket on her head with the pretty action of the girls whom she saw every day carrying water from the fountain.

Mrs. Anderson was alone, and this pretty picture dwelt in her mind, and gave her a great deal of thought. Was it only fun and occupation, as the girl said?—or was there something else unknown to Kate dawning in her heart, and making her life bright, all unconsciously to herself? “They are both as brothers to her,” Mrs. Anderson said to herself, with pain and fear; and then she repeated to herself how good they were, what true gentlemen, how incapable of any pretence which could deceive even so innocent a girl as Kate. The truth was, Mrs. Anderson’s uneasiness increased every day. She was doing by Kate as she would that another should not do by Ombra. She was doubly kind and tender, lavishing affection and caresses upon her, but she was not considering Kate’s interest, or carrying out Mr. Courtenay’s conditions. And what could she do? The happiness of her own child was in-

volved ; she was bound hand and foot by her love for Ombra. "Then," she would say to herself, "Kate is getting no harm. She is eighteen past—quite old enough to be 'out'—indeed, it would be wrong of me to deny her what pleasure I can, and it is not as if I took her wherever we were asked. I am sure, so far as I am concerned, I should have liked much better to go to the Morrises—nice, pleasant people, not too grand to make friends of—but I refused, for Kate's sake. She shall go nowhere but in the *very best society*. Her uncle himself could not do better for her than Lady Granton or Lady Caryisfort—most likely not half so well ; and he will be hard to please indeed if he is discontented with that," Mrs. Anderson said to herself. But notwithstanding all these specious pleadings at that secret bar, where she was at once judge and advocate and culprit, she did not succeed in obtaining a favourable verdict ; all she could do was to put the thought away from her by times, and persuade herself that no harm could ensue.

“Look at Ombra now,” Kate said, on the same afternoon to Francesca, whose Florentine lore she held in great estimation. Her conversation with her aunt had brought the subject to her mind, and a little curiosity about it had awakened within her when she thought it over. “See what change of air has done, as I told you it would—and change of scene.”

“Mees Katta,” said Francesca, “change of air is very good—I say nothing against that—but, as I have remarked on other occasions, one must not form one’s opinions on ze surface. Mademoiselle Ombra has *changed ze mind*.”

“Oh! yes, I know you said she must do that, and you never go back from what you once said; but, Francesca, I don’t understand you in the least. How has she changed her mind?”

“If Mademoiselle would know, it is best to ask Mees Ombra her-self,” said Francesca, “not one poor servant, as has no way to know.”

“Oh,” cried Kate, flushing scarlet, “when you are so humble there is an end of everything—I

know that much by this time. There! I will ask Ombra herself; I will not have you make me out to be underhand. Ombra, come here one moment, please. I am so glad you are better; it makes me happy to see you look like your old self; but tell me one thing—my aunt says it is the change of air, and I say it is change of scene and plenty to do. Now, tell me which it is—I want to know.”

Ombra had been passing the open door; she came and stood in the doorway, with one hand upon the lintel. A pretty, fitting, evanescent colour had come upon her pale cheek, and there was now always a dewy look of feeling in her eyes, which made them beautiful. She stood and smiled, in the soft superiority of her elder age upon the girl who questioned her. Her colour deepened a little; her eyes looked as if there was dew in them, ready to fall. “I am better,” she said, in a voice which seemed to Kate to be full of combined and harmonious notes—“I am better without knowing why—I suppose because God is so good.”

And then she went away softly, crooning the song which she had been humming to herself, in the lightness of her heart, as her cousin called her. Kate was struck with violent shame and self-disgust. "Oh, how wicked I am!" she said, rushing to her own room and shutting herself in. And there she had a short but refreshing cry, though she was by no means given to tears. She had been brought up piously, to be sure—going to Church, attending to her "religious duties," as a well-brought up young woman ought to do. But it had not occurred to her to give any such visionary reason for anything that had happened to her. Kate preferred secondary causes, to tell the truth. But there was something more than met the ear in what Ombra said. How was it that God had been so good? Kate was very reverential of this new and unanswerable cause for her cousin's restoration. But how was it?—there was still something which she did not fathom, beyond.

Such pleasant days these were! When "the boys" came to pay their greetings in the



morning, "Where shall we go to-day?" was the usual question. They went to the pictures two or three days in the week, seeing every scrap of painting that was to be found anywhere—from the great galleries, where all was light and order, to the little out-of-the-way churches, which hid, in the darkness of their heart of hearts, some one precious morsel of an altar-piece, carefully veiled from the common public. And, in the intervals, they would wander through the streets, learning the very houses by heart; gazing into the shop windows, at the mosaics, on the Lung-Arno; at the turquoises and pearls, which then made the Ponte Vecchio a soft blaze of colour, blue and white; at the curiosity shops, and those hung about with copies in which Titian was done into weakness, and Raphael to imbecility. Every bit of Florence was paced over by these English feet, one pair of which were often very tired, but never shrunk from the duty before them. Most frequently "the boys" returned to luncheon, which even Mrs. Anderson, who knew

better, was prejudiced enough to create into a steady-going English meal. In the afternoon, if they drove with Lady Caryisfort to the Cascine, the Berties came to the carriage-windows to tell them all that was going on; to bring them bouquets; to point out every new face. When they went to the theatre or opera in the evening, again the same indefatigable escort accompanied and made everything smooth for them. When they had invitations, the Berties, too, were invariably of the party. When they stayed at home the young men, even when not invited, would always manage to present themselves during the evening, uniting in pleasant little choruses of praise to Mrs. Anderson for staying at home. "After all, this is the best," the young hypocrites would say; and one of them would read while the ladies worked; or there would be "a little music," in which Ombra was the chief performer. Thus, from the beginning of the day to the end, they were scarcely separated, except for intervals, which gave freshness ever

renewed to their meeting. It was like "a family party;" so Mrs. Anderson said to herself a dozen times in a day.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

“COME and tell me all about yourself, Kate,” said Lady Caryisfort, from her sofa. She had a cold, and was half an invalid. She had kept Kate with her while the others went out, after paying their call. Lady Caryisfort had enveloped her choice of Kate in the prettiest excuses, “I wish one of you girls would give up the sunshine, and stay and keep me company,” she had said. “Let me see—no, I will not choose Ombra, for Ombra has need of all the air that is to be had; but Kate is strong—an afternoon’s seclusion will not make any difference to her. Spare me Kate, please, Mrs. Anderson. I want some one to talk to—I want something pleasant to look at. Let her stay and dine with me,

and in the evening I will send her home."

So it had been settled; and Kate was in the great, somewhat dim drawing-room, which was Lady Caryisfort's abode. The house was one of the great palazzi in one of the less-known streets of Florence. It was on the sunny side, but long ago the sun had retreated behind the high houses opposite. The great lofty palace itself was like a mountain side, and half way down this mountain side came the tall windows, draped with dark velvet and white muslin, which looked out into the deep ravine, called a street, below. The room was very large and lofty, and had openings on two sides, enveloped in heavy velvet curtains, into two rooms beyond. The two other side walls were covered with large frescoes, almost invisible in this premature twilight; for it was not late, and the top rooms in the palace, which were inhabited by Cesare, the mosaic-worker, still retained the sunshine. All the decorations were of a grandiose character; the velvet hangings were dark, though warm.

in colour ; a cheerful wood fire threw gleams of variable reflection here and there into the tall mirrors ; and Lady Caryisfort, wrapped in a huge soft white shawl, which looked like lace, but was Shetland wool, lay on a sofa under one of the frescoes. As the light varied, there would appear now a head, now an uplifted arm out of the historical composition above. The old world was all about in the old walls, in the waning light, in the grand proportions of the place ; but the dainty lady in her shawl, the dainty table with its pretty tea-service, which stood within reach of her hand, and Kate, whose bloom not even the twilight could obliterate, belonged not to the old, but the new. There was a low, round chair, a kind of luxurious shell, covered with the warm, dark velvet, on the other side of the little table.

“Come and sit down beside me here,” said Lady Caryisfort, “and tell me all about yourself.”

“There is not very much to tell,” said Kate, “if you mean facts ; but if it is *me* you want to

know about, then there is a little more. Which would you like best ?”

“ I thought you were a fact.”

“ I suppose I am,” said Kate, with a laugh. “ I never thought of that. But then, of course, between the facts that have happened to me, and this fact, Kate Courtenay, there is a good deal of difference. Which would you like best ? Me ? But, then, where must I begin ?”

“ As early as you can remember,” said the inquisitor ; “ and, recollect, I should most likely have sought you out, and known all about you long before this, if you had stayed at Langton—so you may be perfectly frank with me.”

To tell the truth, all the little scene had been got up on purpose for this confidential talk ; the apparently chance choice of Kate as a companion, and even Lady Caryisfort’s cold, were means to an end. Kate was of her own county, she was of her own class, she was thrown into a position which Lady Caryisfort thought was not the one she ought to have filled, and with all the fervour of a lively fancy and benevolent

meaning she had thrown herself into this little ambush. The last words were just as near a mistake as it was possible for words to be, for Kate had no notion of being anything but frank; and the little assurance that she might be so safely, almost put her on her guard.

“You would not have been allowed to seek me out,” said Kate. “Uncle Courtenay had made up his mind I was to know nobody—I am sure I don’t know why. He used to send me a new governess every year. It was the greatest chance that I was allowed to keep even Maryanne. He thought servants ought to be changed; and I am afraid,” said Kate, with humility, “that I was not at all *nice* when I was at home.”

“My poor child!—I don’t believe you were ever anything but nice.”

“No,” said Kate, taking hold of the caressing hand which was laid on her arm; “you can’t think how disagreeable I was, till I was fifteen; then my dear aunt—my good aunt, whom you don’t like so much as you might——”



“How do you know that, you little witch?”

“Oh! I know very well. She came home to England, after being years away, and she wrote to my uncle, asking if she might see me, and he was horribly worried with me at the time,” said Kate. “I had worried him so that he could not eat his dinner even in peace—and Uncle Courtenay likes his dinner—so he wrote and said she might have me altogether, if she pleased; and though he gave the very worst account of me, and said all the harm he could, aunty started off directly, and took me home.”

“That was kind of her, Kate.”

“Kind of her!—oh! it was a great deal more than kind. Fancy how I felt when she cried and kissed me! I am not sure that anybody had ever kissed me before, and I was such a stupid—such a thing without a soul—that I was quite astonished when she cried. I actually asked her why? Whenever I think of it, I feel my cheeks grow crimson.” And here Kate, with a pretty gesture, laid one of Lady Caryis-

fort's soft rose-tipped fingers upon her burning cheek.

"You poor dear child! Well, I understand why Mrs. Anderson cried, and it was nice of her; but *après*," said Kate's confessor.

"*Après*? I was at home—I was as happy as the day was long. I got to be like other girls; they never paid any attention to me, and they petted me from morning to night."

"But how could that be?" said Lady Caryisfort, whose understanding was not quite equal to the strain thus put upon it.

"I forgot all about myself after that," said Kate. "I was just like other girls. Ombra thought me rather a bore at first; but, fortunately, I never found that out till she had got over it. She had always been aunty's only child, and I think she was a trifle—jealous; I have an idea," said Kate—"but how wicked I am to go and talk of Ombra's faults to you!"

"Never mind; I shall never repeat anything you tell me," said the confidante.

"Well, I think, if she has a weakness, it is

that perhaps she likes to be first. I don't mean in any vulgar way," said Kate, suddenly flushing red as she saw a smile on her companion's face, "but with people she loves. She would not like (naturally) to see her mother love anyone else as much as her; or even she would not like to see me——"

"And how about other people?" cried Lady Caryisfort, amused.

"About other people I do not know what to say; I don't think she has ever been tried," said Kate, with a grave and puzzled look. "She has always been first, without any question—or, at least, so I think; but that is puzzling—that is more difficult. I would rather not go into that question; for, by-the-by, this is all about Ombra—it is not about me."

"That is true," said Lady Caryisfort; "we must change the subject, for I don't want you to tell me your cousin's secrets, Kate."

"Secrets!—she has not any," said Kate, with a laugh.

“Are you quite sure of that?”

“Sure of Ombra!—of course I must be. If I were not quite sure of Ombra, whom could I believe in? There are no secrets,” said Kate, with a little pride, “among us.”

“Poor child!” thought Lady Caryisfort to herself; but she said nothing, though after a while she asked gently, “Were you glad to come abroad? I suppose it was your guardian’s wish?”

Once more Kate laughed.

“That is the funniest thing of all,” she said. “He came to pay us a visit; and fancy he, who never could bear me to have a single companion, arrived precisely on my birthday, when we were much gayer than usual, and had a croquet party! It was as good as a play to see his face. But he made my aunt promise to take us abroad. I suppose he thought we could make no friends abroad.”

“But in that he has evidently been mistaken, Kate.”

“I don’t know. Except yourself, Lady

Caryisfort, what friends have we made? You have been very kind, and as nice as it is possible to be—”

“Thanks, dear. The benefit has been mine,” said Lady Caryisfort in an undertone.

“But we don’t call Lady Granton a friend,” continued Kate—“nor the people who have left cards and sent us invitations since they met us there. And until we came to Florence we had not met you.”

“But then there are these two young men—Mr. Eldridge and Mr. Hardwick.”

“Oh! the Berties,” said Kate; and she laughed. “*They* don’t count, surely; they are old friends. We did not require to come to Italy to make acquaintance with them.”

“Perhaps you came to Italy to avoid them?” said Lady Caryisfort, drawing her bow at a venture.

Kate looked her suddenly in the face, with a start; but the afternoon had gradually grown darker, and neither could make out what was in the other’s face.

“Why should we come to Italy to avoid them?” said Kate gravely.

Her new seriousness quite changed the tone of her voice. She was thinking of Ombra and all the mysterious things that had happened that Summer day after the yachting. It was more than a year ago, and she had almost forgotten; but somehow, Kate could not tell how, the Berties had been woven in with the family existence ever since.

Lady Caryisfort gave her gravity a totally different meaning. “So that is how it is,” she said to herself.

“If I were you, Kate,” she said aloud, “I would write and tell my guardian all about it, and who the people are whom you are acquainted with here. I think he has a right to know. Would he be quite pleased that the Berties, as you call them, should be with you so much? Pardon me if I say more than I ought.”

“The Berties!” said Kate, now fairly puzzled. “What has Uncle Courtenay to do with the Berties? He is not Ombra’s guardian, but only

mine: and *they* have nothing to do with me."

"Oh! perhaps I am mistaken," said Lady Caryisfort; and she changed the subject dexterously, leading Kate altogether away from this too decided suggestion. They talked afterwards of everything in earth and heaven; but at the end of that little dinner, which they ate *tête-à-tête*, Kate returned to the subject which in the meantime had been occupying a great part of her thoughts.

"I have been thinking of what you said about Uncle Courtenay," she said quite abruptly after a pause. "I do write to him about once every month, and I always tell him whom we are seeing. I don't believe he ever reads my letters. He is always paying visits through the Winter when Parliament is up, and I always direct to him at home. I don't suppose he ever reads them. But that, of course, is not my fault, and whenever we meet anyone new I tell him. We don't conceal anything; my aunt never permits that."

“And I am sure it is your own feeling too,” cried Lady Caryisfort. “It is always best.”

And she dismissed the subject, not feeling herself possessed of sufficient information to enter into it more fully. She was a little shaken in her own theory on the subject of the Berties, one of whom at least she felt convinced must have designs on Kate’s fortune—that was “only natural;” but at least Kate was not aware of it. And Lady Caryisfort was half annoyed and half pleased when one of her friends asked admittance in the evening, bringing with her the young Count Buoncompagni, whom Kate had met at the Embassy. It was a Countess Strozzi, an aunt of his, and an intimate of Lady Caryisfort’s who was his introducer. There was nothing to be said against the admission of a good young man who had come to escort his aunt in her visit to her invalid friend, but it was odd that they should have chosen that particular night, and no other. Kate was in her morning dress, as she had gone to make a morn-



ing call, and was a little troubled to be so discovered; but girls look well in anything, as Lady Caryisfort said to herself with a sigh.

## CHAPTER XIX.

IT was about this time, about two months after their arrival in Florence, and when the bright and pleasant "family life" we have been describing had gone on for about six weeks in unbroken harmony, that there began to breathe about Kate, like a vague, fitful wind, such as sometimes rises in Autumn or Spring, one can't tell how or from whence, a curious sense of isolation, of being somehow left out and put aside in the family party. For some time the sensation was quite indefinite. She felt chilled by it, she could not tell how. Then she would find herself sitting alone in a corner, while the others were grouped together, without being able to explain to herself how it

happened. It had happened several times, indeed, before she thought of attempting to explain so strange an occurrence; and then she said to herself that of course it was mere chance, or that she herself must have been sulky, and nobody else was aware.

A day or two, however, after her visit to Lady Caryisfort, there came a little incident which could not be quite chance. In the evening Mrs. Anderson sat down by her, and began to talk about indifferent subjects, with a little air of constraint upon her, the air of one who has something not quite pleasant to say. Kate's faculties had been quickened by the change which she had already perceived, and she saw that something was coming, and was chafed by this preface, as only a very frank and open nature can be. She longed to say, "Tell me what it is, and be done with it." But she had no excuse for such an outcry. Mrs. Anderson only introduced her real subject after at least an hour's talk.

"By-the-by," she said—and Kate knew in a

moment that now it was coming—"we have an invitation for to-morrow, dear, which I wish to accept, for Ombra and myself, but I don't feel warranted in taking you—and, at the same time, I don't like the idea of leaving you."

"Oh! pray don't think of me, aunt," said Kate, quickly. A flush of evanescent anger at this mode of making it known suddenly came over her. But, in reality, she was half stunned, and could not believe her ears. It made her vague sense of desertion into something tangible at once. It realized all her vague feelings of being one too many. But, at the same time, it stupefied her. She could not understand it. She did not look up, but listened with eyes cast down, and a pain which she did not understand in her heart.

"But I must think of you, my darling," said Mrs. Anderson, in a voice which, at this moment, rung false and insincere in the girl's ears, and seemed to do her a positive harm. "How is it possible that I should not think of you? It is an old friend of mine, a merchant from Leghorn,

who has bought a place in the country about ten miles from Florence. He is a man who has risen from nothing, and so is his wife, but they are kind people all the same, and used to be good to me when I was poor. Lady Barker is going—for she, too, you know, is of my old set at Leghorn, and though she has risen in the world, she does not throw off people who are rich. But I don't think your uncle would like it, if I took *you* there. You know how very careful I have been never to introduce you to anybody he could find fault with. I have declined a great many pleasant invitations here, for that very reason."

"Oh! please, aunt, don't think of doing so any more," cried Kate, stung to the heart. "Don't deprive yourself of anything that is pleasant for me. I am very well. I am quite happy. I don't require anything more than I have here. Go, and take Ombra, and never mind me."

And the poor child had great difficulty in refraining from tears. Indeed, but for the fact

that it would have looked like crying for a lost pleasure, which Kate, who was stung by a very different feeling, despised, she would not have been able to restrain herself. As it was, her voice trembled, and her cheeks burned.

“Kate, I don’t think you are quite just to me,” said Mrs. Anderson. “You know very well that neither in love, nor in anything else, have I made a difference between Ombra and you. But in this one thing I must throw myself upon your generosity, dear. When I say your generosity, Kate, I mean that you should put the best interpretation on what I say, not the worst.”

“I did not mean to put any interpretation,” said Kate, drawn two ways, and ashamed now of her anger. “Why should you explain to me, auntie, or make a business of it? Say you are going somewhere to-morrow, and you think it best I should not go. That is enough. Why should you say a word more?”

“Because I wanted to treat you like a woman, not like a child, and to tell you the

reason," said Mrs. Anderson. "But we will say no more about it, as those boys are coming. I do hope, however, that you understand me, Kate."

Kate could make no answer, as "the boys" appeared at this moment; but she said to herself sadly, "No, I don't understand—I can't tell what it means," with a confused pain which was very hard to bear. It was the first time she had been shaken in her perfect faith in the two people who had brought her to life, as she said. She did not rush into the middle of the talk, as had once been her practice, but sat, chilled, in her corner, wondering what had come over her. For it was not only that the others were changed—a change had come upon herself also. She was chilled; she could not tell how. Instead of taking the initiative, as she used to do in the gay and frank freshness which everybody had believed to be the very essence of her character, she sat still, and waited to be called, to be appealed to. Even when she became herself conscious of this, and tried to shake it

off, she could not succeed. She was bound as in chains ; she could not get free.

And when the next morning came, and Kate, with a dull amaze which she could not overcome, saw the party go off with the usual escort, the only difference being that Lady Barker occupied her own usual place, her feelings were not to be described. She watched them from the balcony while they got into the carriage, and arranged themselves gaily. She looked down upon them and laughed too, and bade them enjoy themselves. She met the wistful look in Mrs. Anderson's eyes with a smile, and, recovering her courage for the moment, made it understood that she meant to pass an extremely pleasant day by herself. But when they drove away, Kate went in, and covered her eyes with her hands. It was not the pleasure, whatever that might be ; but why was she left behind ? What had she done that they wanted her no longer ?—that they found her in the way ? It was the first slight



she had ever had to bear, and it went to her very heart.

It was a lovely bright morning in December. Lovely mornings in December are rare in England; but even in England there comes now and then a Winter day which is a delight and luxury, when the sky is blue, crisper, profounder than Summer, when the sun is resplendent, pouring over everything the most lavish and overwhelming light; when the atmosphere is still as old age is when it is beautiful—stilled, chastened, subdued, with no possibility of uneasy winds or movement of life; but all quietness and now and then one last leaf fluttering down from the uppermost boughs. Such a morning in Florence is divine. The great old houses stand up, expanding, as it were, erecting their old heads gratefully into the sun and blueness of the sphere; the old towers rise, poising themselves, light as birds, yet strong as giants, in that magical atmosphere. The sun-lovers throng to the bright

side of the way, and bask and laugh and grow warm and glad. And in the distance the circling hills stand round about the plain, and smile from all their heights in fellow-feeling with the warmed and comforted world below. One little girl, left alone in a sunny room on the Lung-Arno in such a morning, with nothing but her half-abandoned tasks to amuse her, nobody to speak to, nothing to think of but a vague wrong done to herself, which she does not understand, is not in a cheerful position, though everything about her is so cheerful; and Kate's heart sank down—down to her very slippers.

“I don't understand why you shouldn't come,” said some one, bursting in suddenly. “Oh! I beg your pardon; I did not mean to be so abrupt.”

For Kate had been crying. She dashed away her tears with an indignant hand, and looked at Bertie with defiance. Then the natural re-action came to her assistance. He looked so scared and embarrassed standing there, with his hat in his hand, breathless with haste, and

full of compunction. She laughed in spite of herself.

“I am not so ashamed as if it had been anyone else,” she said. “You have seen me cry before. Oh! it is not for the expedition; it is only because I thought they did not want me, that was all.”

“I wanted you,” said Bertie, still breathless, and under his breath.

Kate looked up wondering, and suddenly met his eye, and they both blushed crimson. Why? She laughed to shake it off, feeling, somehow, a pleasanter feeling about her heart.

“It was very kind of you,” she said; “but, you know, you don’t count; you are only one of the boys. You have come back for something?”

“Yes, Lady Barker’s bag, with her fan and her gloves, and her eau-de-Cologne.”

“Oh! Lady Barker’s. There it is, I suppose. I hate Lady Barker!” cried Kate.

“And so do I; and to see her in your place——”

“Never mind about that. Go away, please, or you will be late; and I hope you will have a pleasant day all the same.”

“Not without you,” said Bertie; and he took her hand, and for one moment seemed doubtful what to do with it. What was he going to do with it? The thought flashed through Kate’s mind with a certain amusement; but he thought better of the matter, and did nothing. He dropped her hand, blushing violently again, and then turned and fled, leaving her consoled and amused, and in a totally changed condition. What did he mean to do with the hand he had taken? Kate held it up and looked at it carefully, and laughed till the tears came to her eyes. He had meant to kiss it, she felt sure, and Kate had never yet had her hand kissed by mortal man; but he had thought better of it. It was “like Bertie.” She was so much amused that her vexation went altogether out of her mind.

And in the afternoon Lady Caryisfort called and took her out. When she heard the narra-

tive of Kate's loneliness, Lady Caryisfort nodded her head approvingly, and said it was very nice of Mrs. Anderson, and quite what ought to have been. Upon which Kate became ashamed of herself, and was convinced that she was the most ungrateful and guilty of girls.

"A distinction must be made," said Lady Caryisfort, "especially as it is now known who you are. For Miss Anderson it is quite different, and her mother, of course, must not neglect her interests."

"How funny that anyone's interests should be affected by an invitation!" said Kate, with one of those unintentional revelations of her sense of her own greatness which were so amusing to her friends. And Count Buoncompagni came to her side of the carriage when they got to the Cascine. It was entirely under Lady Caryisfort's wing that their acquaintance had been formed, and nobody, accordingly, could have a word to say against it. Though she could not quite get Bertie (as she said) out of her head after the incident of the

morning, the young Italian was still a very pleasant companion. He talked well, and told her about the people as none of the English could do. "There is Roscopanni, who was the first out in '48," he said. "He was nearly killed at Novara. But perhaps you do not care to hear about our patriots?"

"Oh! but I do," cried Kate, glowing into enthusiasm; and Count Antonio was nothing loth to be her instructor. He confessed that he himself had been "out," as Fergus MacIvor, had he survived it, might have confessed to the '45. Kate had her little prejudices, like all English girls—her feeling of the inferiority of "foreigners," and their insincerity and theatrical emotionalness; but Count Antonio took her imagination by storm. He was handsome; he had the sonorous masculine voice which suits Italian best, and does most justice to its melodious splendour; yet he did not speak much Italian; but only a little now and then, to give her courage to speak it. Even French, however, which was their general medium of com-

munication, was an exercise to Kate, who had little practice in any language but her own. Then he told her about his own family, and that they were poor, with a frankness which went to Kate's heart; and she told him, as best she could, about Francesca, and how she had heard the history of the Buoncompagni—"before ever I saw you," Kate said, stretching the fact a little.

Thus the young man was emboldened to propose to Lady Caryisfort a visit to his old palace and its faded glories. There were some pictures he thought that *ces dames* would like to look at. "Still some pictures, though not much else," he said, ending off with a bit of English, and a shrug of his shoulders, and a laugh at his own poverty; and an appointment was made before the carriage drove off.

"The Italians are not ashamed of being poor," said Kate with animation as they went home.

"If they were, they might as well give in at once, for they are all poor," said Lady Caryisfort, with British contempt. But Kate, who

was rich, thought all the more of the noble young Florentine, with his old palace and his pictures. And then he had been "out."



## CHAPTER XX.

**K**ATE took it upon herself to make unusual preparations for the supper on that particular evening. She decorated the table with her own hands, and coaxed Francesca to the purchase of various dainties beyond the ordinary.

“They will be tired; they will want something when they come back,” she said.

“Mademoiselle is very good; it is angelic to be so kind after what has passed—after the affair of the morning,” said Francesca. “If I had been in Mademoiselle’s place, I do not think I should have been able to show so much education. For my part, it has yet to be explained to me how my lady could go to amuse herself and leave Mees Katta alone here.”

“Francesca, don’t talk nonsense,” said Kate. “I quite approve what my aunt did. She is always right, whatever anyone may think.”

“It is very likely, Mees Katta,” said Francesca; “but I shall know ze why, or I will not be happy. It is not like my lady. She is no besser than a slave with her Ombra. But I shall know ze why—I shall know ze reason why!”

“Then don’t tell me, please, for I don’t wish to be cross again,” said Kate, continuing her preparations. “Only I do hope they won’t bring Lady Barker with them,” she added to herself. Lady Barker was the scapegoat upon whom Kate spent her wrath. She forgave the other, but her she had made up her mind not to forgive. It was night when the party came home. Kate rushed to the balcony to see them arrive, and looked on without, however, making her presence known. There was but lamplight this time, but enough to show how Ombra sprang out of the carriage, and how thoroughly the air of a successful expedition hung about

the party. "Well!" said Kate to herself, "and I have had a pleasant day too." She ran to the door to welcome them, but, perhaps, made her appearance inopportunately. Ombra was coming upstairs hand in hand with some one—it was not like her usual gravity—and when the pair saw the door open they separated, and came up the remaining steps each alone. This was odd, and startled Kate. Then, when she asked, "Have you had a pleasant day?" some one answered, "The most delightful day that ever was!" with an enthusiasm that wounded her feelings—she could not tell why. Was it indeed Bertie Hardwick who said that?—he who had spoken so differently in the morning? Kate stood aghast, and asked no more questions. She would have let the two pass her, but Ombra put an arm round her waist, and drew her in.

"Oh Kate, listen, I am so happy!" said Ombra, whispering in her ear. "Don't be vexed about anything, dear; you shall know it all afterwards. I am so happy!"

This was said in the little dark ante-room, where there were no lights, and Kate could only give her cousin a hasty kiss before she danced away. Bertie, for his part, in the dark, too, said nothing at all. He did not explain the phrase—"The most delightful day that ever was!" "Well!" said poor Kate to herself, gulping down a little discomfort—"well! I have had a pleasant day too."

And then what a gay supper it was!—gayer than usual; gayer than she had ever known it! She did not feel as if she were quite in the secret of their merriment. They had been together all day, while she had been alone; they had all the jokes of the morning to carry on, and a hundred allusions which fell flat upon Kate. She had been put on her generosity, it was true, and would not, for the world, have shown how much below the general tone of hilarity she was; but she was not in the secret, and very soon she felt ready to flag. When she put in her experiences of the day, a momentary polite attention was

given, but everybody's mind was elsewhere. Mrs. Anderson had a half-frightened, half-puzzled look, and now and then turned affecting glances upon Kate ; but Ombra was radiant. Never had she looked so beautiful ; her eyes shone like two stars ; her faint rose-colour went and came ; her face was lit with soft smiles and happiness. All sorts of fancies crossed Kate's mind. She looked at the young men, who were both in joyous spirits—but either her discrimination failed her, or her eyes were dim, or her understanding clouded. Altogether Kate was in a maze, and did not know what to do or think ; they stayed till it was very late, and both Ombra and her mother went to close and lock the door after them when they went away, leaving Kate once more alone. She sat still at a corner of the table, and listened to the voices and laughter still at the door. Bertie Hardwick's voice, she thought, was the one she heard most. They were all so happy, and she only listening to it, not knowing what it meant ! Then, when the door was finally locked, Mrs. Anderson came

back to her alone. "Ombra has gone to bed," she said. "She is tired, though she has enjoyed it so very much. And, my dear child, you must go to bed too. It is too late for you to be up."

"But you have had a very pleasant day."

"They have—oh, -yes!" said Mrs. Anderson. "The young ones have been very happy; but it has not been a pleasant day to me. I have so many anxieties; and then to think of you by yourself at home."

"I was not by myself," said Kate. "Lady Caryisfort called and took me out."

"Ah! Lady Caryisfort is very kind," said Mrs. Anderson, with a tone, however, in which there was neither delight nor gratitude; and then she put her arm round her niece, and leaned upon her. "Ah!" she said again, "I can see how it will be! They will wean you away from me. You, who have never given me a moment's uneasiness, who have been such a good child to me! I suppose it must be so—and I ought not to complain."

"But, auntie," said Kate, bewildered, "no-

body tries to take me from you—nobody wants me, that I know of—even you——”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Anderson, “even I. I know. And I shall have to put up with that too. Oh! Kate, I know more than one of us will live to regret this day;—but nobody so much as I.”

“I don’t understand you. Aunty, you are over-tired. You ought to be asleep.”

“You will understand me some time,” said Mrs. Anderson, “and then you will recollect what I said. But don’t ask me any questions, dear. Good night.”

Good night! She had been just as happy as any of the party, Kate reflected, half an hour before, and her voice had been audible from the door, full of pleasantness and the melody of content. Was the change a fiction, got up for her own benefit, or was there something mysterious lying under it all? Kate could not tell, but it may be supposed how heart-sick and weary she was when such an idea as that her dearest friend had put on a semblance to deceive her, could have entered her mind. She was very,

very much ashamed of it, when she woke in the middle of the night, and it all came back to her. But what was she to think? It was the first mystery Kate had encountered, and she did not know how to deal with it. It made her very uneasy and unhappy, and shook her faith in everything. She lay awake for half an hour pondering it; and that was as much to Kate as a week of sleepless nights would have been to many, for up to this time she had no need to wake o' nights, nor anything to weigh upon her thoughts when she woke.

Next morning, however, dissipated these mists, as morning does so often. Ombra was very gay and bright, and much more affectionate and caressing than usual. Kate and she, indeed, seemed to have changed places—the shadow had turned into sunshine. It was Ombra who led the talk, who rippled over into laughter, who petted her cousin and her mother, and was the soul of everything. All Kate's doubts and difficulties fled before the unaccustomed tenderness of Ombra's looks and words.



She had no defence against this unexpected means of subjugation, and for some time she even forgot that no explanation at all was given to her of the events of the previous day. It had been "a pleasant day," "a delightful day," the walk had been perfect, "and everything else," Ombra had said at breakfast, "except that you were not with us, Kate."

"And that we could not help," said Mrs. Anderson, into whose face a shade of anxiety had crept. But she was not as she had been in that mysterious moment on the previous night. There was no distress about her. She had nearly as much happiness in her eyes as that which ran over and overflowed in Ombra's. Had Kate dreamed that last five minutes, and its perplexing appearances? But Mrs. Anderson made no explanations, any more than Ombra. They chatted about the day's entertainment, their hosts, and many things which Kate could only half understand, but they did not say, "We are so happy because of this or that." Through all this affectionateness and tenderness

this one blank remained, and Kate could not forget it. They told her nothing. She was left isolated, separated, outside of some magic circle in which they stood.

The young men joined them very early, earlier even than usual; and then this sense of separation became stronger and stronger in Kate's mind. Would they never have done talking of yesterday? The only thing that refreshed her spirit a little was when she announced the engagement Lady Caryisfort had made—"for us all," Kate said, feeling a little conscious, and pleasantly so, that she herself was, in this case, certainly to be the principal figure—to visit the Buoncompagni Palace. Bertie Hardwick roused up immediately at the mention of this.

"Palace indeed!" he said. "It is a miserable old house, all mildewed and moth-eaten! What should we do there?"

"I am going, at least," said Kate, "with Lady Caryisfort. Count Buoncompagni said there were some nice pictures; and I like old houses,

though you may not be of my opinion. Auntie, you will come ?”

“Miss Courtenay’s taste is peculiar,” said Bertie. “One knows what an old palace, belonging to an impoverished family, means in Italy. It means mouldy hangings, horrible old frescoes, furniture (and very little of that) crumbling to pieces, and nothing in good condition but the coat of arms. Buoncompagni is quite a type of the class—a young, idle, do-nothing fellow, as noble as you like, and as poor as Job; good for leading a cotillon, and for nothing else in this world; and living in his mouldy old palace, like a snail in its shell.”

“I don’t think you need to be so severe,” said Kate, with flashing eyes. “If he is poor, it is not his fault; and he is not ashamed of it, as some people are. And, indeed, I don’t think you young men work so very hard yourselves as to give you a right to speak.”

This was a blow most innocently given, but it went a great deal deeper than Kate had supposed. Bertie’s countenance became crimson;

he was speechless ; he could make no reply ; and, like every man whose conscience is guilty, he felt sure that she meant it, and had given him this blow on purpose. It was a strange quarter to be assailed from ; but yet, what else could it mean ? He sat silent, and bit his nails, and remembered Mr. Sugden, and asked himself how it was that such strange critics had been moved against him. We have said that this episode was refreshing to Kate ; but not so were the somewhat anxious arrangements which followed on Mrs. Anderson's part, "for carrying out Kate's plan, which would be delightful."

"I always like going over an old palace," she said, with a certain eagerness ; "and if you gentlemen have not done it already, I am sure it will be worth your while."

But there was very little response from anyone ; and in a few minutes more the interruption seemed to be forgotten, and they had all resumed their discussion of the everlasting history of the previous day. Once more Kate felt her isolation, and after awhile she escaped

silently from the room. She did not trust herself to go to her own chamber, but retired to the chilly dining-room, and sat down alone over her Italian, feeling rather desolate. She tried to inspire herself with the idea of putting the Italian into practice, and by the recollection of Count Antonio's pretty compliments to her on the little speeches she ventured to make in answer to his questions. "I must try not to make any mistakes this time," she said to herself; but after five minutes she stopped, and began thinking. With a conscious effort she tried to direct her mind to the encounter of yesterday—to Lady Caryisfort and Count Buoncompagni; but somehow other figures would always intrude; and a dozen times at least she roused up sharply, as from a dream, and found herself asking again, and yet again, what had happened yesterday? Was it something important enough to justify concealment? Was it possible, whatever it was, that it could be concealed from *her*? What was it? Alas! poor Count Antonio was but the ghost whom

she tried to think of; while these were the real objects that interested her. And all the time the party remained in the drawing-room, not once going out. She could hear their voices now and then, when a door was opened. They stayed indoors all the morning—a thing which had never happened before. They stayed to luncheon. In the afternoon they all went out walking together; but even that was not as of old. A change had come over everything—the world itself seemed different; and what was worst of all, was that this change was pleasant to all the rest, and melancholy only to Kate. She said to herself, wistfully, “No doubt I would be pleased as well as the rest, if only I knew.”

## CHAPTER XXI.

**F**OR the next few days everything was merry as marriage-bells; and though Kate felt even the fondness and double consideration with which she was treated when she was alone with her aunt and cousin to belong somehow to the mystery, she had no excuse even to herself for finding fault with it. They were very good to her. Ombra, at least, had never been so kind, so tender, so anxious to please her. Why should she be anxious to please her? She had never done so before; it had never been necessary; it was a reversal of everything that was natural; and, like all the rest, it meant something underneath, something which had to be made up for by these superficial caresses. Kate did not go

so far as this in her articulate thoughts; but it was what she meant in the confused and painful musings which now so often possessed her. But she could not remonstrate, or say, "Why are you so unnecessarily, unusually tender? What wrong have you done me that has to be made up for in this way?" She could not say this, however much she might feel it. She had to hide her wonder and dissatisfaction in her own heart.

At last the day came for the visit to the Buoncompagni palace. They were to walk to Lady Caryisfort's, to join her, and all had been arranged on the previous night. The ladies were waiting, cloaked and bonneted, when Bertie Eldridge made his appearance alone.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting," he said; "that ridiculous cousin of mine won't come. I don't know what has come over him; he has taken some absurd dislike to poor Buoncompagni, who is the best fellow in the world. I hope you will accept my company alone."

Ombra had been the first to advance to meet



him, and he stood still holding her hand while he made his explanation. She dropped it, however, with an air of disappointment and annoyance.

“Bertie will not come—when he knows that I—that we are waiting for him! What a strange thing to do! Bertie, who is always so good; how very annoying—when he knew we depended on him!”

“I told him so,” said the other,—“I told him what you would say; but nothing had any effect. I don’t know what has come to Bertie of late. He is not as he used to be; he has begun to talk of work, and all sorts of nonsense. But to-day he will not come, and there is nothing more to be said. It is humbling to me to see how I suffer without him; but I hope you will try to put up with me by myself for one day.”

“Oh! I cannot think what Bertie means by it. It is too provoking!” said Ombra, with a clouded countenance; and when they got into the street, their usual order of march was reversed,

and Ombra fell behind with Kate, whose mind was full of a very strange jumble of feeling, such as she could not explain to herself. On ordinary occasions one or other of the Berties was always in attendance on Ombra. To-day she indicated, in the most decided manner, that she did not want the one who remained. He had to walk with Mrs. Anderson, while the two girls followed together. "I never knew anything so provoking," Ombra continued, taking Kate's arm. "It is as if he had done it on purpose—to-day, too, of all days in the world!"

"What is particular about to-day?" said Kate, who, to tell the truth, was at this moment less in sympathy with Ombra than she had ever been before.

"Oh! to-day—why, there is—— well," said Ombra, pausing suddenly, "of course there is nothing particular about to-day. But he must have known how it would put us out—how it would spoil everything. A little party like ours is quite changed when one is left out. You ought to see that as well as I do. It spoils

everybody's pleasure. It changes the feeling altogether."

"I don't think it does so always," said Kate; but she was generous even at this moment, when a very great call was made on her generosity. "I never heard you call Mr. Hardwick Bertie before," she added, not quite generous enough to pass this over without remark.

"To himself, you mean," said Ombra, with a slight blush. "We have always called them the Berties among ourselves. But I think it is very ridiculous for people who see so much of each other to go on saying Mr. and Miss."

"Do they call you Ombra, then?" said Kate, lifting her eyebrows. Poor child! she had been much if secretly exasperated, and it was not in flesh and blood to avoid giving a mild momentary prick in return.

"I did not say so," said Ombra. "Kate, you, too, are contradictory and uncomfortable to-day; when you see how much I am put out——"

"But I don't see why you should be so much

put out," said Kate, in an under-tone, as they reached Lady Caryisfort's door.

What did it mean? This little incident plunged her into a sea of thoughts. Up to this moment she had supposed Bertie Eldridge to be her cousin's favourite, and had acquiesced in that arrangement. Somehow she did not like this so well. Kate had ceased for a long time to call Bertie Hardwick "my Bertie," as she had once done so frankly; but still she could not quite divest herself of the idea that he was more her own property than anyone else's—her oldest friend, whom she had known before any of them. And he had been so kind the other morning, when the others had deserted her. It gave her a strange, dull, uncomfortable sensation to find him thus appropriated by her cousin. "I ought not to mind—it can be nothing to me," she said to herself; but nevertheless she did not like it. She was glad when they came to Lady Caryisfort's door, and her *tête-à-tête* with Ombra was over; and it was even agreeable to her wounded *amour-propre*

when Count Antonio came to her side, beaming with smiles and self-congratulations at having something to show her. He kept by Lady Caryisfort as they went on to the palazzo, which was close by, with the strictest Italian propriety; but when they had entered his own house, the young Count did not hesitate to show that his chief motive was Kate. He shrugged his shoulders as he led them in through the great doorway into the court, which was full of myrtles and greenness. There was a fountain in the centre, which trickled shrilly in the air just touched with frost, and oleanders planted in great vases along a terrace with a low balustrade of marble. The tall house towered above, with all its multitudinous windows twinkling in the sun. There was a handsome *loggia*, or balcony, over the terrace on the first floor. It was there that the sunshine dwelt the longest, and there it was still warm, notwithstanding the frost. This balcony had been partially roofed in with glass, and there

were some chairs placed in it, and a small white covered table.

“This is the best of my old house,” said Count Antonio, leading them in, hat in hand, with the sun shining on his black hair. “Such as it is, it is at the service of *ces dames*; but its poor master must beg them to be very indulgent—to make great allowances for age and poverty.” And then he turned and caught Kate’s eye, and bowed to the ground, and said, “*Sia padrona!*” with the pretty extravagance of Italian politeness, with a smile for the others, but with a look for herself which made her heart flutter. “*Sia padrona*—consider yourself the mistress of everything,”—words which meant nothing at all, and yet might mean so much! And Kate, poor child, was wounded, and felt herself neglected. She was left out by others—banished from the love and confidence that were her due—her very rights invaded. It soothed her to feel that the young Italian, in himself as romantic a figure as heart could desire, who had been “out” for his

country, whose pedigree ran back to Noah, and perhaps a good deal further, was laying his half-ruined old house and his noble history at her feet. And the signs of poverty, which were not to be concealed, and which Count Antonio made no attempt to conceal, went to Kate's heart, and conciliated her. She began to look at him, smiling over the wreck of greatness, with respect as well as interest; and when he pointed to a great empty space in one of the noble rooms, Kate's heart melted altogether.

“There was our Raphael—the picture he painted for us. That went off in '48, when my father fitted out the few men who were cut to pieces with him at Novara. I remember crying my eyes out, half for our Madonna, half because I was too small to go with him. *Nevare mind*” (he said this in English—it was one of his little accomplishments of which he was proud). “The country is all the better; but no other picture shall ever hang in that place—that we have sworn, my mother and I.”

Kate stood and gazed up at the vacant place

with an enthusiasm which perhaps the picture itself would scarcely have called from her. Her eyes grew big and luminous, "each about to have a tear." Something came into her throat which prevented her from speaking; she heard a little flutter of comments, but she could not betray the emotion she felt by trying to add to them. "Oh!" she said to herself with that consciousness of her wealth which was at times a pleasure to her—"oh! if I could find that Madonna, and buy it and send it back!" And then other thoughts involuntarily rushed after that one—fancies, gleams of imagination, enough to cover her face with blushes. Antonio turned back when the party went on, and found her still looking up at the vacant place.

"It is a sad blank, is it not?" he said.

"It is the most beautiful thing in all the house," said Kate; and one of the tears fell as she looked at him, a big blob of dew upon her glove. She looked at it in consternation, blushing crimson, ashamed of herself.

Antonio did what any young Italian would



have done under the circumstances. Undismayed by the presence of an audience, he put one knee to the ground, and touched the spot upon Kate's little gloved thumb with his lips; while she stood in agonies of shame, not knowing what to do.

“The Signorina's tear was for Italy,” he said, as he rose; “and there is not an Italian living who would not thank her for it on his knees.”

He was perfectly serious, without the least sense that there could be anything ridiculous or embarrassing in the situation; but it may be imagined what was the effect upon the English party, all with a natural horror of a scene.

Lady Caryisfort, I am sorry to say, showed herself the most ill-bred upon this occasion—she pressed her handkerchief to her lips, but could not altogether restrain the very slightest of giggles. Ombra opened her eyes, and looked at her mother; while poor Kate, trembling, horrified, and overwhelmed with shame, shrank behind Mrs. Anderson.

“It was not my fault,” she gasped.

“Don’t think anything of it, my love,” whispered Mrs. Anderson, in consolation. “They mean nothing by it—it is the commonest thing in the world.” A piece of consolation which was not, however, quite so consolatory as it was intended to be.

But she kept her niece by herself after this incident as long as it was practicable; and so it came about that the party divided into three. Lady Caryisfort and Antonio went first, Mrs. Anderson and Kate next, and Ombra and Bertie Eldridge last of all. As Kate moved gradually on, she heard that a very close and low-toned conversation was going on behind her; and Ombra did not now seem so much annoyed by Bertie Hardwick’s absence as she had been a little while ago. Was she—an awful revelation seemed to burst upon Kate—was Ombra a coquette? She dismissed the thought from her mind as fast as possible; but after feeling so uncomfortable about her cousin’s sudden interest in Bertie, she could not help feeling now a certain pity for him, as if he too, like herself, were

slighted now. Not so would Kate herself have treated anyone. It was not in her, she said to herself, to take up and cast down, to play with any sentiment, whether friendship or anything else; and in her heart she condemned Ombra, though secretly she was not sorry. She was a coquette—that was the explanation. She liked to have both the young men at her feet, without apparently caring much for either. This was a sad accusation to bring against Ombra, but somehow Kate felt more kindly disposed towards her after she had struck this idea out.

When they reached the *loggia*, the table was found to be covered with an elegant little breakfast, which reminded Kate of the pretty meals to be seen in a theatre, which form part of so many pretty comedies. It was warm in the sunshine, and there was a *scaldina*, placed, Italian fashion, under the table, for the benefit of the chilly; and an old man, in a faded livery, served the repast, which he had not cooked, solely because it had been ordered from an

hotel, to poor old Girolamo's tribulation. But his master had told him the reason why, and the old servant had allowed that the expenditure might be a wise one. Kate found, to her surprise, that she was the special object of the old man's attention. He ran off with a whole string of "Che! che's," when he had identified her, which he did by consultation of his master's eye. "Bella Signorina, this is from the old Buoncompagni vineyards," he said, as he served to her some old wine; and, with another confidential movement, touched her arm when he handed her the fruit, "From the gardens, Signorina mia," he whispered; and the honey "from Count Antonio's own bees up on the mountains;" and, "Cara Signorina mia, this the Contessa's own hands prepared for those beautiful lips," he said, with the preserves. He hung about her; he had eyes for no one else.

"What is the old man saying to you, Kate?" said her aunt.

"Nothing," answered Kate, half amused and half distressed; and she met Count Antonio's

eye, and they both blushed, to the admiration of the beholders.

This was how the visit terminated. Old Girolamo followed them obsequiously down the great staircase, bowing, with his hand upon his breast, and his eyes upon the young English lady, who was as rich as the Queen of Sheba, and as beautiful as the Holy Mother herself. And Kate's heart beat with all the little magic flutter of possibilities that seemed to gather round her. If her heart had been really touched, she would not have divined what it all meant so readily; but it was only her imagination that was touched, and she saw all that was meant. It was the first time that she had seen a man pose himself before her in the attitude of love, and (though no doubt it is wrong to admit it) the thing pleased her. She was not anxious, as she ought to have been, to preserve Antonio's peace of mind. She was flattered, amused, somewhat touched. That was what he meant. And for herself, she was not unwilling to breathe this delicate incense, and be, as other

women, wooed and worshipped. Her ideas went no further. Up to this moment it was somewhat consolatory, and gave her something pleasant to think of. Poor old Girolamo! Poor old palace! She liked their master all the better for their sake.

## CHAPTER XXII.

**I**N the few weeks that followed it happened that Kate was thrown very much into the society of Lady Caryisfort. It would have been difficult to tell why; and not one of the party could have explained how it was that Ombra and her mother were always engaged, or tired, or had headaches, when Lady Caryisfort called on her way to the Cascine. But so it happened; and gradually Kate passed into the hands of her new friend. Often she remained with her after the drive, and went with her to the theatre, or spent the evening with her at home. And though Mrs. Anderson sometimes made a melancholy little speech on the subject, and half upbraided Kate for this transference of her society, she never made any real effort to with-

stand it, but really encouraged—as her niece felt somewhat bitterly—a friendship which removed Kate out of the way, as she had resolved not to take her into her confidence. Kate was but half happy in this strange severance, but it was better to be away, better to be smiled upon and caressed by Lady Caryisfort, than to feel herself one too many, to be left out of the innermost circle at home.

And the more she went to the Via Maggio, the more she saw of Count Buoncompagni. Had it been in any other house than her own that Kate had encountered this young, agreeable, attractive honest fortune-hunter, Lady Caryisfort would have been excited and indignant. But he was an *habitué* of her own house, an old friend of her own, as well as the relation of her dearest and most intimate Italian friend, and she was too indolent to disturb her own mind and habits by the effort of sending him away.

“Besides, why should I? Kate cannot have some one to go before her to sweep all the young men out of her path,” she said, with some



amusement at her own idea. "She must take her chance, like everybody else; and he must take his chance." By way of setting her conscience at rest, however, she warned them both. She said to Count Antonio seriously,

"Now, don't flirt with my young lady. You know I dislike it. And I am responsible for her safety when she is with me; and you must not put any nonsense into her head."

"Milady's commands are my law," said Antonio, meaning to take his own way. And Lady Caryisfort said lightly to Kate,

"Don't you forget, dear, that all Italians are fortune-hunters. Never believe a word these young men say. They don't even pretend to think it disgraceful, as we do. And, unfortunately, it is known that you are an heiress."

All this did not make Kate happier. It undermined gradually her confidence in the world, which had seemed all so smiling and so kind. She had thought herself loved, where now she found herself thrust aside. She had thought herself an important member of a party which it

was evident could go on without her ; and the girl was humbled and downcast. And now to be warned not to believe what was said to her, to consider all those pleasant faces as smiling, not upon herself, but upon her fortune. It would be difficult to describe in words how depressed she was. And Antonio Buoncompagni, though she had been thus warned against him, had an honest face. He looked like the hero in an opera, and sang like the same ; but there was an honest simplicity about his face, which made it very hard to doubt him. He was a child still in his innocent ways, though he was a man of the world, and doubtless knew a great deal of both good and evil which was unknown to Kate. But she saw the simplicity, and she was pleased, in spite of herself, with the constant devotion he showed to her. How could she but like it ? She was wounded by other people's neglect, and he was so kind, so amiable, so good to her. She was pleased to see him by her side, glad to feel that he preferred to come ; not like those who had known her all her life, and yet did not care.

So everything went on merrily, and already old Countess Buoncompagni had heard of it at the villa, and meditated a visit to Florence, to see the English girl who was going to build up the old house once more. And even, which was most wonderful of all, a sense that she might have to do it—that it was her fate, not to be struggled against—an idea half pleasant, half terrible, sometimes stole across the mind even of Kate herself.

Lady Caryisfort received more or less every evening, but most on the Thursdays; and one of these evenings the subject was brought before her too distinctly to be avoided. That great, warm-coloured, dark drawing-room, with the frescoes, looked better when it was full of people than when its mistress was alone in it. There were quantities of wax lights everywhere, enough to neutralize the ruby gloom of the velvet curtains, and light up the brown depths of the old frescoes, with the faces looking out of them. All the mirrors, as well as the room itself, were full of people in pretty

dresses, seated in groups or standing about, and there were flowers and lights everywhere. Lady Caryisfort herself inhabited her favourite sofa near the fire, underneath that great fresco; she had a little group round her as she always had; but something rather unusual had occurred. Among all the young men who worshipped and served this pretty woman, who treated them as boys and professed not to want them—and the gay young women who were her companions—there had penetrated one British matron, with that devotion to her duties, that absolute virtuousness and inclination to point out their duty to others, which sometimes distinguishes that excellent member of society. She had been putting Lady Caryisfort through a catechism of all her doings and intentions, and then, as ill-luck would have it, her eye lighted upon pretty Kate, with the young man who was the very Count of romance—the *primo tenore*; the *jeune premier*, whom any one could identify at a glance.

“ Ah, I suppose I shall soon have to congratu-

late you on *that*," she said, nodding her head with airy grace in the direction where Kate was, "for you are a relation of Miss Courtenay's, are you not? I hope the match will be as satisfactory for the lady as for the gentleman—as it must be indeed, when it is of your making, dear Lady Caryisfort. What a handsome couple they will make!"

"Of my making!" said Lady Caryisfort. And the crisis was so terrible that there was a pause all round her—a pause such as might occur in Olympus before Jove threw one of his thunderbolts. All who knew her, knew what a horrible accusation this was. "A match—of my making!" she repeated. "Don't you know that I discourage marriages among my friends? I—to make a match!—who hate them, and the very name of them!"

"Oh, dear Lady Caryisfort, you are so amusing! To hear you say that, with such a serious look! What an actress you would have made!"

"Actress," said Lady Caryisfort, "and match-maker! You do not compliment me;

but I am not acting just now. I never made a match in my life—I hate to see matches made! I discourage them; I throw cold water upon them. Matches!—if there is a thing in the world I hate——”

“ But I mean a *nice* match, of course; a thing most desirable; a marriage such as those, you know,” cried the British matron, with enthusiasm, “ which are made in heaven.”

“ I don’t believe in anything of the kind,” said the mistress of the house, who liked to shock her audience now and then.

“ Oh, *dear* Lady Caryisfort !”

“ I do not believe in anything of the kind. Marriages are the greatest nuisance possible; they have to be, I suppose, but I hate them; they break up society; they disturb family peace; they spoil friendship; they make four people wretched for every two whom they pretend to make happy !”

“ Lady Caryisfort—Lady Caryisfort ! with all these young people about !”

“ I don’t think what I say will harm the

young people; and, besides, everybody knows my feelings on this subject. I a match-maker! why, it is my horror! I begin to vituperate in spite of myself. I—throw away my friends in such a foolish way! The moment you marry you are lost—I mean to me. Do you hear, young people? Such of you as were married before I knew you I can put up with. I have accepted you in the lump, as it were. But, good heavens! fancy me depriving myself of that child who comes and puts her pretty arms round my neck and tells me all her secrets! If she were married to-morrow she would be prim and dignified, and probably would tell me that her John did not quite approve of me. No, no, I will have none of that.”

“Lady Caryisfort is always sublime on this subject,” said one of her court.

“Am I sublime? I say what I feel,” said Lady Caryisfort, languidly leaning back upon her cushions. “When I give my benediction to a marriage, I say, at the same time, *bon jour*. I don’t want to be surrounded by my equals.

I like inferiors—beings who look up to me ; so please let nobody call me a match-maker. It is the only opprobrious epithet which I will not put up with. Call me anything else—I can bear it—but not that.”

“Ah! dear Lady Caryisfort, are not you doing wrong to a woman’s best instincts?” said her inquisitor, shaking her head with a sigh.

Lady Caryisfort shrugged her shoulders.

“Will some one please to give me my shawl?” she said; and half-a-dozen pair of hands immediately snatched at it. “Thanks; don’t marry—I like you best as you are,” she said, with a careless little nod at her subjects before she turned round to plunge into a conversation with Countess Strozzi, who did not understand English. The British matron was deeply scandalized; she poured out her indignant feelings to two or three people in the room before she withdrew, and next day she wrote a letter to a friend in England, asking if it was known that the great heiress, Miss Courtenay, was on the eve of being married to an



Italian nobleman—"or, at least, he calls himself Count Somebody; though, of course, one never believes what these foreigners tell one," she wrote. "If you should happen to meet Mr. Courtenay, you might just mention this, in case he should not know how far things had gone."

Thus, all unawares, the cloud arose in the sky, and the storm prepared itself. Christmas had passed, and Count Antonio felt that it was almost time to speak. He was very grateful to Providence and the saints for the success which had attended him. Perhaps, after all, his mother's prayers in the little church at the villa, and those perpetual *novenas* with which she had somewhat vexed his young soul when she was with him in Florence, had been instrumental in bringing about this result. The Madonna, who, good to everyone, is always specially good to an only son, had no doubt led into his very arms this wealth, which would save the house. So Antonio thought quite devoutly, without an idea in his good-natured soul that there was anything ignoble in his

pursuit or in his gratitude. Without money he dared not have dreamed of marrying, and Kate was not one whom he could have ventured to fall in love with apart from the necessity of marriage. But he admired her immensely, and was grateful to her for all the advantages she was going to bring him. He even felt himself in love with her, when she looked up at him with her English radiance of bloom, singling him out in the midst of so many who would have been proud of her favour. There was not a thought in the young Italian's heart which was not good, and tender, and pleasant towards his heiress. He would have been most kind and affectionate to her, had she married him, and would have loved her honestly, had she chosen to love him; but he was not impassioned—and at the present moment it was to Antonio a most satisfactory, delightful, successful enterprise, which could bring nothing but good, rather than a love-suit, in which his heart and happiness were engaged.

However, things were settling steadily this

way when Christmas came. Already Count Antonio had made up his mind to begin operations by speaking to Lady Caryisfort on the subject, and Kate had felt vaguely that she would have to choose between the position of a great lady in England on her own land, and that of a great lady in beautiful Florence. The last was not without its attractions, and Antonio was so kind, while other people were so indifferent. Poor Kate was not as happy as she looked. More and more it became apparent to her that something was going on at home which was carefully concealed from her. They even made new friends, whom she did not know—one of whom, in particular, a young clergyman, a friend of the Berties, stared at her now and then from a corner of the drawing-room in the Lung-Arno, with a curiosity which she fully shared. “Oh! he is a friend of Mr. Hardwick’s; he is here only for a week or two; he is going on to Rome for the Carnival,” Mrs. Anderson said, without apparently perceiving what an evidence Kate’s ignorance was of the

way in which their lives had fallen apart. And the Berties now were continually in the house. They seemed to have no other engagements, except when, now and then, they went to the opera with the ladies. Sometimes Kate thought one or the other of them showed signs of uneasiness, but Ombra was bright as the day, and Mrs. Anderson made no explanation. And how could she, the youngest of the household, the one who was not wanted—how could she interfere or say anything? The wound worked deeper and deeper, and a certain weariness and distrust crept over Kate. Oh, for some change!—even Antonio's proposal, which was coming. For as it was only her imagination and her vanity, not her heart, which were interested, Kate saw with perfect clear-sightedness that the proposal was on its way.

But before it arrived—before any change had come to the state of affairs in the Lung-Arno—one evening, when Kate was at home, and, as usual, abstracted over a book in a corner; when the Berties were in full possession, one bend-

ing over Ombra at the piano, one talking earnestly to her mother, Francesca suddenly threw the door open, with a vehemence quite unusual to her, and without a word of warning—without even the announcement of his name to put them on their guard—Mr. Courtenay walked into the room.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.