

# 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.

THE scene which Mr. Courtenay saw when he walked in suddenly to Mrs. Anderson's drawing-room, was one so different in every way from what he had expected, that he was for the first moment as much taken aback as any of the company. Francesca, who remembered him well, and whose mind was moved by immediate anxiety at the sight of him, had not been able to restrain a start and exclamation, and had ushered him in suspiciously, with so evident a feeling of alarm and confusion that the suspicious old man of the world felt doubly convinced that there was something to conceal. But she had neither time nor opportunity to

warn the party; and yet this was how Mr. Courtenay found them. The drawing-room, which looked out on the Lung-Arno, was not small, but it was rather low—not much more than an *entresol*. There was a bright wood fire on the hearth, and near it, with a couple of candles on a small table by her side, sat Kate, distinctly isolated from the rest, and working diligently, scarcely raising her eyes from her needlework. The centre table was drawn a little aside, for Ombra had found it too warm in front of the fire; and about this the other four were grouped—Mrs. Anderson, working, too, was talking to one of the young men; the other was holding silk, which Ombra was winding; a thorough English domestic party—such a family group as should have gladdened virtuous eyes to see. Mr. Courtenay looked at it with indescribable surprise. There was nothing visible here which in the least resembled a foreign Count; and Kate was, wonderful to tell, left out—clearly left out. She was sitting apart at her little table near the fire, looking just a

little weary and forlorn—a very little—not enough to catch Mrs. Anderson's eye, who had got used to this aspect of Kate. But it struck Mr. Courtenay, who was not used to it, and who had suspected something very different. He was so completely amazed, that he could not think it real. That little old woman must have given some signal; they must have been warned of his coming; otherwise it was altogether impossible to account for this extraordinary scene. They all jumped to their feet at his appearance. There was first a glance of confusion and embarrassment exchanged, as he saw; and then every one rose in their wonder.

“Mr. Courtenay! What a great, what a very unexpected——,” said Mrs. Anderson. She had meant to say pleasure; but even she was so much startled and confounded that she could not carry her intention out.

“Is it Uncle Courtenay?” said Kate, rising too. She was not alarmed—on the contrary, she looked half glad, as if the sight of him was rather a relief than otherwise. “Is it you, Uncle Cour-

tenay ? Have you come to see us ? I am very glad. But I wonder you did not write."

"Thanks for your welcome, Kate. Thanks, Mrs. Anderson. Don't let me disturb you. I made up my mind quite suddenly. I had not thought of it a week ago. Ah ! some more acquaintances whom I did not expect to see."

Mr. Courtenay was very gracious—he shook hands all round. The Bertie's shrank, no one could have quite told how—they looked at each other, exchanging a glance full of dismay and mutual consultation. Mr. Courtenay's faculties were all on the alert ; but he had been thinking only of his niece, and the young men puzzled him. They were not near Kate, they were not "paying her attention ;" but, then, what were they doing here ? He was not so imaginative nor so quick in his perceptions as to be able to shift from the difficulty he had mastered to this new one. What he had expected was a foreign adventurer making love to his niece ; and instead of that here were two young Englishmen, not even looking at his niece. He was posed ;

but ever suspicious. For the moment they had baffled him; but he would find it out, whatever they meant, whatever they might be concealing from him; and with that view he accepted the great arm-chair blandly, and sat down to make his observations with the most smiling and ingratiating face.

“We are taking care of Kate—she is a kind of invalid, as you will see,” said Mrs. Anderson. “It is not bad, I am glad to say, but she has a cold, and I have kept her indoors, and even condemned her to the fireside corner, which she thinks very hard.”

“It looks very comfortable,” said Mr. Courtenay. “So you have a cold, Kate? I hear you have been enjoying yourself very much, making troops of friends. But pray don’t let me disturb anyone. Don’t let me break up the party—”

“It is time for us to keep our engagement,” said Bertie Hardwick, who had taken out his watch. “It is a bore to have to go, just as there is a chance of hearing news of home; but I hope we shall see Mr. Courtenay again.”

We must go now. It is actually nine o'clock."

"Yes. I did not think it was nearly so late," said his cousin, echoing him. And they hurried away, leaving Mr. Courtenay more puzzled than ever. He had put them to flight, it was evident—but why? For personally he had no dread of them, nor objection to them, and they had not been taking any notice of Kate.

"I have disturbed your evening, I fear," he said to Mrs. Anderson. She was annoyed and uncomfortable, though he could not tell the reason why.

"Oh! no, not the least. These boys have been in Florence for some little time, and they often come in to enliven us a little in the evenings. But they have a great many engagements. They can never stay very long," she said, faltering and stammering, as if she did not quite know what she was saying. But for this Kate would have broken out into aroused remonstrance. Can never stay very long! Why, they stayed generally till midnight, or near it. These words were on Kate's lips, but she held



them back, partly for her aunt's sake, partly—she could not tell why. Ombra, overcast in a moment from all her brightness, sat behind, drawing her chair back, and began to arrange and put away the silk she had been winding. It shone in the lamplight, vivid and warm in its rich colour. Whata curious little picture this made altogether! Kate, startled and curious, in her seat by the fire; Mrs. Anderson, watchful, not knowing what was going to happen, keeping all her wits about her, occupied the central place; and Ombra sat half hidden behind Mr. Courtenay's chair, a shadowy figure, with the lamplight just catching her white hands, and the long crimson thread of the silk. In a moment everything had changed. It might have been Shanklin again, from the aspect of the party. A little chill seemed to seize them all, though the room was so light and warm. Why was it? Was it a mere reminiscence of his former visit which had brought such change to their lives? He was uncomfortable, and even embarrassed, himself, though he could not have told why.

“So Kate has a cold!” he repeated. “From what I heard, I supposed you were living a very gay life, with troops of friends. I did not expect to find such a charming domestic party. But you are quite at home here, I suppose, and know the customs of the place—all about it? How sorry I am that your young friends should have gone away because of me.”

“Oh! pray don’t think of it. It was not because of you. They had an engagement,” said Mrs. Anderson. “Yes, I have lived in Florence before; but that was in very different days, when we were not left such domestic quiet in the evenings,” she added, elevating her head a little, yet sighing. She did not choose Mr. Courtenay, at least, to think that it was only her position as Kate’s chaperon which gave her importance here. And it was quite true that the Consul’s house had been a lively one in its day. Two young wandering Englishmen would not have represented society *then*; but perhaps all the *habitués* of the house were not exactly on a level with the Berties. “I have kept quiet,

not without some trouble," she continued, "as you wished it so much for Kate."

"That was very kind of you," he said; "but see, now, what odd reports get about. I heard that Kate had plunged into all sorts of gaiety—and was surrounded by Italians—and I don't know what besides."

"And you came to take care of her?" said Ombra quietly at his elbow.

Mr. Courtenay started. He did not expect an assault on that side also.

"I came to see you all, my dear young lady," he said; "and I congratulate you on your changed looks, Miss Ombra. Italy has made you look twice as strong and bright as you were in Shanklin. I don't know if it has done as much for Kate."

"Kate has a cold," said Mrs. Anderson, "but otherwise she is in very good looks. As for Ombra, this might almost be called her native air."

This civil fencing went on for about half an hour. There was attack and defence, but both

stealthy, vague, and general; for the assailant did not quite know what he had to find fault with, and the defenders were unaware what would be the point of assault. Kate, who felt herself the subject of contention, and who did not feel brave enough or happy enough to take up her rôle as she had done at Shanklin, kept in her corner and said very little. She coughed more than was at all necessary, to keep up her part of invalid; but she did not throw her shield over her aunt as she had once done. With a certain mischievous satisfaction she left them to fight it out; they did not deserve Mr. Courtenay's wrath, but yet they deserved something. For that one night Kate, who was somewhat sick and sore, felt in no mood to interfere. She could not even keep back one little arrow of her own, when her uncle had withdrawn, promising an early visit on the morrow.

“As you think I am such an invalid, aunty,” she said with playfulness, which was somewhat forced, when the door closed upon that untoward visitor, “I think I had better go to bed.”

“Perhaps it will be best,” said Mrs. Anderson, offended. And Kate rose, feeling angry and wicked, and ready to wound, she could not tell why.

“It is intolerable that that old man should come here with his suspicious looks—as if we meant to take advantage of him or harm *her*,” cried Ombra in indignation.

“If it is me whom you call *her*, Ombra——”

“Oh! don’t be ridiculous!” cried Ombra impatiently. “I am sure poor mamma has not deserved to be treated like a governess or a servant, and watched and suspected, on account of you.”

By this time, however, Mrs. Anderson had recovered herself.

“Hush,” she said, “Ombra; hush, Kate—don’t say things you will be sorry for. Mr. Courtenay has nothing to be suspicious about, that I know of, and it is only manner, I dare say. It is a pity that he should have that manner; but it is worse for him than it is for me.”

Now Kate did not love her uncle Courtenay, but for once in her life she was moved to defend him. And she did love her aunt; but she was wounded and sore, and felt herself neglected, and yet had no legitimate ground for complaint. It was a relief to her to have this feasible reason for saying something disagreeable. The colour heightened in her face.

“My uncle Courtenay has always been good to me,” she said, “and if anxiety about me has brought him here, *I* ought to be grateful to him at least. He does not mean to be rude to any one, I am sure; and if I am the first person he thinks of, you need not grudge it, Ombra. There is certainly no one else in the world so foolish as to do that.”

The tears were in Kate's eyes; she went away hastily, that they might not fall. She had never known until this moment, because she had never permitted herself to think, how hurt and sore she was. She hurried to her own room, and closed her door, and cried till her head ached. And then the dreadful thought

came—how ungrateful she had been!—how wicked, how selfish! which was worse than all.

The two ladies were so taken by surprise that they stood looking after her with a certain consternation. Ombra was the first to recover herself, and she was very angry, very vehement, against her cousin.

“Because she is rich, she thinks she should always be our tyrant,” she cried.

“Oh! hush, Ombra, hush!—you don’t think what you are saying,” said her mother.

“You see now, at least, what a mistake it would have been to take her into our confidence, mamma. It would have been fatal. I am so thankful I stood out. If she had us in her power now what should we have done?” Ombra added, more calmly, after the first irritation was over.

But Mrs. Anderson shook her head.

“It is never wise to deceive any one; harm always comes of it,” she said sadly.

“To deceive! Is it deceiving to keep one’s own secrets?”

“Harm always comes of it,” answered Mrs. Anderson emphatically.

And after all was still in the house, and everybody asleep, she stole through the dark passage in her dressing-room, and opened Kate’s door softly, and went in and kissed the girl in her bed. Kate was not asleep, and the tears were wet on her cheeks. She caught the dark figure in her arms.

“Oh! forgive me. I am so ashamed of myself!” she cried.

Mrs. Anderson kissed her again, and stole away without a word. “Forgive her! It is she who must forgive me. Poor child! poor child!” she said in her heart.



## CHAPTER II.

NEXT morning, when Mr. Courtenay took his way from the hotel to the Lung-Arno, his eye was caught by the appearance of a young man who was walking exactly in front of him with a great bouquet of violets in his hand. He was young, handsome, and well-dressed, and the continual salutes he received as he moved along testified that he was well-known in Florence. The old man's eye (knowing nothing about him) dwelt on him with a certain pleasure. That he was a genial, friendly young soul there could be no doubt; so pleasant were his salutations to great and small, made with hat and hand and voice, as continually as a prince's salutations to his subjects. Probably he was a young prince, or duke, or marchesino; at all events, a noble of the old blue blood, which, in

Italy, is at once so uncontaminated and so popular.

Mr. Courtenay had no premonition of any special interest in the stranger, and consequently he looked with pleasure on this impersonation of youth and good looks and good manners. Yes, no doubt he was a nobleman of the faithful Italian blood, one of those families which had kept in the good graces of the country, by what these benighted nations considered patriotism. A fine young fellow—perhaps with something like a career before him, now that Italy was holding up her head again among the nations—altogether an excellent specimen of a patrician; one of those well-born and well-conditioned beings whom every man with good blood in his own veins feels more or less proud of. Such were the thoughts of the old English man of the world, as he took his way in the Winter sunshine to keep his appointment with his niece.

It was a bright cold morning—a white rim of snow on the Apennines gave a brilliant edge

to the landscape, and on the smaller heights on the other side of Arno there was green enough to keep Winter in subjection. The sunshine was as warm as Summer; very different from the dreary dirty weather which Mr. Courtenay had left in Bond Street and Piccadilly, though Piccadilly sometimes is as bright as the Lung-Arno. Though he was as old as Methuselah in Kate's eyes, this ogre of a guardian was not so old in his own. And he had once been young, and when young had been in Florence; and he had a flower in his button-hole and no overcoat, which made him happy. And though he was perplexed, he could not but feel that the worst that he had been threatened with had not come true, and that perhaps the story was false altogether, and he was to escape without trouble. All this made Mr. Courtenay walk very lightly along the sunny pavement, pleased with himself, and disposed to be pleased with other people; and the same amiable feelings directed his eyes towards the young Italian, and gave him a friendly feeling to the stranger.

A fine young fellow; straight and swift he marched along, and would have distanced the old man, but for those continual greetings, which retarded him. Mr. Courtenay was just a little surprised when he saw the youth whom he had been admiring enter the doorway to which he was himself bound; and his surprise may be imagined when, as he climbed the stairs towards the second floor where his niece lived, he overheard a lively conversation at Mrs. Anderson's very door.

“*Amica mia*, I hope your beautiful young lady is better,” said the young man. “Contrive to tell her, my Francesca, how miserable I have been these evil nights, while she has been shut up by this hard-hearted lady-aunt. You will say, *cara mia*, that it is the Lady Caryisfort who sends the flowers, and that I am desolated—desolated!—and all that comes into your good heart to say. For you understand—I am sure you understand.”

“Oh yes, I understand, Signor Cont' Antonio,” said Francesca. “Trust to me, I

know what to say. She is not very happy herself, the dear little Signorina. It is dreary for her seeing the other young lady with her lovers ; but, perhaps, my beautiful young gentleman, it is not bad for you. When one sees another loved, one wishes to be loved one's self ; but it is hard for Mees Katta. She will be glad to have the Signor Conte's flowers and his message."

"But take care, Francesca mia, you must say they are from my Lady Caryisfort," said Count Antonio, "and lay me at the feet of my little lady. I hunger—I thirst—I die to see her again! Will she not see my Lady Caryisfort to-day? Is she too ill to go out to-night? The new *prima donna* has come, and has made a *furore*. Tell her so, *cara mia*. Francesca, make her to come out, that I may see her. You will stand my friend—you were always my friend."

"The Signor Conte forgets what I have told him ; that I am as a connection of the family. I will do my very best for him. Hist! hush!

*oh, miserecordia ! Ecco il vecchio !*” cried Francesca, under her breath.

Mr. Courtenay had heard it all, but as his Italian was imperfect he had not altogether made it out, and he missed this warning about *il vecchio* altogether. The young man turned and faced him as he reached the landing. He was a handsome young fellow, with dark eyes, which were eloquent enough to get to any girl's heart. Mr. Courtenay felt towards him as an old lady in the best society might feel, did she see her son in the fatal clutches of a penniless beauty. The fact that Kate was an heiress made, as it were, a man of her, and transferred all the female epithets of “wilful” and “designing” to the other side. Antonio, with the politeness of his country, took off his hat and stood aside to let the older man pass. “Thinks he can come over me too, with his confounded politeness,” Mr. Courtenay said to himself—indeed, he used a stronger word than confounded, which it would be unladylike to repeat. He made no response to

the young Italian's politeness, but pushed on, hat on head, after the vigorous manner of the Britons. "Who are these for?" he asked, gruffly, indicating with his stick the bunch of violets which made the air sweet.

"For ze young ladies, zare," said Francesca, demurely, as she ushered him out of the dark passage into the bright drawing-room.

Mr. Courtenay went in with suppressed fury. Kate was alone in the room waiting for him, and what with the agitation of the night, and the little flutter caused by his arrival, she was pale, and seemed to receive him with some nervousness. He noticed, too, that Francesca carried away the bouquet, though he felt convinced it was not intended for Ombra. She was in the pay of that young adventurer!—that Italian rogue and schemer!—that fortune-hunting young black-guard! These were the intemperate epithets which Mr. Courtenay applied to his handsome young Italian, as soon as he had found him out!

"Well, Kate," he said, sitting down beside

her, "I am sorry you are not well. It must be dull for you to be kept indoors, after you have had so much going about, and have been enjoying yourself so much."

"Did not you wish me to enjoy myself?" said Kate, whom her aunt's kiss the night before had once more enlisted vehemently on the other side.

"Oh, surely," said her guardian. "What do persons like myself exist for, but to help young people to enjoy themselves? It is the only object of our lives!"

"You mean to be satirical, I see," said Kate, with a sigh, "but I don't understand it. I wish you would speak plainly out. You taunted me last night with having made many friends, and having enjoyed myself—was it wrong? If you will tell me how few friends you wish me to have, or exactly how little enjoyment you think proper for me, I will endeavour to carry out your wishes—as long as I am obliged."

This was said in an undertone, with a grind and setting of Kate's white teeth which, though



very slight, spoke volumes. She had quite taken up again the colours which she had almost let fall last night. Mr. Courtenay was prepared for remonstrance, but not for such a vigorous onslaught.

“You are civil, my dear,” he said, “and sweet and submissive, and, indeed, everything I could have expected from your character and early habits ; but I thought Mrs. Anderson had brought you under. I thought you knew better by this time than to attempt to bully me.”

“I don’t want to bully you,” cried Kate, with burning cheeks ; “but why do you come like this, with your suspicious looks, as if you came prepared to catch us in something ?—whereas, all the world may know all about us —whom we know, and what we do.”

“This nonsense is your aunt’s, I suppose, and I don’t blame you for it,” said Mr. Courtenay. “Let us change the subject. You are responsible to me, as it happens, but I am not responsible to you. Don’t make yourself disagree-

able, Kate. Tragedy is not your line, though it is your cousin's. By the way, that girl is looking a great deal better than she did ; she is a different creature. She has grown quite handsome. Is it because Florence is her native air, as her mother said ?”

“I don't know,” said Kate. Though she had taken up her aunt's colours again vehemently, she did not feel so warmly towards Ombra. A certain irritation had been going on in her mind for some time. It had burst forth on the previous night, and Ombra had offered no kiss, said no word of reconciliation. So she was not disposed to enter upon any admiring discussion of her cousin. She would have resented anything that had been said unkindly, but it was no longer in her mind to plunge into applause of Ombra. A change had thus come over them both.

Mr. Courtenay looked at her very keenly—he saw there was something wrong, but he could not tell what it was—Some girlish quarrel, no doubt, he said to himself. Girls were always

quarrelling—about their lovers, or about their dresses, or something. Therefore he went over this ground lightly, and returned to his original attack.

“You like Florence?” he said. “Tell me what you have been doing, and whom you have met. There must be a great many English here, I suppose?”

However, he had roused Kate’s suspicions, and she was not inclined to answer.

“We have been doing what everybody else does,” she said—“going to see the pictures and all the sights; and we have met Lady Caryisfort. That is about all, I think. She has rather taken a fancy to me, because she belongs to our own county. She takes me to drive sometimes; and I have seen a great deal of her—especially of late.”

“Why especially of late?”

“Oh! I don’t know—that is, my aunt and Ombra found some old friends who were not fine enough, they said, to please you, so they left me behind; and I did not like it, I suppose

being silly ; so I have gone to Lady Caryisfort's more than usual since."

"Oh-h!" said Mr. Courtenay, feeling that enlightenment was near. "It was very honourable of your aunt, I am sure. And this Lady Caryisfort?—is she a matchmaker, Kate?"

"A matchmaker! I don't understand what you mean, uncle."

"You have met a certain young Italian, a Count Buoncompagni, whom I have heard of, there?"

Kate reddened, in spite of herself—being on the eve of getting into trouble about him, she began to feel a melting of her heart to Antonio.

"Do you know anything about Count Buoncompagni?" she asked, with elaborate calm. This, then, was what her uncle meant—this was what he had come from England about. Was it really so important as that?

"I have heard of him," said Mr. Courtenay, drily. "Indeed, five minutes ago, I followed him up the stairs, without knowing who he

was, and heard him giving a string of messages and a bunch of flowers to that wretched old woman.”

“Was it me he was asking for?” said Kate, quite touched. “How nice and how kind he is! He has asked for me every day since I have had this cold. The Italians are so nice, Uncle Courtenay. They are so sympathetic, and take such an interest in you.”

“I have not the least doubt of it,” he said, grimly. “And how long has this young Buoncompagni taken an interest in you? It may be very nice, as you say, but I doubt if I, as your guardian, can take so much pleasure in it as you do. I want to hear all about it, and where and how often you have met.”

Kate wavered a moment—whether to be angry and refuse to tell, or to keep her temper and disarm her opponent. She chose the latter alternative, chiefly because she was beginning to be amused, and felt that some “fun” might be got out of the matter. And it was so long now (about two weeks and a half) since she had

had any "fun." She did so want a little amusement. Whereupon she answered very demurely, and with much conscious skill,

"I met him first at the Embassy—at Lady Granton's ball."

"At Lady Granton's ball?"

"Yes. There were none but the very best people there—the *crème de la crème*, as auntie says. Lady Granton's sister introduced him to me. He is a very good dancer—just the sort of man that is nice to waltz with; and very pleasant to talk to, uncle."

"Oh! he is very pleasant to talk to, is he?" said Uncle Courtenay, still more grimly.

"Very much so indeed. He talks excellent French, and beautiful Italian. It does one all the good in the world talking to such a man. It is better than a dozen lessons. And then he is so kind, and never laughs at one's mistakes. And he has such a lovely old palace, and is so well known in Florence. He may not be very rich perhaps——"

"Rich!—a beggarly adventurer!—a con-

founded fortune-hunter!—an Italian rogue and reprobate! How this precious aunt of yours could have shut her eyes to such a piece of folly; or your Lady Caryisfort, forsooth——”

“Why forsooth, uncle? Do you mean that she is not Lady Caryisfort, or that she is unworthy of the name? She is very clever and very agreeable. But I was going to say that though Count Buoncompagni is not rich, he gave us the most beautiful little luncheon the day we went to see his pictures. Lady Caryisfort said it was perfection. And talking of that—if he brought some flowers, as you say, I should like to have them. May I go and speak to Francesca about them?—or perhaps you would rather ring the bell?”

## CHAPTER III.

IT was thus that Kate evaded the further discussion of the question. She went off gaily bounding along the long passage. "Francesca, Francesca, where are my flowers?" she cried. Her heart had grown light all at once. A little mischief, and a little opposition, and the freshness, yet naturalness, of having Uncle Courtenay to fight with, exhilarated her spirits. Yes, it felt natural. To be out of humour with her aunt was a totally different matter. That was all pain, with no compensating excitement; but the other was "fun." It filled her with wholesome energy and contradictoriness. "If Uncle Courtenay supposes I am going to give up poor Antonio for him—" she said in her heart, and



danced along the passage, singing snatches of tunes, and calling to Francesca. "Where are my flowers?—I know there are some flowers for me. Some one cares to know whether I am dead or alive," she said.

Francesca came out of the dining-room, holding up her hands to implore silence. "Oh! my dear young lady," said Francesca, "you must not be imprudent. When we receive flowers from a beautiful young gentleman, we take them to our chamber, or we put them in our bosoms—we don't dance and sing over them—or, at least, young ladies who have education, who know what the world expects of them, must not so behave. In my room, Mees Katta, you will find your flowers. They are sent from the English milady—Milady Caryisfort," Francesca added, demurely folding her arms upon her breast.

"Oh! are they from Lady Caryisfort?" said Kate, with a little disappointment. After all, it was not so romantic as she thought.

"My young lady understands that it must

be so," said Francesca, "for young ladies must not be compromised; but the hand that carried them was that of the young Contino, and as handsome a young fellow as any in Florence. I am very glad I am old—I might be his grandmother; for otherwise, look you, Mademoiselle, his voice is so mellow, and he looks so with his eyes, and says Francesca mia, cara amica, and such like, that I should be foolish, even an old woman like me. They have a way with them, these Buoncompagni. His father, I recollect, who was very like Count Antonio, very nearly succeeded in turning the head of my Angelina, my little sister that died. No harm came of it, Mees Katta, or I would not have told. We took her away to the convent at Rocca, where we had a cousin, a very pious woman, well known throughout the country, Sister Agnese, of the Reparazione; and there she got quite serious, and as good as a little saint before she died."

"Was it his fault that she died?" cried Kate, always ready for a story. "I should have

thought, Francesca, that you would have hated him for ever and ever."

"I had the honour of saying to the Signorina that no harm was done," said Francesca, with gravity. "Why should I hate the good Count for being handsome and civil? It is a way they have, these Buoncompagni. But, for my part, I think more of Count Antonio than I ever did of his father. Milady Caryisfort would speak for him, Mees Katta. She is a lady that knows the Italians, and understands how to speak. She has always supported the Contino's suit, has not she? and she will speak for him. He is desolated, desolated—he has just told me—to be so many days without seeing Mademoiselle; and, indeed, he looked very sad. We other Italians don't hide our feelings as you do in your country. He looked sad to break one's heart; and, Mees Katta, figure to yourself my feelings when I saw the Signora's uncle come puff-puff, with his difficulty of breathing, up the stair."

"What did it matter?" said Kate, putting

the best face upon it. "Of course I will not conceal anything from my uncle—though there is nothing to conceal."

"Milady Caryisfort will speak. If I might be allowed to repeat it to the Signorina, she is the best person to speak. She knows him well through his aunt, who is dei Strozzi, and a very great lady. You will take the Signor Uncle there, Mees Katta, if you think well of my advice."

"I do not want any advice—there is nothing to be advised about," cried Kate, colouring deeply, and suddenly recognizing the character which Francesca had taken upon herself. She rushed into Francesca's room, and brought out the violets, all wet and fragrant. They were such a secret as could not be hid. They perfumed all the passages as she hurried to her own little room, and separated a little knot of the dark blue blossoms to put in her bodice. How sweet they were! How "nice" of Antonio to bring them! How strange that he should say they were from Lady Caryisfort! Why

should he say they were from Lady Caryisfort? And was he really sad because he did not see her? How good, how kind he was! Other people were not sad. Other people did not care, she supposed, if they never saw her again. And here Kate gave a little sigh, and blushed a great indignant blush, and put her face down into the abundant fragrant bouquet. It was so sweet, and love was sweet, and the thought that one was cared for, and thought of, and missed! This thought was very grateful and pleasant, as sweet as the flowers, and it went to Kate's heart. She could have done a great deal at that moment for the sake of the tender-hearted young Italian, who comforted her wounded feelings, and helped to restore the balance of her being by the attentions which were so doubly consoling in the midst—she said to herself—of coldness and neglect.

Lady Caryisfort called soon afterwards, and was delighted to make Mr. Courtenay's acquaintance; and, as Kate was better, she took them both to the Cascine. That was the first

morning—Kate remembered afterwards, with many wondering thoughts—that the Berties had not called before luncheon, and Ombra did not appear until that meal, and was less agreeable than she had been since they left Shanklin. But these thoughts soon fled from her mind, and so did a curious, momentary feeling, that her aunt and cousin looked relieved when she went away with Lady Caryisfort. They did not go. Mrs. Anderson, too, had a cold, she said, and would not go out that day, and Ombra was busy.

“Ombra is very often busy now,” said Lady Caryisfort, as they drove off. “What is it, Kate? She and Mrs. Anderson used to find time for a drive now and then at first.”

“I don’t know what it is,” Kate said, with some pain; and then a little ebullition of her higher spirits prompted her to add an explanation, which was partly malicious, and partly kind, to save her cousin from remark. “She writes poetry,” said Kate, demurely. “Perhaps it is that.”

“Oh! good heavens, if I had known she was

literary!" cried Lady Caryisfort, with gentle horror. But here were the Cascine, and the flower-girls, and the notabilities who had to be pointed out to the new-comer; and the Count, who had appeared quite naturally by Kate's side of the carriage. Mr. Courtenay said little, but he kept his eyes open, and noted everything. He looked at the lady opposite to him, and listened to her dauntless talk, and heard all the compliments addressed to her, and the smiling contempt with which she received them. This sort of woman could not be aiding and abetting in a vulgar matrimonial scheme, he said to himself. And he was puzzled what to make of the business, and how to put a stop to it. For the Italian kept his place at Kate's side, without any attempt at concealment, and was not a person who could be sneered down by the lordly British stare, or treated quite as a nobody. Mr. Courtenay knew the world, and he knew that an Englishman who should be rude to Count Buoncompagni on his own soil, on the Cascine at Florence, must belong to a different class of

men from the class which, being at the top of the social ladder, is more cosmopolitan than any other, except the working people, who are at its lower level. An indignant British uncle from Bloomsbury or Highgate might have done this, but not one whose blood was as blue as that of the Buoncompagni. It was impossible. And yet it was hard upon him to see all this going on under his very eyes. Lady Caryisfort had insisted that he and Kate should dine with her, and it was with the farewell of a very temporary parting glance that Count Antonio went away. This was terrible, but it must be fully observed before being put a stop to. He tried to persuade himself that to be patient was his only wisdom.

“But will not your aunt be vexed, be affronted, feel herself neglected, if we go to dine with Lady Caryisfort? Ladies, I know, are rather prompt to take offence in such matters,” he said.

“Oh! my aunt!—she will not be offended. I don’t think she will be offended,” said Kate, in the puzzled tone which he had already noticed. And the two young men of last



night were again in the drawing-room when he went upstairs. Was there some other scheme, some independent intrigue, in this? But he shrugged his shoulders and said, what did it matter? It was nothing to him. Miss Ombra had her mother to manage her affairs. Whatever their plans might be they were not his business, so long as they had the good sense not to interfere with Kate.

The dinner at Lady Caryisfort's was small but pleasant. The only Italian present was a Countess Strozzi, a well-bred woman, who had been Ambassador from Tuscany once at St. James's, and whom Mr. Courtenay had met before—but no objectionable Counts. He really enjoyed himself at that admirable table. After all, he thought, there is no Sybarite like your rich accomplished, independent woman—no one who combines the beautiful and dainty with the excellent in such a high degree; so long as she understands cookery; for the choice of guests and the external arrangements are sure to be complete. And Lady Caryisfort did understand cookery. It was the pleasantest pos-

sible conclusion to his hurried journey and his perplexity. It was London, and Paris, and Florence all in one; the comfort, the exquisite fare, the society, all helped each other into perfection ; and there was a certain flavour of distance and novelty in the old Italian palace which enhanced everything—the flavour of the past. This was not a thing to be had every day, like a Paris dinner. But in the evening Mr. Courtenay was less satisfied. When the great *salon*, with its warm velvet hangings and its dim frescoes, began to fill, Buoncompagni turned up from some corner or other, and appeared as if by magic at Kate's side. The guardian did the only thing which could be done in the circumstances. He approached the sofa under the picture, which was the favourite throne of the lady of the house, and waited patiently until there was a gap in the circle surrounding her, and he could find an entrance. She made room for him at last, with the most charming grace.

“ Mr. Courtenay, you are not like the rest of my friends. I have not heard all your good

things, nor all your news, as I have theirs. You are a real comfort to talk to, and I did not have the good of you at dinner. Sit by me, please, and tell me something new. Nobody does," she added, with a little flutter of her fan,—“nobody ever seems to think that fresh fare is needful sometimes. Let us talk of Kate.”

“If I am bound to confine myself to that subject—” said the old man of society, “I reserve the question whether it is kind to remind me thus broadly that I am a Methuselah.”

“Oh! I am a Methusela myself, without the h,” said Lady Caryisfort. “The young people interest me in a gentle, grandmotherly way. I like to see them enjoy themselves, and all that.”

“Precisely,” said Mr. Courtenay. “I quite understand and perceive the appropriateness of the situation. You are interested in *that*, for example?” he said, suddenly changing his tone, and indicating a group at the other side of the room. Kate, with some flowers in her hand, which had dropped from the bouquet still in her

bosom, with her head drooping over them, and a vivid blush on her cheek—while Count Antonio, bending over her, seemed asking for the flowers, with a hand half extended, and stooping so low that his handsome head was close to hers. This attitude was so prettily suggestive of something asked and granted, that a bewildered blush flushed up upon Lady Caryisfort's delicate face at the sight. She turned to her old companion with a startled look, in which there was something almost like pain.

“Well?” she said, with mingled excitement, surprise, and defiance, which he did not understand.

“I don't think it is well,” he said. “Will you tell me—and pardon an old disagreeable guardian for asking—how far this has gone?”

“You see as well as I do,” she said, with a little laugh; and then, changing her tone—  
“But, however far it is gone, I have nothing to do with it. It seems extremely careless on my part; but I give you my word, Mr. Courtenay, I never really noticed it till to-night.”

This was true enough, notwithstanding that she had perceived the dangers of the situation, and warned both parties against it at the outset. For up to this moment she had not seen the least trace of emotion on the part of Kate.

“Nothing could make me doubt a lady’s word,” said the old man; “but one knows that in such matters the code of honour is held lightly.”

“I am not holding it lightly,” she said, with sudden fire; and then, pausing with an effort—  
“It is true I had not noticed it before. Kate is so frank and so young; such ideas never seem to occur to one in connection with her. But, Mr. Courtenay, Count Buoncompagni is no adventurer. He may be poor, but he is—honourable—good——”

“The woman is agitated,” Mr. Courtenay said to himself. “What fools these women are! My stars!” But he added, with grim politeness, “It is utterly out of the question, Lady Caryisfort. You are the girl’s countrywoman—even her countywoman. You are not

one to incur the fatal reputation of match-making. Help me to break off this folly completely, and I will be grateful to you for ever. It must be done, whether you will help me or not."

As he spoke, somehow or other she recovered her calm.

"Are you so hard-hearted," she said,—“so implacable a model of guardians? And I, innocent soul, who had supposed you romantic and Arcadian, wishing Kate to be loved for herself alone, and all the sentimental etceteras. So it must be put a stop to, must it? Well, if there is nothing to be said for poor Antonio, I suppose, as it is my fault, I must help."

"There can be no doubt of it," said Mr. Courtenay.

Lady Caryisfort kept her eyes upon the two, and her lively brain began to work. The question interested her, there could be no doubt. She was shocked at herself, she said, that she had allowed things to go so far without finding it out. And then the two people of the world

laid their heads together, and schemed the destruction of Kate's fanciful little dream, and of poor Antonio's hopes. Mr. Courtenay had no compunction ; and though Lady Caryisfort smiled and made little appeals to him not to look so implacable, there was a certain gleam of excitement quite unusual to her about her demeanour also.

They had settled their plan before Kate had decided that, on the whole, it was best to thrust the dropped violets back into her belt, and not to give them to Antonio. It was nice to receive the flowers from him ; but to give one back, to accept the look with which it was asked, to commit herself in his favour—that was a totally different question. Kate shrank into herself at the suit which was thus pressed a hair's-breadth further than she was prepared for. It was just the balance of a straw whether she should have yielded or taken fright. And, happily for her, with those two pair of eyes upon her, it was the fright that won the day, and not the impulse to yield.

## CHAPTER IV.

KATE had a good deal to think of when she went home that evening, and shut herself up in the room which was full of the sweetness of Antonio's violets. Francesca, with an Italian's natural terror of flower-scents, had carried them away; but Kate had paused on her way to her room to rescue the banished flowers.

"They are enough to kill Mademoiselle in her bed, and leave us all miserable," said Francesca.

"I am not a bit afraid of violets," said Kate.

On the contrary, she wanted them to help her. For she did not go into the drawing-room, though it was still early. The two young men, she heard, were there; and Kate felt a little sick at heart, and did not care to go where she was not wanted—"Where her absence," as she said



to herself, "was never remarked." Oh! how different it was from what it had been! Only a few weeks ago she had been unable to form an idea of herself detached from her aunt and cousin, who went everywhere with her, and shared everything. Even Lady Caryisfort had shown no favouritism towards Kate at first. She had been quite as kind to Ombra, quite as friendly to Mrs. Anderson. It was their own doing altogether. They had snatched, as it were, at Lady Caryisfort, as one who would disembarass them of the inconvenient cousin—"the third, who was always *de trop*," poor Kate said to herself, with a sob in her throat, and a dull pang in her heart. They still went through all the formulas of affection, but they got rid of her, they did not want her. When she had closed the door of her room even upon Maryanne, and sat down over the fire in her dressing-gown, she reflected upon her position, as she had never reflected on it before. She was nobody's child. People were kind to her, but she was not necessary to any one's happiness; she belonged to no home of her own, where her pre-

sence was essential. Her aunt loved her in a way, but, so long as she had Ombra, could do without Kate. And her uncle did not love her at all, only interfered with her life, and turned it into new channels, as suited him. She was of no importance to any one, except in relation to Langton-Courtenay, and her money, and estates.

This is a painful and dangerous discovery to be made by a girl of nineteen, with a great vase full of violets at her elbow, the offering of such a fortune-hunter as Antonio Buoncompagni, one who was mercenary only because it was his duty to his family, and in reality meant no harm. He was a young man who was quite capable of having fallen in love with her, had she not been so rich and so desirable a match; and as it was he liked her, and was ready to swear that he loved her, so as to deceive not only her, but himself. But perhaps, after all, it was he, and not she, who was most easily deceived. Kate, though she did not know it, had an instinctive inkling of the real

state of the case, which was the only thing which saved her from falling at once and altogether into Antonio's net. Had she been sure that he loved her, nothing could have saved her; for love in the midst of neglect, love which comes spontaneous when *other people* are indifferent, is the sweetest and most consolatory of all things. Sometimes she had almost persuaded herself that this was the case, and had been ready to rush into Antonio's arms; but then there would come that cold shudder of hesitation which precedes a final plunge—that doubt—that consciousness that the Buoncompagni were poor, and wanted English money to build them up again. As for the poverty itself, she cared nothing; but she felt that, had her lover been even moderately well off, it would have saved her from that shrinking chill and suspicion. And then she turned, and rent herself, so to speak, remembering the sublime emptiness of that space on the wall where the Madonna dei Buoncompagni used to be.

“If I can ever find it out anywhere, what-

ever it may cost, I will buy it, and send it back to him," Kate said, with a flush on her cheek. And next moment she cried with real distress, feeling for his disappointment, and asking herself why should not she do it?—why not? To make a man happy, and raise up an old house, is worth a woman's while, surely, even though she might not be very much in love. Was it quite certain that people were always very much in love when they married? A great many things, more important, were involved in any alliance made by a little princess in her own right; and such was Kate's character to her own consciousness, and in the eyes of other people. The violets breathed all round her, and the soft silence and loneliness of the night enveloped her; and then she heard the stir in the drawing-room, the movement of the visitors going away, and whispering voices which passed her door, and Ombra's laugh, soft and sweet, like the very sound of happiness——

Ombra was happy; and what cared anyone for Kate? She was the one alone in this little

loving household—and that it should be so little made the desolation all the greater. She was one of three, and yet the others did not care what she was thinking, how she was feeling. Kate crept to bed silently, and put out her light, that her aunt might not come to pity her, after she had said good night to her own happy child, whom everybody thought of. “And yet I might have as good,” Kate said to herself. “I am not alone any more than Ombra. I have my violets too—my beau chevalier—if I like.” Ah! the beau chevalier! Some one had sung that wistful song at Lady Caryisfort’s that night. It came back upon Kate’s mind now in the dark, mingled with the whispering of the voices, and the little breath of chilly night air that came when the door opened.

“Ne voyez vous pas que la nuit est profonde,  
Et que le monde  
N’est que souci.”

Strange, at nineteen, in all the sweetness of her youth, the heiress of Langton had come to understand how that might be!

Lady Caryisfort took more urgent measures on her side than Mr. Courtenay had thought it wise to do. She detained her friend, the Countess Strozzi, and her friend's nephew, when all the other guests were gone. This flattered Antonio, who thought it possible some proposition might be about to be made to him, and made the Countess uncomfortable, who knew the English better than he. Lady Caryisfort made a very bold assault upon the two. She took high ground, and assured them that, without her consent and countenance, to mature a scheme of this kind under her wing, as it were, was a wrong thing to do. She was so very virtuous, in short, that Countess Strozzi woke up to a sudden and lively hope that Lady Caryisfort had more reasons than those which concerned Kate for disliking the match; but this she kept to herself; and the party sat late and long into the night discussing the matter. Antonio was reluctant, very reluctant, to give up the little English maiden, whom he declared he loved.

“Would you love her if she were penniless—if she had no lands and castles, but was as her cousin?” said Lady Caryisfort; and the young man paused. He said at last that, though probably he would love her still better in these circumstances, he should not dare to ask her to marry him. But was that possible? And then it was truly that Lady Caryisfort distinguished herself. She told him all that was possible to a ferocious English guardian—how, though he could not take the money away, he could bind it up so that it would advantage no one; how he could make the poor husband no better than a pensioner of the rich wife, or even settle it so that even the rich wife should become poor, and have nothing in her power except the income, which, of course, could not be taken from her. “Even that she will not have till she is of age, two long years hence,” Lady Caryisfort explained; and then gave such a lucid sketch of trustees and settlements that the young Italian’s soul shrank into his boots. His face grew longer and longer as he listened.

“But I am committed—my honour is involved,” he said.

“*Ah! pazzo, allora hai parlato?*” cried his kinswoman.

“No, I have not spoken, not in so many words; but I have been understood,” said Antonio, with that imbecile smile and blush of vanity which women know so well.

“I think you may make yourself easy in that respect,” said Lady Caryisfort. “Kate is not in love with you,”—a speech which almost undid what she had been labouring to do; for Antonio’s pride was up, and could scarcely be pacified. He had committed himself; he had given Kate to understand that he was her lover, and how was he now to withdraw? “If he proposes, she is a romantic child—no more than a child—and she is capable of accepting him,” Lady Caryisfort said to his aunt in their last moment of consultation.

“Leave him to me, *cara mia*,” said the Countess—“leave him to me.” And that noble lady went away with her head full of new combina-



tions. "The girl will not be of age for two years, and in that time anything may happen. It would be hard for you to wait two years, Antonio mio ; let us think a little. I know another, young still, very handsome, and with everything in her own power——"

Antonio was indignant, and resented the suggestion ; but Countess Strozzi was not impatient. She knew very well that to such arguments, in the long run, all Antonios yield.

Mr. Courtenay entered the drawing-room in the Lung-Arno next day at noon, and found all the ladies there. Again the Berties were absent, but there was no cloud that morning upon Ombra's face. Kate had made her appearance, looking pale and ill, and the hearts of her companions had been touched. They were compunctious and ashamed, and eager to make up for the neglect of which she had never complained. Even Ombra had kissed her a second time after the formal morning salutation, and had said "Forgive me!" as she did so.

"For what?" said Kate, with the intention

of being proud and unconscious. But when she had looked up, and met her aunt's anxious look, and Ombra's eyes with tears in them, her own overflowed. "Oh! I am so ill-tempered," she said, "and ungrateful. Don't speak to me."

"You are just as I was a little while ago," said Ombra. "But, Kate, with you it is all delusion, and soon, very soon, you will know better. Don't be as I was."

As Ombra was! Kate dried her eyes, yet she did not know whether to be gratified or to be angry. Why should she be as Ombra had been? But yet even these few words brought about a better understanding. And the three were seated together, in the old way, when Mr. Courtenay entered. He had the air of a man full of business. In his hand he carried a packet of letters, some of which he had not yet opened.

"I have just had letters from Langton," he said. "I don't know if you take any interest in Langton—or these ladies, who have never even seen it——"

"Of course I do, uncle, cried Kate. "Take

interest in my own house, my dear old home!"

"It does not follow that young ladies who are fond of Italy should care about a dull old place in the heart of England," said this wily old man. "Grieve tells me it is going to rack and ruin, which is not pleasant news. He says it is wicked and shameful to leave it so long without inhabitants; that the village is discontented, and dirty, and wretched, with no one to look after it. In short, ladies, if I look miserable, you must forgive me, for I have not got over Grieve's letter."

"Who is Grieve, uncle?"

"The new estate-agent, Kate. Didn't you know? Ah! you must begin to take an interest in the estate. My time is drawing to a close, and I shall be glad, very glad, to be rid of it. If I could go down and live there, I might do something; but as that is impossible, I suppose things must continue going to the bad till you come of age."

Kate sat upright in her chair; her cheeks began to glow, and her eyes to shine.

“Why should things go to the bad?” she said. “I would rather they did not, for my part.”

“How can they do otherwise,” said Mr. Courtenay, “while the house is shut up, and there is no one to see to anything? Grieve is a good fellow, but I can’t give him Langton to live in, or make him into a Courtenay.”

“I should hope not,” said Kate, setting her small white teeth. By this time her whole countenance began to gleam with excitement and resolution, and that charm to which she always responded with such delight and readiness, the charm of novelty. Then she made a pause, and drew in her breath. “Uncle,” she said, “I am not a child any longer. Why shouldn’t I go home, and open the house, and live as I ought? I want something to do. I want duty, such as other people have. It is my business to look after Langton. Let me go home.”

“You foolish child!” he said; which was a proof, though Kate did not see it, that every-

thing was working as he wished. "You foolish child! How could you, at nineteen, go and live in that house alone?"

She looked up. Her crimson cheek grew white, her eyes went in one wistful, imploring look from her aunt to Ombra, from Ombra back again to Mrs. Anderson. Her lips parted in her eagerness, her eyes shone out like lights. She was as if about to speak—but stopped short, and referred to them, as it were, for the answer. Mr. Courtenay looked at them too, not without a little anxiety; but the interest in his face was of a very different kind from that shown by Kate.

"If you mean," said Mrs. Anderson, faltering, and, for her part, consulting Ombra with her eyes, "that you would like me to go with you—Kate, my darling, thank you for wishing it—oh! thank you, I have not deserved—But most likely your uncle would not like it, Kate."

"On the contrary," said Mr. Courtenay, with his best bow, "if you would entertain the idea—if it suits with your other plans to go to

Langton till Kate comes of age, it would be everything that I could desire.”

The three looked at each other for a full moment in uncertainty and wonder. And then Kate suddenly jumped up, overturned the little table by her side, on which stood the remains of her violets, and danced round the room with wild delight.

“Oh! let us go at once!—let us leave this horrid old picture-gallery! Let us go home, home!” she cried, in an outburst of joy. The vase was broken, and the dead violets strewed over the carpet. Francesca came in and swept them away, and no one took any notice. That was over. And now for home—for home!

## CHAPTER V.

THE success of this move had gone far beyond Mr. Courtenay's highest hopes. He was unprepared for the suddenness of its acceptance. He went off, and told Lady Caryisfort, with a surprise and satisfaction that was almost rueful. "Since that woman came into my niece's affairs," he said, "I have had to sacrifice something for every step I have gained; and I find that I have made the sacrifice exactly when it suited her—to buy a concession she was dying to make. I never meant her to set foot in Langton, and now she is going there as mistress; and just, I am certain, at the time it suits her to go. This is what happens to a simple-minded man when he ventures to enter the lists with women. I have a great mind to

put everything in her hands and retire from the field."

"I don't think she is so clever as you give her credit for," said Lady Caryisfort, who was somewhat languid after the night's exertions. "I suspect it was you who found out the moment that suited you rather than she."

But she gave him, in her turn, an account of what she had done, and they formed an alliance offensive and defensive—a public treaty of friendship for the world's inspection, and a secret alliance known only to themselves, by the conditions of which Lady Caryisfort bound herself to repair to London, and take Kate under her charge, when it should be thought necessary and expedient by the allied powers. She pledged herself to present the heiress, and watch over her, and guard her from all match-makers, that the humble chaperon might be dismissed, and allowed to go in peace. When he had concluded this bargain, Mr. Courtenay went away with a lighter heart, to make preparations for his niece's return. He had been



most successful in his pretence to get her away from Florence; and now this second arrangement to get rid of the relations who would be no longer necessary, seemed to him a miracle of diplomacy. He chuckled to himself over it, and rubbed his hands.

“Kate must not be treated as a child any longer—she is grown up, she has a judgment of her own,” he said, with a delicious sense of humour; and then he listened very gravely to all her enthusiastic descriptions of what she was to do when she got to Langton. Kate, however, after the first glow of her resolution, did not feel the matter so easy as it appeared. She had not thought of the violets, which Francesca swept up, at the moment; but afterwards the recollection of them came back to her. She had allowed them to be swept away without a thought. What a cold heart!—what an ungrateful nature she must have! And poor Antonio! In the light of Langton, Antonio looked to her all at once impossible—as impossible as it would be to transplant his old palace

to English soil. No way could the two ideas be harmonized. She puckered her brows over it till she made her head ache. Count Buoncompagni and Langton-Courtenay ! They would not come together—could not—it was impossible ! Indeed, the one idea chased the other from her mind. And how was she to intimate this strange and cruel fact to him ? How was she to show that all his graceful attentions must be brought to an end?—that she was going home, and all must be over ? And the worst was that it could not be done gradually ; but one way or another must be managed at once.

The next day Lady Caryisfort came, as usual, on her way to the Cascine ; but, to Kate's surprise and relief, and, it must be owned, also to her disappointment, Antonio was not there. She declined the next invitation to Lady Caryisfort's, inventing a headache for the occasion ; and growing more and more perplexed the longer she thought over that difficult matter. It was while she was musing thus that Bertie Hardwick one day managed to get beside her

for a moment, while Ombra was talking to his cousin. Bertie Eldridge had raised a discussion about some literary matter, and the two had gone to consult a book in the little ante-room, which served as a kind of library; the other Bertie was left alone with Kate, a thing which had not happened before for weeks. He went up to her the moment they were gone, and stood hesitating and embarrassed before her.

“Miss Courtenay,” he said, and waited till she looked up.

Something moved in Kate’s heart at the sound of his voice—some chord of early recollection—remembrances which seemed to her to stretch so far back—before the world began.

“Well, Mr. Hardwick?” she said, looking up with a smile. Why there should be something pathetic in that smile, and a little tightness across her eyelids, as if she could have cried, Kate could not have told; and neither can I.

“Are you pleased to go home?—is it with your own will? or did your uncle’s coming

distress you?" he said, in a voice which was—yes, very kind, almost more than friendly; brotherly, Kate said to herself.

"Distress me?" she said.

"Yes; I have thought you looked a little troubled sometimes. I can't help noticing. Don't think me impertinent, but I can't bear to see trouble in your face."

Kate made no reply, but she looked up at him; looked him straight in the eyes. Once more she did not know why she did it, and she did not think of half the meanings which he saw written in her face. He faltered; he turned away; he grew red and grew pale; and then came back to her with an answering look which did not falter; but for the re-entrance of the others he must have said something. But they came back, and he did not speak. If he had spoken, what would he have said?

This gave a new direction to Kate's thoughts, but still it was with a heavy heart that she entered Lady Caryisfort's drawing-room, not more than a week after that evening when Antonio

had asked for the violets, and she had hesitated whether she would give them. She had hesitated! It was this thought which made her so much ashamed. She had been lonely, and she had been willing to accept his heart as a play-thing; and how could she say to him now, "I am no longer lonely. I am going home; and I could not take you, a stranger, back, to be master of Langton?" She could not say this, and what was she to say? Antonio Buoncompagni was not much more comfortable; he had been thoroughly schooled, and he had begun to accept his part. He even saw, and that clearly, that a pretty, independent bird in the hand, able to pipe as he wished, was better than a fluttering, uncertain fledgling in the bush; but he had a lively sense of honour, and he had committed himself. The young lady, he thought, ought, at least, to have the privilege of refusing him. "Go, then, and be refused—*pazzo!*" said his aunt. "Most people avoid a refusal, but thou wishest it. It is a pity that thou shouldst not be satisfied." But, having ob-

tained this permission, the young Count was not, perhaps, so ready to avail himself of it. He did not care to be rejected any more than other men, but he was anxious to reconcile his conscience to his desertion ; and he had a tender sense that he himself—Antonio—was not one to be easily forgotten. He watched Kate from the moment of her entry, and persuaded himself that she was pale. “*Poverina!*” he said beneath his moustache. Alas ! the sacrifice must be made ; but then it might be done in a gentle way.

The evening, however, was half over before he had found his way to her side—a circumstance which filled Kate with wonder, and kept her in a curious suspense ; for she could not talk freely to anyone else while he was within sight, to whom she had so much (she thought) to say. He came, and Kate was confused and troubled. Somehow she felt he was changed. Was he less handsome, less tall, less graceful ? What had happened to him ? Surely there was something. He was no longer the young hero who had dropped on his knee, and kissed her

hand for Italy. She was confused, and could not tell how it was.

“You are going to leave Florence?” he said. “It is sudden—it is too sad to think of. Miss Courtenay, I hope it is not you who wish to leave our beautiful Italy—you, who have understood her so well?”

“No, it is not I,” said Kate. “I should not have gone of my own free will; but yet I am very willing—I am ready to go—it is home,” she added hastily, and with meaning. “It is the place I love best in the world.”

“Ah!” he said, “I had thought—I had hoped you loved Italy too.”

“Oh! so I do, Count Buoncompagni—and I thought I did still more,” cried the girl, eager to make her hidden and shy, yet brave apology. “I thought I could have lived and died here, where people were so good to me. But, you know, whenever I heard the name of home, it made my blood all dance in my veins. I felt I had been making a mistake, and that there was nothing in the world I loved like Langton-

Courtenay. I made a great mistake, but I did not mean it. I hope nobody will think it is unkind of me, or that I am fond of change."

Count Antonio stood and listened to this speech with a grim smile on his face, and a look in his eyes which was new to Kate. He, too, was making a disagreeable discovery, and he did not like it. He made her a bow, but he did not make any answer. He stood by her side a few moments, and then he asked her suddenly, "May I get you some tea?—can I bring you anything?" with a forced quietness; and when Kate said "No," he went away, and devoted himself for all the rest of the evening to Lady Caryisfort. There was pique in his manner, but there was something more, which she could not make out; and she sat rather alone for the rest of the evening. She was left to feel her mistake, to wonder, to be somewhat offended and affronted; and went back to the Lung-Arno impatient to hurry over all the packing, and get home at once. But she never found out that in thus taking the weight of the breaking off



on her own shoulders, she had saved Count Antonio a great deal of trouble.

When Lady Caryisfort found out what had passed, her amusement was very great. "She will go now and think all her life that she has done him an injury, and broken his heart, and all kinds of nonsense," she said to herself. "Poor Antonio! what a horrible thing money is! But he has escaped very cheaply, thanks to Kate, and she will make a melancholy hero of him, poor dear child, for the rest of her life."

In this, however, Lady Caryisfort, not knowing all the circumstances, was wrong; for Kate felt vaguely that there was something more than the honourable despair of a young Paladin in her Count's acceptance of her explanation. He accepted it too readily, with too little attempt to resist or remonstrate. She was more angry than pitiful, ignorant as she was. A man who takes a woman so entirely at her first word almost insults her, even though the separation is her own doing. Kate felt this vaguely, and a hot blush rose to her cheek for two or

three days after, at the very mention of Antonio's name.

The person, however, who felt this breaking off most was old Francesca, who had gone to an extra mass for weeks back, to promote the suit she had so much at heart. She cried herself sick when she saw it was all over, and said to herself she knew something evil would happen as soon as *il vecchio* came. *Il vecchio's* appearance was always the signal for mischief. He had come, and now once more the party was on the wing, and she herself was to be torn from her native place, the Florence she adored, for this old man's caprice. Francesca thought with a little fierce satisfaction that, when his soul went to purgatory, there would be nobody to pray him out, and that his penance would be long enough. The idea gave her a great deal of satisfaction. She would not help him out, she was certain—not so much as by a single prayer.

But all the time she got on with her packing, and the ladies began to frequent the shops to buy

little souvenirs of Florence. It was a busy time, and there was a great deal of movement, and so much occupation that the members of the little party lost sight of each other, as it were, and pursued their different preparations in their own way. "She is packing," or, "she is shopping," was said, first of one, and then of another; and no further questions were asked. And thus the days crept on, and the time approached when they were to set out once more on the journey home.

## CHAPTER VI.

**Y**ES, packing, without doubt, takes up a great deal of time, and that must have been the reason why Mrs. Anderson and Ombra were so much occupied. They had so many things to do. Francesca, of course, was occupied with the household; she did the greater part of the cooking, and superintended everything, and consequently had not time for the manifold arrangements—the selection of things they did not immediately want, which were to be sent off direct from Leghorn, and of those which they would require to carry with them. And in this work the ladies toiled sometimes for days together.

Kate had no occasion to make a slave of herself. She had Maryanne to attend to all her

immediate requirements, and, in her own person, had nothing better to do than to sit alone, and read, or gaze out of the window upon the passengers below, and the brown Arno running his course in the sunshine, and the high roofs blazing into the mellow light on the other side, while the houses below were in deepest shadow. Kate was too young, and had too many requirements, and hungers of the heart, to enjoy this scene for itself so much, perhaps, as she ought to have done. Had there been somebody by to whom she could have pointed out, or who would have pointed out to her, the beautiful gleams of colour and sunshine, I have no doubt her appreciation of it all would have been much greater. As it was, she felt very solitary; and often after, when life was running low with her, her imagination would bring up that picture of the brown river, and the housetops shining in the sun, and all the people streaming across the Ponte della Trinità, to the other side of the Arno—stranger people, whom she did not know, who were always coming and going, coming and going.

Morning made no difference to them, nor night, nor the cold days, nor the rain. They were always crossing that bridge. Oh! what a curious, tedious thing life was, Kate thought—always the same thing over again, year after year, day after day. It was so still that she almost heard her own breathing within the warm, low room, where the sunshine entered so freely, but where nothing else entered all the morning, except herself.

To be sure, this was only for a few days; but, after all, what a strange end it was to the life in Florence, which had begun so differently. In the afternoon, to be sure, it was not lonely. Her uncle would come, and Lady Caryisfort, and the Berties, but not so often as usual. They never came when Mr. Courtenay was expected; but Kate felt, by instinct, that when she and her uncle were at Lady Caryisfort's, the two young men re-appeared, and the evenings were spent very pleasantly. What had she done to be thus shut out? It was a question she could not answer. Now and then the young clergy-

man would appear, who was the friend of Bertie Eldridge, a timid young man, with light hair and troubled eyes. And sometimes she caught Bertie Hardwick looking at herself with a melancholy, anxious gaze, which she still less understood. Why should he so regard her? she was making no complaint, no show of her own depression; and why should her aunt look at her so wistfully, and beg her pardon in every tone or gesture? Kate could not tell; but the last week was hard upon her, and still more hard was a strange accident which occurred at the end.

This happened two or three days before they left Florence. She was roused early, she did not know how, by a sound which she could not identify. Whether it was distant thunder, which seemed unlikely, or the shutting of a door close at hand, she could not tell. It was still dark of the Winter morning, and Kate, rousing up, heard some early street cries outside, only to be heard in that morning darkness before the dawn, and felt something in the air, she could not tell

what, which excited her. She got up, and cautiously peered into the ante-room out of which her own room opened. To her wonder she saw a bright fire burning. Was it late, she thought? and hastened to dress, thinking she had overslept herself. But when she had finished her morning toilette, and came forth to warm her cold fingers at that fire, there was still no appearance of any one stirring. What did it mean? The shutters were still closed, and everything was dark, except this brisk fire, which must have been made up quite recently. Kate had taken down a book, and was about to make herself comfortable by the fireside, when the sound of some one coming startled her. It was Francesca, who looked in, with her warm shawl on.

“I thought I heard some one,” said Francesca. “Mees Katta, you haf give me a bad fright. Why do you get up so early, without warning anyone? I hear the sound, and I say to myself, my lady is ill—and behold it is only Mees Katta. It does not show education, waking



poor peoples in ze cold out of their good warm bet."

"But, Francesca, I heard noises too; and what can be the matter?" said Kate, becoming a little alarmed.

"Ah! but there is nosing the matter. Madame sleep—she would not answer even when I knocked. And since you have made me get up so early, it shall be for ze good of my soul, Mees Katta. I am going to mass."

"Oh! let me go too," said Kate. "I have never been at church so early. Don't say a word, Francesca, because I *know* my aunt will not mind. I will get my hat in a minute. See, I am ready."

"The Signorina will always have her way," said Francesca; and Kate found herself, before she knew, in the street.

It was still dark, but day was breaking; and it was by no means the particularly early hour that Kate supposed. There were no fine people certainly about the streets, but the poorer population was all awake and afoot. It was very

cold—the beginning of January—the very heart of Winter. The lamps were being extinguished along the streets; but the cold glimmer of the day neither warmed nor cleared the air to speak of; and through that pale dimness the great houses rose like ghosts. Kate glanced round her with a shiver, taking in a strange wild vision, all in tints of grey and black, of the houses along the side of the Arno, the arched line of the bridge, the great dim mass of the other part of the town beyond, faint in the darkness, and veiled, indistinct figures still coming and going. And then she followed Francesca, with scarcely a word, to the little out-of-the-way church, with nothing in it to make a show, which Francesca loved, partly because it was humble. For poor people have a liking for those homely, mean little places, where no grandeur of ornament nor pomp of service can ever be. This is a fact, explain it as they can, who think the attractions of ritualistic art and splendid ceremonial are the chief charms of the worship of Rome.

Francesca found out this squalid little church by instinct, as a poor woman of her class in England would find a Bethesda Chapel. But at this moment the little church looked cheery, with its lighted altar blazing into the chilly darkness. Kate followed into one of the corners, and kneeled down reverently by her companion. Her head was confused by the strangeness of the scene. She listened, and tried to join in what was going on, with that obstinate English prejudice which makes Common Prayer a necessity in a church. But it was not Common Prayer that was to be found here. The priest was making his sacrifice at the altar; the solitary kneeling worshippers were having their private intercourse with God, as it were, under the shadow of the greater rite. While Francesca crossed herself and muttered her prayer under her breath, Kate, scarcely capable of that, covered her eyes with her hand, and pondered and wondered. Poor little church, visited by no admiring stranger; poor unknown people, snatching a moment from their work,

market-people, sellers of chestnuts from the streets, servants, the lowliest of the low ; but morning after morning their feeble candles twinkled into the dark, and they knelt upon the damp stones in the unseen corners. How strange it was ! Not like English ideas—not like the virtuous ladies who patronised the daily service at Shanklin. Kate's heart felt a great yearning towards those badly-dressed poor folks, some of whom smelled of garlic. She cried a little silently, the tears dropping one by one, like the last of a Summer shower, from behind the shelter of her hand. And when Francesca had ended her prayers, and Kate, startled from her thinking, took her hand from her eyes, the little grey church was all full of the splendour of the morning, the candles put to flight, the priest's muttering over.

“If my young lady will come this way,” whispered Francesca, “she will be able to kiss the shrine of the famous Madonna—she who stopped the cholera in the village, where my blessed arnt Agnese, of the Reparazione, was so much beloved.”

“I would rather kiss you, Francesca,” cried Kate, in a little transport, audible, so that some praying people raised their heads to look at her, “for you are a good woman.”

She spoke in English; and the people at their prayers looked down again, and took no more notice. It was nothing wonderful for an English visitor to talk loud in a church.

It was bright daylight when they came out, and everything was gay. The sun already shone dazzling on all the towers and heights, for it was no longer early; it was half-past eight o'clock, and already the forenoon had begun in that early Italian world. As they returned to the Lung-Arno the river was sparkling in the light, and the passengers moving quickly, half because of the cold, and half because the sun was so warm and exhilarating.

“My aunt and Ombra will only be getting up,” said Kate with a little laugh of superiority; when suddenly she felt herself clutched by Francesca, and looking round suddenly stopped short also in the uttermost amaze. In front of

her, walking along the bright street, were the two whom she had just named—her aunt and Ombra—and not alone. The two young men were walking with them—one with each lady. Ombra was clinging to the arm of the one by her side ; and they all kept close together, with a half guilty, half clandestine air. The sight of them filled Kate with so much consternation as well as wonder, that these particulars recurred to her afterwards, as do the details of an accident to those who have been too painfully excited to observe them at the moment of their occurrence.

Francesca clutched her close and held her back as the group went on. They passed, almost brushing by the two spectators, yet in their haste perceiving nothing. But Kate had no inclination to rush forward and join herself to the party, as the old woman feared. After a moment's interval the two resumed their walk, slowly, in speechless wonder. What did it mean? Perhaps Francesca guessed more truly than Kate did ; but even she was not in the secret. Be-

fore, however, they reached the door, Kate had recovered herself. She quickened her steps, though Francesca held her back.

“They must know that we have seen them,” she said over and over to herself, with a parched throat.

And when the door was reached, the two parties met. It was Ombra who made the discovery first. She had turned round upon her companion to say some word of parting; her face was pale, but full of emotion; she was like one of the attendant saints at a martyrdom, so pale was she, and with a strange look of trance and rapture. But when her eye caught Kate behind, Ombra was strangely moved. She gave a little cry, and without another word ran into the house and up the stairs. Mrs. Anderson turned suddenly round when Ombra disappeared. She stood before the door of the house, and faced the newcomers.

“What, Kate!” she said, half frightened, half relieved, “is it you? What has brought you out so early—and with Francesca, too?”

“ You too are out early, aunt.”

“ That is true ; but it is not an answer,” said Mrs. Anderson, with a flush that rose over all her face.

And the two young men stood irresolute, as if they did not know whether to go or stay. Bertie Eldridge, it seemed to Kate, wore his usual indifferent look. He was always *blasé* and languid, and did not give himself much trouble about anything ; but Bertie Hardwick was much agitated. He turned white, and he turned red, and he gave Kate looks which she could not understand. It seemed to her as if he were always trying to apologise and explain with his eyes ; and what right had Bertie Hardwick to think that she wanted anything explained, or cared what he did ? She was angry, she did not quite know why—angry and wounded—hurt as if some one had struck her, and she did not care to stop and ask or answer questions. She followed Mrs. Anderson upstairs, listening doubtfully to Francesca’s voluble explanation—how Mademoiselle had been disturbed by some



sounds in the house, "possibly my lady herself, though I was far from thinking so when I left," said Francesca pointedly; and how Mees Katta had insisted upon going to mass with her—

Mrs. Anderson shook her head, but turned round to Kate at the door with a softened look, which had something in it akin to Bertie's. She kissed Kate, though the girl half averted her face.

"I do not blame you, my dear, but your uncle might not like it. You must not go again," she said, thus gently placing the inferior matter in the first place.

And they went in, to find the fire in the ante-room burning all alone, as when Kate had left, and the calm little house looking in its best order, as if nothing had ever happened there.

## CHAPTER VII.

THAT was a curious day—a day full of strange excitement and suppressed feeling—suppressed on all sides, yet betraying itself in some inexplicable way. Mrs. Anderson made no explanation whatever of her early expedition—at least, to Kate; she did not even refer to it. She gave her a little lecture at breakfast, while they sat alone together—for Ombra did not appear—about the inexpediency of going with Francesca to church. “I know that you did not mean anything, my darling,” she said tenderly; “but it is very touching to see the poor people at their prayers, and I have known a girl to be led away so, and to desert her own church. Such an idea must never be entertained for you; you are not a private individual,

Kate—you are a woman with a great stake in the country, an example to many——”

“Oh! I am so tired of hearing that I have a stake in the country!” cried Kate, who at that moment, to tell the truth, was sick of everything, and loathed her life heartily, and everything she heard and saw.

“But that is wrong,” said Mrs. Anderson. “You must not be tired of such an honour and privilege. You must be aware, Kate, that an ordinary girl of your years would not be considered and studied as you have been. Had you been only my dear sister’s child, and not the mistress of Langton-Courtenay, even I should have treated you differently; though, for your own good,” Mrs. Anderson added, “I have tried as much as possible to forget your position, and look upon you as my younger child.”

Kate’s heart was full—full of a yearning for the old undoubting love, and yet a sense that it had been withdrawn from her by no fault of hers, which made it impossible for her to make overtures of tenderness, or even to accept them.

She said, "I like that best;" but she said it low, with her eyes fixed upon her plate, and her voice choking. And perhaps her aunt did not hear. Mrs. Anderson had deliberately mounted upon her high horse. She had invoked, as it were, the assistance of her chief weakness, and was making use of it freely. She said a good deal more about Kate's position—about the necessity of being faithful to one's church, not only as a religious, but a public duty; and thus kept up the discussion till breakfast was fairly over. Then, as usual, Kate was left alone. Francesca had a private interview after in her mistress's room, but what was said to her was never known to anyone. She left it looking as if tears still lay very near her eyes, but not a word did she repeat of any explanation given to her—and, indeed, avoided Kate, so that the girl was left utterly alone in the very heart of that small, and once so tender, household.

And thus life went on strangely, in a mist of suppressed excitement, for some days. How her

aunt and cousin spent that time Kate could not tell. She saw little of them, and scarcely cared to note what visits they received, or what happened. In the seclusion of her own room she heard footsteps coming and going, and unusual sounds, but took no notice; and, from that strange morning encounter, saw no more of the Berties, until they made their appearance suddenly one day in the forenoon, when Mr. Courtenay was there; when they announced their immediate departure, and took their leave at one and the same moment. The parting was a strange one; they all shook hands stiffly with each other, as if they had been mere acquaintances. They said not a word of meeting again; and the young men were both agitated, looking pale and strange. When they left at last, Mr. Courtenay, in his airy way, remarked that he did not think Florence had agreed with them. "They look as if they were both going to have the fever," he said; "though, by-the-by, it is in Rome people have the fever, not in Florence."

“I suppose they are sorry to leave,” said Mrs. Anderson steadily; and then the subject dropped.

It seemed to Kate as if the world went round and round, and then suddenly settled back into its place. And by this time all was over—everything had stopped short. There was no more shopping, nor even packing. Francesca was equal to everything that remained to be done; and the moment of their own departure drew very near.

Ombra drew down her veil as they were carried away out of sight of Florence on the gentle bit of railway which then existed, going to the north. And Mrs. Anderson looked back upon the town with her hands clasped tight together in her lap, and tears in her eyes. Kate noted both details, but even in her own mind drew no deductions from them. She herself was confused in her head as well as in her heart, bewildered, uncertain, walking like some one in a dream. The last person she saw in the railway-station was Antonio Buoncompagni, with a bunch of violets

in his coat. He walked as far as he could go when the slow little train got itself into motion, and took off his hat, with a little gesture which went to Kate's heart. Poor Antonio!—had she perhaps been unkind to him, after all? There was something sad, and yet not painful—something almost comforting in the thought.

And so they were really on their way again, and Florence was over like yesterday when it is past, and like a tale that is told! How strange to think so! A place never perhaps to be entered again—never, certainly, with the same feelings as now. Ombra's veil was down, and it was thick, and concealed her, and tears stood in Mrs. Anderson's eyes. They had their own thoughts, too, though Kate had no clue to them. No clue! Probably these thoughts dwelt upon things absolutely unknown to her—probably they too were saying to themselves, "How strange to leave Florence in the past—to be done with it!" But had they left it in the past?

As for Mr. Courtenay, he read his paper,

which he had just received from England. There was a debate in it about some object which interested him, and the *Times* was full of abuse of some of his friends. The old man chuckled a little over this, as he sat on the comfortable side, with his back towards the engine, and his rug tucked over his knees. He did not so much as give Florence a glance as they glided away. What was Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba? Nothing had happened to him there. Nothing happened to him anywhere—though his ward gave him a good deal of trouble. As for this journey of his, it was a bore, but still it had been successful, which was something, and he made himself extremely comfortable, and read over, as they rolled leisurely along, every word of the *Times*.

And thus they travelled home.



## CHAPTER VIII.

IT is a curious sensation to return, after a long interval, to the home of one's youth, especially if one has had very great ideas of that home, and thought it magnificent. Even a short absence changes most curiously this first conception of grandeur. When Kate ran into Langton-Courtenay, on her return, rushing through the row of new servants, who bowed and curtsayed in the hall, her sense of mortification and disappointment was intense. Everything had shrunken somehow; the rooms were smaller, the ceilings lower, the whole place diminished. Were these the rooms which she had compared in her mind with the suite in which the English ambassadress gave her ball? Kate stood aghast, blushing up to the roots of her

hair, and felt so mortified that she did not remember to do the honours to her aunt and cousin. When she recollected, she went back to where they had placed themselves in the great old hall, round the great fireplace. There was a comfortable old-fashioned settle by it, and on this Mrs. Anderson had seated herself, to warm her frozen fingers, and give Kate time to recover herself.

“I have not the least doubt we shall find everything very comfortable,” she said to the new housekeeper, who stood before her, curtsying in her rustling silk gown, and wondering already whether she was to have three mistresses, or which was to be the “lady of the house.” Mrs. Spigot felt instinctively that the place was not likely to suit her, when Kate ran against the new housemaid, and made the new butler (Mr. Spigot) fall back out of her way. This was not a dignified beginning for a young lady coming home; and if the aunt was to be mistress, it was evident that the situation would not be what the housekeeper thought.

“My niece is a little excited by coming home,”

said Mrs. Anderson. "To-morrow Miss Courtenay will be rested, and able to notice you all." And she nodded to the servants, and waved her hand, dismissing them. If a feeling passed through Mrs. Anderson's mind, as she did so, that this was truly the position that she ought to have filled, and that Kate, a chit of nineteen, was not half so well endowed for it by nature as she herself would have been, who can blame her? She gave a sigh at this thought, and then smiled graciously as the servants went away, and felt that to have such a house, and so many servants under her control, even provisionally, would be pleasant. The housemaids thought her a very affable lady; but the upper servants were not so enthusiastic. Mrs. Anderson had mounted upon her very highest horse. She had put away all the vagaries of Italian life, and settled down into the very blandest of British matrons. She talked again about proper feeling, and a regard for the opinions of society. She had resumed all the caressing and instructive ways which, at the very

beginning of their intercourse, she had adopted with Kate. And all these sentiments and habits came back so readily that there were moments in which she asked herself, "Had she ever been in Italy at all?" But yes, alas, yes! Never, if she lived a thousand years, could she forget the three months just past.

Kate came back with some confusion to the hall, to find Ombra kneeling on the great white sheepskin mat before the fire; while Mrs. Anderson sat benignly on the settle, throwing off her shawls, and loosing her bonnet. Ombra's veil was thrown quite back; the ruddy glow threw a pink reflection on her face, and her eyes seemed to have thawed in the cheery, warm radiance. They were bright, and there seemed to be a little moisture in them. She held out her hand to her cousin, and drew her down beside her.

"This is the warmest place," said Ombra; "and your hands are like ice, Kate. But how warm it feels to be at home in England; and I like your house—it looks as if it had never been anything but a home."

“It is delightful!—it is much larger and handsomer than I supposed,” said Mrs. Anderson, from the settle. “With such a place to come home to, dear, I think you may be pardoned a little sensation of pride.”

“Oh! do you think so?” said Kate, gratified. “I am so very glad you like it. It seems to me so insignificant, after all we have seen. I used to think it was the biggest, the finest, the most delightful house in the world; but if you only knew how the roofs have come down, and the rooms have shrunk!—I feel as if I could both laugh and cry.”

“That is quite natural—quite natural. Kate, I have sent the servants away. I thought you would be better able to see them to-morrow,” said Mrs. Anderson. “But when you have warmed yourself, I think we may ask for Mrs. Spigot again, and go over the rooms, and see which we are to live in. It will not be necessary to open the whole house for us three, especially in Winter. Besides our bedrooms and the dining-room, I think a snug little room

that we can make ourselves comfortable in—that will be warm, and not too large—”

It pleased Mrs. Anderson to sit there, in the warmth and stillness, and make all these suggestions. The big house gave her a sensible pleasure. It was delicious to think that a small room might be chosen for comfort, while there were miles of larger ones all at her orders. She smiled and beamed upon the two girls on the hearth. And indeed it was a pretty picture—Kate began to glow and brighten, with her hat off, and her bright hair shining in the firelight. Her travelling-dress was trimmed round the throat with white fur, like a bird's plumage, which caught a pink tinge too from the firelight, and seemed to caress her, nestling against her pretty cheek. The journey, and the arrival, and all the excitement had driven away, for the moment at least, all mists and clouds, and there was a pretty conflict in her face—half pleasure to be at home, half whimsical discontent with home. Ombra, with her veil quite back, and her face cleared also of some other mystical

veil, had her hand on Kate's shoulder, and was looking at her kindly, almost tenderly; and one of Ombra's cheeks was getting more than pink—it was crimson in the genial glow; she held up her hand to shield it, which looked transparent against the firelight. Mrs. Anderson looked very complacently, very fondly at both. Now that everything was over, she said to herself, and they had got *home*, surely at least a little interval of calm might come. She shut her eyes and her ears, and refused to look forward, refused to think of the seeds sown, and the results that must come from them. She had been carried away to permit and even sanction many things that her conscience disapproved; but perhaps the Fates would exact no vengeance this time—perhaps all would go well. She looked at Ombra, and it seemed to her that her child, after so many agitations, looked happy—yes, really happy—not with feverish joy or excitement, but with a genial quiet, that belonged to home. Oh! if it might be so?—and why might it not be so?—at least for a time.

Mr. Courtenay had stayed in town, and the

three ladies were alone in the house. They settled down in a few days, into ease and comfort which, after their travelling, was very sweet. Things were different altogether from what they had been in the Shanklin cottage; and though Mrs. Anderson was in the place of Kate's guardian, yet Kate was no longer a child, to be managed for and ruled in an arbitrary way. It was now that the elder lady showed her wisdom. It was a sensible pleasure to her to govern the great house; here at last she seemed to have scope for her powers; but yet, though she ruled, she did so from the background; with heroic self-denial she kept Kate in the position she was so soon to occupy by right, trained her for it, guided her first steps, and taught her what to do.

“When you are of age, this is how you must manage,” she would say.

“But when I am of age, why should not you manage for me?” Kate replied; and her aunt made no answer.

They had come together again, and the old love had asserted itself once more. The



mysteries unexplained had been buried by common consent. Kate lulled her own curiosity to rest, and when various questions came to the very tip of her tongue, she bit and stilled that unruly member, and made a not unsuccessful effort to restrain herself. But it was a hard discipline, and strained her strength. Sometimes, when she saw the continual letters which her aunt and cousin were always receiving, curiosity would give her a renewed pinch. But generally she kept herself down, and pretended not to see the correspondence, which was so much larger than it ever used to be. She was so virtuous even as not to look at the addresses of the letters. What good would it do her to know who wrote them? Of course some must be from the Berties, one, or both—what did it matter? The Berties were nothing to Kate; and, whatever the connection might be, Kate had evidently nothing to do with it, for it had never been told her. With this reasoning she kept herself down, though she was always sore and disposed to be cross about the hour of breakfast. Mrs. Anderson, for her part, would never see the crossness.

She petted Kate, and smoothed her down, and read out, with anxious conciliation, scraps from Lady Barker's letters, and others of a similarly indifferent character ; while, in the meantime, the other letters, ones which were not indifferent nor apt for quotation, were read by Ombra. The moment was always a disagreeable one for Kate—but she bore it, and made no sign.

But to live side by side with a secret has a very curious effect upon the mind ; it sharpens some faculties and deadens others in the strangest way. Kate had now a great many things to think of, and much to do ; people came to call, hearing she had come home ; and she made more acquaintances in a fortnight than she had done before in a year. And yet, notwithstanding this, I think it was only a fortnight that the reign of peace and domestic happiness lasted. During that time, she made the most strenuous effort a girl could make to put out of her mind the recollection that there was something in the lives of her companions that had been concealed from her. Sometimes, indeed, when she sat by

her cousin's side, there would suddenly rise up before her a glimpse of that group at the doorway on the Lung-Arno, and the scared look with which Ombra had rushed away; or some one of the many evening scenes when she was left out, and the other four, clustered about the table, would glide across her eyes like a ghost. Why was she left out? What difference would it have made to them, if they had made her one of themselves—was she likely to have betrayed their secret? And then Bertie Hardwick's troubled face would come before her, and his looks, half-apologetic, half-explanatory; looks which, now she thought of them, seemed to have been so very frequent. Why was he always looking at her, as if he wanted to explain; as if he were disturbed and ill at ease; as if he felt her to be wronged? Though, of course, she was not in the least wronged, Kate said to herself, proudly; for what was it to her if all the Berties in the world had been at Ombra's feet?—Kate did not want them! Of that, at least, she was perfectly sure.

Mrs. Anderson's room was a large one; opening into that of Ombra on the one side, and into an ante-room, which they could sit in, or dress in, or read and write in, for it was furnished for all uses. It was a *petit appartement*, charmingly shut in and cosy, one of the best set of rooms in the house, which Kate had specially chosen for her aunt. Here the mother and daughter met one night after a very tranquil day, over the fire in the central room. It was a bright fire, and the cosy chairs that stood before it were luxurious, and the warm fire-light flickered through the large room, upon the ruddy damask of the curtains, and the long mirror, and all the pretty furnishings. Ombra came in from her own room in her dressing-gown with her dusky hair over her shoulders. Dusky were her looks altogether, like evening in a Winter's twilight. Her dressing-gown was of a faint grey-blue—not a pretty colour in itself, but it suited Ombra; and her long hair fell over it almost to her waist. She came in noiselessly to her mother's room, and it was her voice

which first betrayed her presence there. Mrs. Anderson had been sitting thinking, with a very serious face; she started at her child's voice.

“I have been trying my very best to bear it—I think I have done my very best; I have smiled, and kept my temper, and tried to look as if I were not ready to die of misery. Oh! mamma, mamma, can this go on for ever? What am I to do?”

“Oh! Ombra, for God's sake have patience!” cried her mother—“nothing new has happened to-day?”

“Nothing new!—is it nothing new to have those girls here from the Rectory, jabbering about their brother? and to know that he is coming—next week, they say? We shall be obliged to meet—and how are we to meet? when I think how I took leave of him last! My life is odious to me!” cried the girl, sinking down in a chair, and covering her face with her hands. “I don't know how to hold up my head and look those people in the face; and it is worse when no one comes. To live for a whole long, endless day

without seeing a strange face, with Kate's eyes going through and through me——”

“Don't make things worse than they are,” said her mother. “Oh! Ombra, have a little patience! Kate suspects nothing.”

“Suspects!” cried Ombra—“she *knows* there is something—not what it is, but that there is something. Do you think I don't see her looks in the morning, when the letters come? Poor Kate! she will not look at them; she is full of honour—but to say she does not suspect!”

“I don't know what to say to satisfy you, Ombra,” said her mother. “Did not I beg you on my knees to take her into your confidence? It would have made everything so much easier, and her so much happier.”

“Oh! mamma, my life is hard enough of itself—don't make it harder and harder!” cried Ombra; and then she laid down her head upon her mother's shoulder and wept. Poor Mrs. Anderson bore it all heroically; she kissed and soothed her child, and persuaded her that it could not last long—that Bertie would bring

good news—that everything would be explained and atoned for in the end. “There can be no permanent harm, dear—no permanent harm,” she repeated, “and everybody will be sorry and forgive.” And so, by degrees, Ombra was pacified, and put to bed, and forgot her troubles.

This was the kind of scene which took place night after night in the tranquil house, where all the three ladies seemed so quietly happy. Kate heard no echo of it through the thick walls and curtains, yet not without troubles of her own was the heiress. The intimation of Bertie’s coming disturbed her too. She thought she had got quite composed about the whole matter, willing to wait until the secret should be disclosed, and the connection between him and her cousin, whatever it was, made known. But to have him here again, with his wistful looks, and the whole mystery to be resumed, as if there had been no interruption of it—this was more than Kate felt she could bear.

## CHAPTER IX.

THE news which had made so much commotion in the Hall came from the Rectory in a very simple way. Edith and Minnie had come up to call. Their mother rather wished them to do so frequently. She urged upon them that it might demand a little sacrifice of personal feeling, yet that personal feeling was always a thing that ought to be sacrificed—it was a good moral exercise, irrespective of everything else; and Miss Courtenay was older, and, no doubt, more sensible than when she went away—not likely to shock them as she did then—and that it would be good for her to see a good deal of them, and pleasant for people to know that they went a good deal to the Hall. All this mass of reasoning was scarcely required,



yet Edith and Minnie, on the whole, were glad to know that it was their duty to visit Kate. They both felt deeply that a thing which you do as a duty takes a higher rank than a thing you do as a pleasure ; and their visits might have taken that profane character, had not all this been impressed upon them in time.

“ Oh ! Miss Courtenay, we have such news,” said Edith ; and Minnie added, in a parenthesis (“ We are so happy ! ”). “ Dear Bertie is coming home for a few days. He wrote that he was so busy, he could not possibly come ; but papa insisted ” (“ I am so glad papa insisted,” from Minnie, who was the accompaniment), “ and so he is coming—just for two days. He is going to bring us the things he bought for us at Florence.” (“ Oh ! I do so want to see them ! ”) “ You saw a great deal of him at Florence, did you not ? ”

“ Yes, we saw him—a great many times,” said Kate, noticing, under her eyelids, how Ombra suddenly caught her breath.

“ He used to mention you in his letters at first

—only at first. I suppose you made too many friends to see much of each other.” (“Bertie is such a fellow for society.”) “He is reading up now for the bar. Perhaps you don’t know that he has given up the church?”

“I think I heard him say so,” answered Kate.

And then there was a little pause. The Hardwick girls thought their great news was received very coldly, and were indignant at the want of interest shown in “our Bertie!” After awhile Edith explained, with some dignity:

“Of course my brother is very important to us” (“He is just the very nicest boy that ever was!” from Minnie), “though we can’t expect others to take the same interest——”

Kate had looked up by instinct, and she caught Ombra’s eyes, which were opened in a curious little stare, with an elevation of the eyebrows which spoke volumes. Not the same interest! Kate’s heart grew a little sick, she could not tell why, and she turned away, making some conventional answer—she did not

know what. A pause again, and then Mrs. Anderson asked, without looking up from her work,

“Is Mr. Hardwick coming to the Rectory alone?”

“Oh, yes! At least, we think so,” said the two girls in one.

“I ask because he and his cousin were so inseparable,” said Mrs. Anderson smiling. “We used to say that when one was visible the other could not be far off.”

“Oh! you mean Bertie Eldridge,” said Edith. “No, I am sure he is not coming. Papa does not like our Bertie to be so much with him as he has been. We do not think Bertie Eldridge a nice companion for him,” said the serious young woman, who rather looked down upon the boys, and echoed her parents’ sentiments, without any sense of inappropriateness. “No, we don’t at all like them to be so much together,” said Minnie. Again Kate turned round instinctively. This time Ombra was smiling, al-

most laughing, with quite a gay light in her eyes.

“Of course that is a subject beyond me,” said Mrs. Anderson. “They seemed much attached to each other.” And then the matter dropped, and the girls entered upon parish news, which left them full scope for prattle. Edith was engaged to be married to a neighbouring clergyman, and accordingly she was more than ever clerical and parochial in all her ways of thinking; while Minnie looked forward with a flutter, half of fear and half of excitement, to becoming the eldest Miss Hardwick, and having to manage the Sunday School, and decorate the church by herself.

“What shall I do when Edith is married?” was the burden of all the talk she ventured upon alone. “Mamma is so much occupied, she can’t give very much assistance,” she said. “Oh! dear Miss Courtenay, if you would come and help me sometimes, when Edith goes away.”

“I will do anything I can,” said Kate, shortly. And the two girls withdrew at last, somewhat chilled by the want of sympathy. Had they

but known what excitement, what commotion, their simple news carried into that still volcano of a house!

He was to come in a week. Kate schooled herself to be very strong, and think nothing of it, but her heart grew sick when she thought of the Florence scenes all over again—perhaps worse, for at Florence at least there were two. And to Ombra the day passed with feverish haste, and all her pretences at tranquillity and good-humour began to fail in the rising tide of excitement.

“I shall be better again when he has gone away,” she said to her mother. “But, oh! how can I—how can I take it quietly? Could you, if you were in my position? Think of all the misery and uncertainty. And he must be coming for a purpose. He would not come unless he had something to say.”

“Oh! Ombra, if there was anything, why should it not be said in a letter?” cried her mother. “You have letters often enough. I wish you would just put them in your pocket, and

not read them at the breakfast-table. You keep me in terror lest Kate should see the handwriting or something. After all our precautions——”

“Can you really suppose that Kate is so ignorant?” said Ombra. “Do you think she does not know well enough whom my letters are from?”

“Then, for God’s sake, if you think so, let me tell her, and be done with this horrible secret,” cried her mother. “It kills me to keep up this concealment; and if you think she knows, why, why should it go on?”

“You are so impetuous, mamma!” said Ombra with a smile. “There is a great difference between her guessing, and direct information procured from ourselves. And how can we tell what she might do? She would interfere; it is her nature. You could not trust anything so serious to such a child.”

“Kate is not a child now,” said Mrs. Anderson. “And oh! Ombra, if you will consider how ungrateful, how untrue, how unkind it is——”

“Stop, mamma!” cried Ombra, with a flush of angry colour. “That is enough—that is a great deal too much—ungrateful! Are we expected to be grateful to Kate? You will tell me next to look up to her, to reverence her——”

“Ombra, you have always been hard upon Kate.”

“It is not my fault,” cried Ombra, suddenly giving way to a little burst of weeping. “If you consider how different her position is—— All this wretched complication—everything that has happened lately—would have been unnecessary if I had had the same prospects as Kate. Everything would have gone on easily then. There would have been no need for concealment—no occasion for deceit.”

“That is not Kate’s fault,” said Mrs. Anderson, who was at her wit’s end.

“Oh! mother, mother, don’t worry me out of my senses. Did I say it was Kate’s fault! It is no one’s fault. But all we poor miserables must suffer as if it were. And there is no help

for it; and it is so hard, so hard to bear!"

"Ombra, I told you to count the cost," said Mrs. Anderson. "I told you it would be no easy business. You thought you had strength of mind for the struggle then."

"And it turns out that I have no strength of mind," cried Ombra, almost wildly. And then she started up and went to her own room again, where her mother could hear her sighing and moaning till she fell asleep.

These night scenes took away from Mrs. Anderson's enjoyment of the great mansion and the many servants, and that luxurious room which Kate's affection had selected for her aunt. She sat over the fire when she was left alone, and would wonder and ask herself what would come of it, what could ever come of it, and whether it was possible that she should ever be happy again. She looked back with a longing which she could not subdue upon the humble days at Shanklin, when they were all so happy. The little tiny cottage, the small rooms, all rose up before her. The drawing-room itself was



not half so large as Mrs. Anderson's bedroom at Langton-Courtenay. But what happy days these had been! She was not an old woman, though she was Ombra's mother. It was not as if life was nearly over for her, as if she could look forward to a speedy end of all her troubles. And she knew better than Ombra that somehow or other the world always exacts punishment, whether immediately or at an after period, from those who transgress its regulations. She said to herself mournfully that things do not come right in life as they do in story-books. Her daughter had taken a weak and foolish step, and she too had shared in the folly by consenting to it. She had done so, she could not explain to herself why, in a moment of excitement. And though Ombra was capable of hoping that some wonderful chain of accidents might occur to solve every difficulty, Mrs. Anderson was not young enough, or inexperienced enough, to think anything of the kind possible. Accidents happen, she was aware, when you do not want them, not when you do. When a

catastrophe is foreseen and calculated upon, it never happens. In such a case, the most rotten vessel that ever sunk in a storm will weather a cyclone. Fate would not interfere to help ; and when Mrs. Anderson considered how slowly and steadily the ordinary course of nature works, and how little it is likely to suit itself to any pressure of human necessity, her heart grew sick within her. She had a higher opinion of her niece than Ombra had, and she knew that Kate would have been a tower of strength and protection to them, besides all the embarrassment that would have been avoided, and all the pain and shame of deceit. But what could she do ? The young people were stronger than she, and had overridden all her remonstrances ; and now all that could be done was to carry on as steadily as possible—to conceal the secret—to hope that something might happen, unlikely though she knew that was.

Thus was this gentle household distracted and torn asunder ; for there is no such painful thing in the world to carry about with one as a

secret ;—it will thrust itself to the surface, notwithstanding the most elaborate attempts to heap trifles and the common routine of life over it. It is like a living thing, and moves, or breathes, or cries out at the wrong moment, disclosing itself under the most elaborate covers ; and finally, howsoever people may deceive themselves, it is never really hidden. While we are throwing the embroidered veil over it, and flattering ourselves that it is buried in concealment dark as night, our friends all the time are watching it throb under the veil, and wondering with a smile or a sigh, according to their dispositions, how we can be so foolish as to believe that it is hidden from them. The best we can do for our secret is to confuse the reality of it, most often making it look a great deal worse than it is. And this was what Om-bra and her mother were doing, while poor Kate looked on wistful, seeing all their transparent manœuvres ; and a choking, painful sense of concealment was in the air—a feeling that any moment some volcano might burst forth.

## CHAPTER X.

IT was a week later before Bertie came. He was brought to call by his mother and sisters in great delight and pomp; and then there ensued the strangest scene, of which only half the company had the least comprehension. The room which Kate had chosen as their sitting-room was an oblong room, with another smaller one opening from it. This small room was almost opposite the fireplace in the larger one, and made a draught which some people—indeed, most people—objected to; but as the broad open doorway was amply curtained, and a great deal of sun came in along with the imaginary draught, the brightness of the place won the day against all objections. The little room was thus preserved from the air of secrecy

and retirement common to such rooms. No one could retire to flirt there ; no one could listen unseen to conversations not intended for them. The piano was placed in it, and the writing-table, under the broad recessed window, which filled the whole end of it. It was light as a lantern, swept by the daylight from side to side, and the two fires kept it as warm as it was bright. When Mrs. Hardwick sailed in, bearing under her convoy her two blooming girls close behind her, and the tall brother towering over their heads, a more proud or happy woman could not be.

“I have brought my Bertie to see you,” she said, all the seriousness of that “sense of duty” which weighed upon her ordinary demeanour melting for the moment in her motherly delight and pride. “He was so modest, we could scarcely persuade him to come. He thought you might think he was presuming on your acquaintance abroad, and taking as much liberty as if he had been an intimate——”

“I think Mr. Hardwick might very well take

as much liberty as that," cried Kate, moved, in spite of herself, to resentment with this obstinate make-believe. Her aunt looked up at her with such pain in her eyes as is sometimes seen in the eyes of animals, who can make us no other protest.

"We are very glad to see Mr. Bertie again," said Mrs. Anderson, holding out her hand to him with a smile. "He is a Shanklin acquaintance, too. We are old friends."

And he shook hands with all of them solemnly, his face turning all manner of colours, and his eyes fixed on the ground. Ombra was the last to approach, and as she gave him her hand, she did not say a word; neither did she lift her eyes to look at him. They stood by each other for a second, hand in hand, with eyes cast down, and a flush of misery upon both their faces. Was it merely misery? It could not but be painful, meeting thus, they who had parted so differently; but Kate, who could not remove her eyes from them, wondered, out of the midst of the sombre cloud which seemed to have come

in with Bertie, and to have wrapped her round—wondered what other feeling might be in their minds? Was it not a happiness to stand together even now, and here?—to be in the same room?—to touch each other's hands? Even amid all this pain of suppression and concealment was there not something more in it? She felt as if fascinated, unable to withdraw her eyes from them; but they remained together only for a moment; and Bertie's sisters, who did not think Miss Anderson of much importance, did not even notice the meeting. Bertie himself withdrew to Mrs. Anderson's side, and began to talk to her and to his mother. The girls, disappointed (for naturally they would have preferred that he should make himself agreeable to the heiress), sat down by Kate. Ombra dropped noiselessly on a chair close to the doorway between the two rooms; and after a few minutes she said to her cousin, "Will you pardon me if I finish my letter for the post?" and went into the inner room, and sat down at the writing-table.

“She writes a great deal, doesn’t she?” said Edith Hardwick. “Is she literary, Miss Courtenay? I asked Bertie, but he could not tell me. I thought she would not mind doing something perhaps for the ‘Parish Magazine.’”

“Edith does most of it herself,” said Minnie. (“Oh! Minnie, for shame!”) “And, do you know, Miss Courtenay, she had something in the last ‘Monthly Packet.’” (“Please, don’t, Minnie, please! What do you suppose Miss Courtenay cares?”) “I shall bring it up to show you next time I come.”

“Indeed, you shall do nothing of the kind!” said Edith, blushing. And Kate made a pretty little civil speech, which would have been quite real and genuine, had not her mind been so occupied with other things; but with the drama actually before her eyes, how could she think of stories in the “Monthly Packet?” Her eyes went from one to the other as they sat with the whole breadth of the room between them; and this absorption made her look much more superior and lofty than she was in reality, or had



any thought of being. Yes, she said to herself, it was best so—they could not possibly talk to each other as strangers. It was best that they should thus get out of sight of each other almost—avoid any intercourse. But how strange it was!

“Don’t you think it is odd that Bertie, knowing the world as he does, should be so shy?” said Edith. (“Oh! he is so shy!” cried Minnie.) “He made as many excuses as a frightened little girl. ‘They won’t want to see *me*,’ he said. ‘Miss Courtenay will know it is not rudeness on my part if I don’t call. Why should I go and bother them?’ We *dragged* him here!”

“We dragged him by the hair of his head,” said Minnie, who, was the wit of the family.

And Kate did her best to laugh.

“I did not think he had been so shy,” she said. “He wanted, I suppose, to have you all to himself, and not to lose his time making visits. How long is he to stay?”

Edith and Minnie looked at each other. The question had already been discussed between their mother and themselves whether Bertie

would be asked to dinner, or whether, indeed, they might not all be asked, with the addition of Edith's betrothed, who was visiting also at the Rectory. They all thought it would be a right thing for Kate to do; and, of course, as Mrs. Anderson was there, it would be so easy, and in every way so nice. They looked at each other, accordingly, with a little consciousness.

“He is to stay till Monday, I think,” said Edith; “or perhaps we might coax him to give us another day, if—” She was going to say if there was any reason, but that seemed a hint too plain.

“That is not a very long visit,” said Kate. And then, without a hint of a dinner-party, she plunged into the parish, that admirable ground of escape in all difficulties.

They had got into the very depths of charities, and coals, and saving-clubs, when Mrs. Hardwick rose.

“We are such a large party, we must not inflict ourselves upon you too long,” said Mrs. Hardwick. She, too, was a little disappointed

that there was not a word about a dinner. She thought Mrs. Anderson should have known what her duty was in the circumstances, and should have given her niece a hint; "but I hope we shall all meet again before my son goes away."

And then there was a second shaking of hands. When all was over, and the party were moving off, Kate turned to Bertie, who was last.

"You have not taken leave of Ombra," she said, looking full at him.

He coloured to his hair; he made her a confused bow, and hurried into the room where Ombra was. Kate, with a sternness which was very strange to her, watched the two figures against the light. Ombra did not move. She spoke to him apparently without even looking up from her letter. A dozen words or so—no more. Then there came a sudden cry from the other door, by which the mother and daughters were going out.

"Oh! we have forgotten Miss Anderson!" and the whole stream flowed back.

“Indeed, it is Ombra’s fault; but she was writing for the post,” exclaimed her mother, calling to her.

Ombra came forward to the doorway, very pale, even to her lips, but smiling, and shook hands three times, and repeated that it was her fault. And then the procession streamed away.

“That girl looks very unhealthy,” Mrs. Hardwick said, when they were walking down the avenue. “I shall try and find out from her mother if there is consumption in the family, and advise them to try the new remedy. Did you notice what a colour her lips were? She is very retiring, poor thing; and, I must say, never puts herself the least in the way.”

“Do you think she is pretty, Bertie?” said the sisters, together.

“Pretty? Oh! I can’t tell. I am no judge,” said Bertie. “Look here, mamma, I am going to see old Stokes, the keeper. He used to be a great friend of mine. If I don’t make up to you before you reach home, I’ll be back at least before it is dark.”

“Before it is dark!” said Mrs. Hardwick, in dismay. But Bertie was gone. “I suppose young men must have their way,” she said, looking after him. “But you must not think, girls, that people are any the happier for having their way. On the contrary, you who have been educated to submit, have a much better preparation for life. I hope dear Bertie will never meet with any serious disappointment,” she added, with a sigh.

“Oh! mamma, serious disappointment! when he has always succeeded in everything!” cried the girls, in their duet.

“For he could not bear it,” said Mrs. Hardwick, shaking her head. “It would be doubly, *doubly* hard upon him; for he has never been trained to bear it—never, I may say, since he left the nursery, and got out of my hands.”

At this time it was nearly three o'clock, a dull Winter afternoon, not severe, but dim and mournful. It was the greyness of frost, however, not of damp, which was in the air; and Kate, who was restless, announced her inten-

tion of taking a long walk. She was glad to escape from this heavy atmosphere of home; she said, somewhat bitterly, that it was best to leave them together to unbosom themselves, to tell each other all those secrets which were not to be confided to her; and to compare notes, no doubt, as to how he was looking, and how they were to find favourable opportunities of meeting again. Kate's heart was sore—she was irritated by the mystery which, after all, was so plain to her. She saw the secret thing moving underneath the cover—the only difficulty she had was to decide what kind of secret it was. What was the relationship between Bertie and Ombra? Were they only lovers?—were they something more?—and what had Bertie Eldridge to do with it? Kate, indignant, would not permit herself to think; but the questions came surging up in her mind against her will. She had a little basket in her hand. She was carrying some grapes and wine to old Stokes, the disabled keeper, who was dying, and whom everybody made much of. On her way to his cottage, she

had to pass that little nook where the brook was, and where she had first seen Bertie Hardwick. It was the first time she had seen it since her return, and she paused, half in anger and bitterness, half with a softening swell of recollection. How rich, and sweet, and warm, and delicious it had been that Summer evening, with the blossom still on the hawthorns, and the grass like velvet, and the soft little waterfall tinkling. How everything was changed!—the bushes all black with frost, the trees bare of their foliage, with here and there a ragged red leaf at the end of a bough, the brook tinkling with a sharp metallic sound. Everything else was frozen and still—all the insect life of Summer, all the movements and rustlings of grass and leaves and flowers. The flowers and the leaves were gone; the grass bound fast in an icy coat. "But not more different," Kate thought, "than were other matters—more important than the grass and flowers."

She was roused from her momentary reverie by the sound of a footstep ringing clear and

sharp along the frosty road; and before she could get out of the shelter of the little coppice which encircled that haunt of her childhood, Bertie Hardwick came suddenly up to her. The sight of her startled the young man—but in what way? A flush of delight rushed over his face—he brightened all over, as it seemed, eyes and mouth and every feature. He came forward to her with impetuous steps, and took her hand before she was aware.

“I was thinking of you,” he cried; “longing to meet you just here, not believing it possible—oh, Kate!—Miss Courtenay, I beg your pardon. I—I forget what I was going to say.”

He did not give up her hand, though; he stood and gazed at her with such pleasure in his eyes as could not be misconstrued. And then the most curious phenomenon came into being—a thing most wonderful, not to be explained. All the anger and the suspicion and the bitterness, suddenly, in a moment, fled out of Kate’s heart—they fled like evil spirits exorcised and put to flight by something better than they.



Kate was too honest to conceal what was in her mind. She did not draw away her hand; she looked at him full with her candid eyes.

“Mr. Bertie, I am very glad to have met you here. I can’t help remembering; and I should be glad—very glad to meet you anywhere; but——”

He dropped her hand; he put up both his own to his face, as if to cover its shame; and then, with a totally changed tone, and a voice from which all the gladness had gone, he said, slowly—

“I know; but I am not allowed to explain—I cannot explain. Oh! Kate, you know no harm of me, do you? You have never known or heard that I was without sense of honour? trust me, if you can! Nothing in it, not any one thing, is my fault.”

Kate started as if she had been struck, and everything that had wounded her came back in sevenfold strength. She could not keep even a tone of contempt out of her voice.

“I have heard,” she said, “that there was

honour among thieves : do *you* throw the blame upon Ombra—all the blame? I suppose it is the way men do. Good-bye, Mr. Hardwick!” And, before he could say a word, she was gone—flying past him, indignant, contemptuous, wounded to the core.

As she came back from the keeper’s Cottage, when the afternoon was duller than ever, and the sky seemed to be dropping over the tree-tops, Kate thought she saw, in one of the roads which crossed the avenue, the flutter of a lady’s shawl. The girl was curious in her excitement, and she paused behind a tree to watch. After a short time the fluttering shawl drew nearer. It was Ombra, clinging close to Bertie Hardwick’s arm—turning to him a pale face full of care and anxiety. They were discussing their dark concerns—their secrets. Kate rushed home without once stopping or drawing breath.

## CHAPTER XI.

THIS incident passed as all incidents do, and the blank of common life returned. How short those moments of action are in existence, and how long are the dull intervals—those intervals which count for nothing, and yet are life itself! Bertie Hardwick went away only after sundry unsuccessful efforts on the part of his family to unite the party from the Hall with that at the Rectory. Mrs. Hardwick would willingly, very willingly, have asked them to dinner, even after the disappointment of discovering that they did not mean to ask Bertie. She was stopped, however, by a very commonplace hindrance—where was she to find gentlemen enough on short notice to balance all those three ladies? Mr. Hardwick, Bertie, and Edith's

betrotthed made the tale correct to begin with—but three more gentlemen in a country parish on two days' notice! It was impossible. All that Mrs. Hardwick could do was to ask, deprecatingly, that the ladies would come to a family dinner, "*very* quiet," she said; "you must not suppose I mean a party." Mrs. Anderson, with her best and most smiling looks, accepted readily. "But Ombra is not very well," she said; "I fear I must ask you to excuse her. And dear Kate has such a bad cold—she caught it walking across the park the other evening to old Stokes the keeper's cottage."

"To old Stokes!" cried Mrs. Hardwick. "Why, my Bertie was there too." And she added, looking grave, after that burst of radiance, "The old man was a great favourite with everybody. We all go to see him."

"So I hear," said Mrs. Anderson, smiling; and next day she put on her best gown, poor soul! and went patiently down to the Rectory to dinner, and made a great many apologies for her girls. She did not enjoy it much, and she

had to explain that the first chill of England after Italy had been too much for Kate and Ombra. "We had lived in the Isle of Wight for some years before," she added, "so that this is almost their first experience of the severity of Winter. But a few days indoors I hope will make them all right."

Edith Hardwick could not believe her eyes when, next day, the day before Bertie left, she saw Miss Anderson walking in the park. "Do you think it possible it was not true?" she and her sister asked each other in consternation; but neither they, nor wiser persons than they, could have determined that question. Ombra was not well, nor was Kate. They were both disturbed in their youthful being almost beyond the limits of self-control. Mrs. Anderson had, in some respects, to bear both their burdens; but she said to herself, with a sigh, that her shoulders were used to it. She had borne the yoke in her youth, she had been trained to bear a great deal, and say very little about it. And so the emotion of the incident gradually died

away, growing fainter and larger in the stillness, and the monotony came back as of old!

But, oh! how pleasant the monotony of old would have been, how delightful, had there been nothing but the daily walks, the daily talks, the afternoon drives, the cheerful discussions, and cheerful visits, which had made their simple life at Shanklin so sweet. All that was over, another cycle of existence had come in.

I think another fortnight had elapsed since Bertie's visit, and everything had been very quiet—and the quiet had been very intolerable. Sometimes almost a semblance of confidential intercourse would be set up among them, and Ombra would lean upon Kate, and Kate's heart melt towards Ombra. This took place generally in the evening, when they sat together in the firelight, before the lamp was brought, and talked the kind of shadowy talk which belongs to that hour.

“Look at my aunt upon the wall!” Kate cried one evening, in momentary amusement. “How gigantic she is, and how she nods and beckons

at us!" Mrs. Anderson was chilly, and had placed her chair in front of the fire.

"She is no more a shadow than we all are," said Ombra. "When the light comes, that vast apparition will disappear, and she will be herself. Kate, don't you see the parable? We are all stolen out of ourselves, made into ghosts, till the light comes."

"I don't understand parables," said Kate.

"I wish you did this one," said Ombra, with a sigh, "for it is true." And then there was silence for a time, a silence which Kate broke by saying,

"There is the new moon. I must go and look at her."

"Not through the glass, dear—it is unlucky," said Mrs. Anderson; but Kate took no notice. She went into the inner room, and watched the new moon through the great window. A cold, belated, baby moon, looking as if it had lost its way somehow in that blue waste of sky. And the earth looked cold, chilled to the heart, as much as could be seen of it, the tree-tops

cowering together, the park frozen. She stood there in a reverie, and forgot about the time, and where she was. The bustle behind her of the lamp being brought in did not disturb Kate, and seeing her at the window, the servant who came with the lights discreetly forbore to disturb her, and left the curtains undrawn. But, from what followed, it was evident that nobody else observed Kate, and she was still deep in her musings, when she was startled, and brought to instant life, by a voice which seemed to ring through the room to her like a trumpet-note of defiance.

“Mother, this cannot go on!” Ombra cried out all at once. “If it lasts much longer I shall hate her. I shall want to kill her!”

“Ombra!”

“It is true, I shall want to kill her! Oh! not actually with my hands! One never knows what one could do till one is tempted. Still I think I would not touch her. But, God help us, mother, God help us! I hate her now!”

“God help you, indeed, my unhappy child,”



cried her mother. "Oh, Ombra, do you know you are breaking my heart?"

"My own was broken first," cried Ombra; and there was a ferocious and wild force in what she said, which thrilled through and through the listener, now just beginning to feel that she should not be here, but unable to stir in her great horror and astonishment. "My own was broken first. What does it matter? I thought I could brave everything; but to have him sent here for her sake—because she would be the most fit match for him!—to have her come again between him and me——"

"She never came between him and you—poor Kate!—she never thought of him. Has it not been proved that it was only a fancy? Oh! Ombra, how ungrateful, how unkind you are to her!"

"What must I be grateful for?" cried Ombra. "She has always been in my way, always! She came between you and me. She took half away from me of what was all mine. Would you hesitate, and doubt, and trouble, as you do, if it

were not for Kate? She has always been in my way! She has been my enemy, not my friend. If she did not really come between him and me, then I thought so, and I had all the anguish and sorrow as if it had been true. And now he is to be sent here to meet her—and I am to put up with it, he says, as it will give us means of meeting. But I will not put up with it!” cried Ombra, her voice rising shrill with passion—“I cannot; it is asking too much. I would rather not meet him than meet him to be watched by Kate’s eyes. He has no right to come here on such a pretence. I would rather kill her—I would rather never see him again!”

“Oh! Ombra, how can you tell who may hear you?” cried her mother putting up her hand as if to stop her mouth.

“I don’t care who hears me!” said Ombra, pale and sullen.

And then there was a rustle and movement, and both started, looking up with one impulse. In the twilight right beyond the circle of the lamplight, white as death, with a piteous gaze that neither

could ever forget, stood Kate. Mrs. Anderson sprang to her feet with a cry; Ombra said not a word—she sat back in her chair, and kept her startled eyes upon her cousin—great dilated eyes, awakened all in a minute to what she had done.

“Kate, you have heard what she has said?”

“Yes, I have heard it,” she said faintly. “I did not mean to; but I was there, and I thought you knew. I have heard everything. Oh! it does not matter. It hurts at present, but it will go off after a while.”

She tried to smile, and then she broke down and cried. Mrs. Anderson went to her and threw her arms round her; but Kate put her aunt gently away. She looked up through her tears, and shook her head with the best smile she could muster.

“No, it is not worth while,” she said,—“not any more. I have been wrong all the time. I suppose God did not mean it so. I had no natural mother or sister, and you can’t get such things except by nature. Don’t let us say any

more about it," she added, hastily brushing the tears from her eyes. "I am very sorry you have suffered so much on my account, Ombra. If I had only known—— And I never came between you and any one—never dreamt of doing it—never will, never—you may be sure of that. I wanted my aunt to love me—that was natural—but no one else."

"Kate, I did not mean it," faltered Ombra, her white face suddenly burning with a blush of passionate shame. She had never realized the meanness of her jealousies and suspicions till this moment. Her mother's remonstrances had never opened her eyes; but in a moment, in this anguish of being found out, she found out herself, and saw through her cousin's eyes, as it were, how contemptible it all was.

"I think you meant it. I don't think you could have spoken so had not you meant it," said Kate with composure. And then she sat down, and they all looked at each other, Mrs. Anderson standing before the two girls, wringing her hands. I think they realized what had

happened better than she did. Her alarm and misery were great. This was a quarrel between her two children—a quarrel which it was very dreadful to contemplate. They had never quarrelled before ; little misunderstandings might have arisen between them, but these it was always possible to smooth down ; but this was a quarrel. The best thing to do, she felt, was that they should have it out. Thus for once her perception failed her. She stood frightened between them, looking from one to another, not certain on which side the volcano would burst forth. But no volcano burst forth ; things had gone too far for that.

As for Kate, she did not know what had come over her. She had become calm without knowing how. All her agitation passed away, and a dead stillness succeeded—a stillness which made her afraid. Two minutes ago her heart and body had been tingling with darts of pain. She had felt the blow everywhere—on her head, which ached and rang as if she had been struck—on her heart, which seemed all over dull pain

—even in her limbs, which did not feel able to support her. But now all had altered; a mysterious numbness crept from her feet up to her heart and her head. She did not feel anything; she saw Ombra's big, startled eyes straining at her, and Mrs. Anderson, standing by, wringing her hands; but neither the one nor the other brought any gleam of feeling to her mind.

“It is a pity we came here,” she said slowly—“a great pity, for people will discuss everything—I suppose they always do. And I don't know, indeed, what is best; I am not prepared to propose anything; all seems dark to me. I cannot go on standing in Ombra's way—that is all I know. I will not do it. And perhaps, if we were all to think it over to-night, and tell what we think to-morrow morning—” she said, with a smile, which was very faint, and a strong indication to burst forth instead into tears.

“Oh! my darling!” said Mrs. Anderson, bewildered by this extraordinary calm.

Kate made a little strange gesture. It was

the same with which she had put her aunt away. "Don't!" she said, under her breath. She could bear what Ombra had said after the first astonishing outburst, but she could not bear that caressing—those sweet names which belong only to those who are loved. Don't! A touch would have made her recoil—a kiss would have driven her wild and raving, she thought. This was the horror of it all—not that they had quarrelled, but that they had pretended to love her, and all the time had been hating her—or, at the best, had been keeping each other up to the mark by thought of the gratitude and kindness they owed her. Kindness and gratitude!—and yet they had pretended to love.

"Perhaps it is better I should not say anything," said Ombra, with another flush, which this time was that of rising anger. "I ought not to have spoken as I did, but I make no apologies—it would be foolish to do so. You must form your own opinion, and nothing that

I could say would change it. Of course it is no excuse to say that I would not have spoken as I did had I known you were there."

"I did not mean to listen," said Kate, colouring a little. "You might have seen me all the time; but it is best to say nothing at all now—none of us had better speak. We have to get through dinner, which is a pity. But after that, let us think it over quietly—quite quietly—and in the morning we shall see better. There is no reason," she said very softly, "why, because you do not feel for me as I thought you did, we should quarrel; for really there is nothing to quarrel about. One's love is not in one's own gift, to be bestowed as one pleases. You have been very kind to me—very kind."

"Oh! Kate—oh! my dear child, do you think I don't love you? Oh! Kate, do not break my heart!"

"Don't, aunt, please," she said, with a shiver. "I don't feel quite well, and it hurts me. Don't—any more—now!"



## CHAPTER XII.

THAT was the horrible sting of it—they had made-believe to love her, and it had not been true. Now love, Kate reflected (as she went slowly to her room, feeling, somehow, as if every step was a mile), was not like anything else. To counterfeit any other emotion might be pardoned, but to counterfeit love was the last injury anyone could do you. Perhaps it was the wound to her pride which helped the wound to her affections, and made it so bitter. As she thought it all over, she reflected that she had, no doubt, accepted this love much too easily when she went first to her aunt's charge. She had leapt into their arms, as it were. She had left them no room to understand what their

real feelings were ; she had taken it for granted that they loved her. She writhed under the humiliation which this recollection brought her. After all it was not, perhaps, they who were in the wrong, but she who had insisted on believing what they had never taken much pains to persuade her of. After all, when she came to think of it, Ombra had made no pretence whatever. The very first time they met, Ombra had repulsed her—she was honest, at least !

To be sure, Mrs. Anderson had been very caressing, but that was her nature. She said dear and darling to every child that came in her way—she petted everybody. Why, then, should Kate have accepted her petting as any sign of special love ? It was herself that had been a vain fool, all along. She had taken it for granted : she had assumed it as necessary and certain that they loved her ; and they, embarrassed by this faith, had been reluctant to hurt her feelings by undeceiving her ; this was how it was. What stings, what tortures of pride and pain, did she give herself as she

thought these things over! Gradually she pulled down all the pleasant house that had sheltered her these four—nearly five long years. She plucked it down with her hands. She laid her weary head on her little sofa beside the fire in her room, and watched the flickering shadows, and said to herself that here she was, back in the only home that belonged to her, alone as she had been when she left it. Four cold walls, with so much furniture, new unknown servants, who could not love her—who did not even know her; a cold, cold miserable world outside, and no one in it to whom it would make the difference of a meal or a night's rest, whether she lived or died. Oh, cold, terrible remorseless fate! back again in Langton-Courtenay, which, perhaps, she ought never to have left, exactly in the same position as when she left it. Kate could not find any solace in tears; they would not come. All her youth of heart, her easy emotions, her childish laughing and crying, were gone. The sunshine of happiness that had

lighted up all the world with dazzling lights had been suddenly quenched. She saw everything as it was, natural and true. It was like the sudden enlightenment which came to the dreamer in fairy-land; shrivelling up all the beautiful faces, turning the gold into dross, and the sweetness into corruption.

How far these feelings were exaggerated and overdone, the reader can judge. The spectator, indeed, always sees how much too far the bent bow rebounds when the string is cut, and how far the sufferer goes astray in disappointment and grief, as well as in the extravagances of hope. But, unfortunately, the one who has to go through it never gets the benefit of that tranquillizing knowledge. And to Kate all that she saw now seemed too real—more real than anything she had known before—and her desertion complete. She lay on her sofa, and gazed into the fire, and felt her temples beating and her eyes blazing, but could not cry to relieve herself. When Maryanne came upstairs to light her mistress's candles, and pre-

pare her dress for dinner, she shrieked out to see the flushed face on the sofa-pillow.

“I have a headache—that is all. Don’t make a fuss,” cried poor Kate.

“Miss Kate, you must be going to have a fever. Let me call Mrs. Anderson—let me send for the doctor,” cried the girl, in dismay. But Kate exerted her authority, and silenced her. She sent her downstairs with messages that she had a headache, and could not come down again, but was going to bed, and would rather not be disturbed.

Late in the evening, when Mrs. Anderson came to the door, Maryanne repeated the message. “I think, ma’am, Miss Kate’s asleep. She said she was not to be disturbed.”

But Maryanne did not know how to keep this visitor out. She dared not oppose her, as she stole in on noiseless foot, and went to the bedside. Kate was lying with all her pretty hair in a mass on the pillow, with her eyes closed, and the flush which had frightened Maryanne still on her face. Was she asleep? Mrs.

Anderson would have thought so, but for seeing two big teardrops just stealing from her closed eyelashes. She stooped over and kissed her softly on the forehead. "God bless you, my dear child, my dear child!" she whispered, almost wishing she might not be heard; and then stole away to her own room, to the other child, much more tumultuous and exciting, who awaited her. Poor Mrs. Anderson! of all the three she was the one who had the most to bear.

Ombra was pacing up and down the large bed-room, so luxurious and wealthy, her breath coming quick with excitement, her whole frame full of pulses and tinglings of a hundred pains. She, too, had gone through a sharp pang of humiliation; but it had passed over. She was not lonely, like Kate. She had her mother to fall back upon in the meantime; and even failing her mother, she had some one else, another who would support her, upon whom she could lean, and who would give her moral backing and sympathy. All this makes a wonderful difference in the way people receive a downfall. Ombra

had been thunderstruck at first at her own recklessness, and the wounds she had given; but now a certain irritation possessed her, inflaming all the sore places in her mind, and they were not few. She was walking up and down, thinking what she would do, what she would say, how she would no longer be held in subjection, and forced to consider Kate's ways and Kate's feelings, Kate this and that. She was sorry she had said what she did—that she could avow without hesitation. She had not meant to hurt her cousin, and of course she had not meant really that she hated her, but only that she was irritated and unhappy, and not in a position to choose her words. Kate was rich, and could have whatever she pleased; but Ombra had nothing but the people who loved her, and she could not bear any interference with them. It was the parable of the ewe-lamb over again, she said to herself; and thus was exciting herself, and swelling her excitement to a higher and higher pitch, when her mother went in—her mother, for whom all this tempest was prepar-

ing, and upon whom it was about to fall.

“You have been to see her, mamma! You never think of your own dignity! You have been petting her, and apologizing to her!”

“She is asleep,” said Mrs. Anderson, sitting down, and leaning her head on her hand. She did not feel able for any more contention. Kate, she felt sure, was not really asleep, but she accepted the semblance, that no more might be said.

Ombra laughed, and though the laugh sounded mocking, there was a great deal of secret relief in it.

“Oh! she is asleep! Did not I say she was no more than a child? She has got over it already. When she wakes up she will have forgotten all about it. How excellent those easy-going natures are! I knew it was only for the moment. I knew she had no feelings to speak of. For once, mamma, you must acknowledge yourself in the wrong!”

And Ombra sat down too, with an immense weight lifted from her mind. She had not owned it even to herself, but the relief was so



great, that she felt now what her anxiety had been. "Little foolish thing," she said, "to be so heroical, and make such a noise—" Ombra laughed almost hysterically—"and then to go to bed and fall asleep, like a baby! She is little more than a baby—I always told you so, mamma."

"You have always been wrong, Ombra, in your estimation of Kate, and you are wrong now. Whether she was asleep or not, I can't say; she looked like it. But this is a very serious matter all the same. It will not be so easily got over as you think."

"I don't wish it to be got over!" cried Ombra. "It is a kind of life I cannot endure, and it ought not to be asked of me—it is too much to ask of me. You saw the letter. He is to be sent here, with the object of paying his addresses to her, because she is an heiress, and it is thought he ought to marry money. To marry—her! Oh! mamma! he ought not to have said it to me. It was wicked and cruel to make such an explanation."

“I think so too,” said Mrs. Anderson, under her breath.

“And he does not seem to be horrified by the thought. He says we shall be able to meet—— Oh! mother, before this happens let us go away somewhere, and hide ourselves at the end of the earth!”

“Ombra, my poor child, you must not hide yourself. There are your rights to be considered. It is not that I don't see how hard it is; but you must not be the one to judge him harshly. We must make allowances. He was alone—he was not under good influence, when he wrote.”

“Oh! mother, and am I to believe of *him* that bad influences affect him so? That is making it worse—a thousand times worse! I thought I had foreseen everything that there could be to bear; but I never thought of this.”

“Alas! poor child, how little did you foresee!” said Mrs. Anderson in a low voice—“not half nor quarter part. Ombra, let us take Kate's advice. *La nuit porte conseil*—let us decide nothing to-night.”

“ You can go and sleep, like her,” said Ombra, somewhat bitterly. “ I think she is more like you than I am. You will say your prayers, and compose yourself, and go to sleep.”

Mrs. Anderson smiled faintly. “ Yes, I could have done that when I was as young as you,” she said, and made no other answer. She was sick at heart, and weary of the discussion. She had gone over the same ground so often, and how often soever she might go over it, the effect was still the same. For what could anyone make of such a hopeless, dreary business ?

After all, it was Ombra, with all her passion, who was asleep the first. Her sighs seemed to steal through the room like ghosts, and sometimes a deeper one than usual would cause her mother to steal through the open doorway to see if her child was ill. But after a time the sighs died away, and Mrs. Anderson lay in the darkness of the long Winter night, watching the expiring fire, which burned lower and lower, and listening to the wind outside, and asking herself what was to be the next chapter—where

she was to go and what to do. She blamed herself bitterly for all that had happened, and went over it step by step and asked herself how it could have been helped. Of itself, had it been done in the light of day, and with consent of all parties, there had been no harm. She had her child's happiness to consider chiefly, and not the prejudices of a family with whom she had no acquaintance. How easy it is to justify anything that is done and cannot be undone! and how easy and natural the steps seem by which it was brought about! while all the time something keeps pricking the casuist, whispering, "I told you so—I told you so." Yes, she had not been without her warnings; she had known that she ought not to have given that consent which had been wrung from her, as it were, at the sword's point. She had known that it was weak of her to let principle and honour go, lest Ombra's cheek should be pale, and her face averted from her mother.

"It was not Ombra's fault," she said to herself. "It was natural that Ombra should do

anything she did; but I who am older, who know the world, I should have known better—I should have had the courage to bear even her unhappiness, for her good. Oh, my poor child! and she does not know yet, bad as she thinks it, half of what she may have to bear.”

Thus the mother lay and accused herself, taking first one, and then the other, upon her shoulders, shedding salt tears under the veil of that darkness, wondering where she should next wander to, and what would become of them, and whether light could ever come out of this darkness. How her heart ached!—what fears and heaviness overwhelmed her; while Ombra slept and dreamed, and was happy in the midst of the wretchedness which she had brought upon herself!

## CHAPTER XIII.

THEY were all very subdued when they met next day. It was now, perhaps, more than at any former time that Kate's position told. Instinctively, without a word of it to each other, Mrs. Anderson and her daughter felt that on her aspect everything depended. They would not have said it to each other, or even to themselves; but, nevertheless, there could not be any doubt on the subject. There were two of them, and they were perfectly free to go and come as they pleased; but the little one—the younger child—the second daughter, who had been quietly subject to them so long, was the mistress of the situation; she was the lady of the house, and they were but her guests. In a moment their positions were changed, and

everything reversed. And Kate felt it too. They were both in the breakfast-room when she came in. She was very quiet and pale, unlike her usual self; but when she made her usual greetings, a momentary glow of red came over her face. It burned as she touched Om-bra's cheek with her own. After all that had passed, these habitual kisses were the most terrible thing to go through. It was so hard to break the bond of custom, and so hard to bestow what means love solely for custom's sake. The two girls reddened as if they had been lovers as they thus approached each other, though for a very different cause; but no stranger, unless he had been very quick-sighted, would have seen the subtle, unexpressed change which each of them felt dropping into their very soul. Kate left the others as soon as breakfast was over, and was absent the whole morning. At lunch she was again visible, and once more they sat and talked, with walls of glass or ice, between them. This time, however, Kate gave more distinct indication of her policy.

“Would you like to have the carriage this afternoon?” she said.

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Anderson, doubtfully, trying to read her niece’s pleasure in her eyes. “If there is anywhere you want to go to, dear——”

“Oh! if you don’t think of going out, I shall drive to Westerton, to get some books,” said Kate. “I want some German books. It is a long time since I have done any German; but if you want the carriage, never mind—I can go some other day.”

“I do not want it,” said Mrs. Anderson, with a chill of dismay; and she turned to Ombra, and made some anxious suggestion about walking somewhere. “It will be a nice opportunity while Kate is occupied,” said the poor soul, scheming to keep things smooth; “you said you wanted to see that part of the park.”

“Yes,” said Ombra, depressed too, though she would have been too proud to confess it; and thus it was arranged.

Kate drove away alone, and had a hearty cry



in the carriage, and was very unhappy ; and the mother and daughter went and walked against time in the frost-bound park. It was a bright Winter afternoon, with a pleasant sharpness in the air, and a gorgeous sunset of red and gold. They stopped and pointed it out to each other, and dwelt on all the different gradations of colour, with an artificial delight. The change had come in a way which they had not expected, and they did not know how to face it. It was the only situation which Mrs. Anderson, in her long musings, had not foreseen, and she did not know how to meet it. There was nothing but dismay in her mind—dismay and wonder. All her sagacity was at fault.

This went on for some time. Kate was very kind to her guests ; but more and more every day they came to feel themselves guests in the house. She was scarcely ever with them, except at meals ; and they would sit together all the long morning, and sometimes all the long afternoon, silent, saying nothing to each other,

and hear Kate's voice far off, perhaps singing as she went through one of the long passages, perhaps talking to Maryanne, or to a dog whom she had brought in from the stable. They sat as if under a spell, for even Ombra was hushed. Her feelings had somehow changed. Instead of the horror with which she had regarded the probable arrival of her lover, she seemed now possessed with a feverish desire to receive him, to see him when he came, to watch him, perhaps to make sure that he was true to her.

"How can I go away, and know that he is here, and endure it?" she said to her mother. "I must stay!—I must stay! It is wretched; but it would be more wretched to go."

This was her mood one day; and the next she would be impatient to leave Langton-Courtenay at once, and found the yoke which was upon her intolerable. These were terrible days, as smiling and smooth as of old to all beholders, but with complete change within. Kate was as brave as a lion in carrying out the *rôle* she had marked out for herself. Even when

her heart failed her, she hid it, and went on stoutly in the almost impossible way.

“I will not interfere with them—I will not ask anything; but otherwise there shall be no change,” she said to herself, with something of the arrogance of youth, ready to give all, and to believe that it could be accepted without the return of anything. But sometimes it was very hard for her to keep it up; sometimes the peculiar aspect of the scene would fill her with sudden compunctions, sudden longings. Everything looked so like the old, happy days, and yet it was all so different! Sometimes a tone of her aunt’s voice, a movement or a look of Om-bra, would bring some old tender recollection back to her mind, and she would feel driven to the last extremity to prevent herself from bursting into tears, or making a wild appeal to them to let things be as they were again. But she resisted all these impulses, saying to herself, with forlorn pride, that the old love had never existed, that it had been but a delirium of her own, and that consequently there was nothing

to appeal to. She resumed her German, and worked at it with tremendous zeal in the library by herself. German is an admirable thing when one has been crossed in love, or mortified in friendship. How often has it been resorted to in such circumstances—and has always afforded a certain consolation! And Kate plunged into parish business, to the great delight and relief of Minnie Hardwick, and showed all her old love of the “human interest” of the village, the poor folk’s stories and their difficulties. She tired herself out, and went back and put off her grey frock, and arrayed herself, and sat down at the table with Ombra, languid and heavy-eyed, and Mrs. Anderson, who greeted her with faint smiles. There was little conversation at the table; and it grew less and less as the days went on. These dinners were not amusing; and yet they had some interest too, for each watched the other, wondering what she would next do or say.

I cannot tell exactly how long this lasted. It seemed to all three an eternity. But one

afternoon, when Kate came in from a long walk to the other side of the parish, she found a letter conspicuously placed on the hall-table, where she could not fail to see it. She trembled a little when she saw her aunt's handwriting. And there were fresh carriage wheels marking the way down the avenue; she had noticed this as she came up. She sat down on the settle in the hall, where Mrs. Anderson had placed herself on the day of their return, and read the following letter with surprise, and yet without surprise. It gave her a shock as of suddenness and strangeness; and yet she had known that it must happen all along.

“ MY DEAREST KATE.

“ If you can think, when you read this, that I do not mean what I say, you will be very, very wrong. All these years I have loved you as if you were my own child. I could not have done otherwise—it is not in nature. But this is not what I want to say. We are going away. It is not with my will, and yet it is not

against my will; for even to leave you alone in the house is better than forcing you to live this unnatural life. Good-bye, my dear, dear child! I cannot tell you—more's the pity!—the circumstances that have made my poor Ombra bitter with everything, including her best friends; but she is very, very sorry, always, after she has said those dreadful words which she does not mean, but which seem to give a little relief to her suffering and bitterness. This is all I can tell you now. Some time or other you will know everything; and then, though you may blame us, you will pity us too. I want to tell you that it never was my wish to keep the secret from you—nor even Ombra's. At least, she would have yielded, but the other party to the secret would not. Dearest child, forgive me! I go away from you, however, with a very sore heart, and I don't know where we shall go, or what we shall do. Ever your most affectionate

“ A. ANDERSON.

“P.S.—I have written to your uncle, that unavoidable circumstances, over which I have no

control, compelled my leaving. I should prefer that you did not say anything to him about what these circumstances were.”

Kate sat still for some time after she had read her letter. She had expected it—it was inevitable; but, oh! with what loneliness the house began to fill behind her! She sat and gazed into the fire, dumb, bearing the blow as she best could. She had expected it, and yet she had never believed it possible. She had felt sure that something would turn up to reconcile them—that one day or another, sooner or later, they would all fall upon each other’s necks, and be at one again. She was seized suddenly by that fatal doubt of herself which always comes too late. Had she done right, after all? People must be very confident of doing right who have such important matters in hand. Had she sufficient reason? Was it not mean and paltry of her, in her own house, to have resented a few unconsidered words so bitterly? In her own house! And then she had been the means of

turning these two, whom she loved, whether they loved her or not, out upon the world. Kate sat without stirring while the early darkness fell. It crept about her imperceptibly, dimness, and silence, and solitude. The whole great house was a vast desert of silence—not a sound, not a voice, nothing audible but the fall of the ashes on the hearth. The servants' rooms were far away, shut off by double doors, that no noises might disturb their mistress. Oh! what would not Kate have given for the cheerful sound of the kitchen, that used to be too audible at Shanklin, which her aunt always complained of. Her aunt! who had been like her mother! And where was she now? She began to gasp and sob hysterically, but could not cry. And there was nobody to take any notice. She heard her own voice, but nobody else heard it. They were gone! Servants, new servants, filled the house, noiseless creatures, decorous and well-bred, shut in within double doors, that nobody might hear any sound of them. And she alone!—a girl not twenty!—alone in a house which could put up



fifty people!—in a house where there was no sound, no light, no warmth, no fire, no love!

She sat there till it was dark, and never moved. Why should she move? There was no fireside to go to, no one whose presence made home. She was as well on the settle in the hall as anywhere else. The darkness closed over her. What did she care? She sat stupefied, with the letter in her hand.

And there she was found when Mr. Spigot, the butler, came to light the lamp. He gave a jump when he saw something in the corner of the settle. And that something started too, and drew itself together, and said, "Is it so late? I did not know!" and put her hands across her dazzled eyes.

"I beg you a thousand pardons, miss," said Spigot, confused, for he had been whistling under his breath. "I didn't know as no one wasn't there."

"Never mind," said Kate. "Give me a candle, please. I suppose I must have dropped asleep."

Had she dropped asleep really "for sorrow?"

—had she fainted and come to again, nobody being the wiser? Kate could not tell—but there had been a moment of unconsciousness one way or the other; and when she crept upstairs with her candle, a solitary twinkle like a glow-worm in the big staircase, she felt chilled to the bone, aching and miserable. She crept upstairs into the warmth of her room, and, looking in the glass, saw that her face was as the face of a ghost. Her hair had dropped down on one side, and the dampness of the evening had taken all the curl out of it. It fell straight and limp upon her colourless cheek. She went and kneeled down before the fire and warmed herself, which seemed the first necessity of all. “How cold one gets when one is unhappy!” she said, half aloud; and the murmur of her own voice sounded strange in her ear. Was it the only voice that she was now to hear?

When Maryanne came with the candles, it was a comfort to Kate. She started up from the fire. She had to keep up appearances—to look as if nothing had happened. Maryanne,

for her part, was running over with the news.

“Have you heard, Miss, as Mrs. Anderson and Miss Ombra is gone?” she asked, as soon as decency would permit. The whole house had been moved by this extraordinary departure, and the entire servants’ hall hung upon Maryanne for news.

“Yes,” said Kate, calmly. “I thought I should be back in time, but I was too late. I hope my aunt had everything comfortable. Maryanne, as I am all alone, you can bring me up some tea here—I can’t take the trouble to dine—alone.”

“Very well, Miss,” said Maryanne; “it will be a deal comfortabler. If Mrs. Spigot had known as the ladies was going, she would have changed the dinner—but it was so sudden-like.”

“Yes, it was very sudden,” said Kate. And thus Maryanne carried no news downstairs.

## CHAPTER XIV.

**K**ATE'S life seemed to stop at this point. For a few days she did not know what she did. She would have liked to give in, and be ill, but dared not, lest her aunt (who did not love her) should be compromised. Therefore she kept up, and walked and went to the parish and chattered with Minnie Hardwick, and even tried her German, though this latter attempt was not very successful.

“My aunt was called away suddenly on business,” she explained to Mrs. Hardwick.

“What! and left you alone—quite alone in that great house?” cried Mrs. Hardwick. “It is not possible! How lonely for you! But I suppose she will only be gone for a few days?”

“ We scarcely know. It is business that has taken her away, and nobody can answer for business,” said Kate, with an attempt at a laugh, “ But the servants are very good, and I shall do very well. I am not afraid of being alone.”

“ Not afraid, I daresay, but dreadfully solitary. It ought not to be,” said Mrs. Hardwick, in a tone of reproof. And the thought passed through her mind that she had never quite approved of Mrs. Anderson, who seemed to know much more of Bertie than was at all desirable, and, no doubt, had attempted to secure him for that pale girl of hers. “ Though what any gentleman could see in her, or how anyone could so much as look at her while Kate Courtenay was by, I don’t understand,” she said after, discussing the question in private.

“ Oh, mamma, I think she is so sweet and pretty,” said Edith. “ But I am sure Bertie does not like her. Bertie avoided her—he was scarcely civil. I am sure if there is anyone that Bertie admires it is Kate.”

Mrs. Hardwick shook her head.

“Bertie knows very well,” she said, “that Miss Courtenay is out of his reach—delightful as she is, and everything we could desire—except that she is rather too rich; but that is no reason why he should go and throw himself away on some girl without a penny. I don’t put any faith in his avoiding Miss Anderson. When a young man *avoids* a young woman it is much the same as when he seeks her society. But, Minnie, run away and look after your club books; you are too young yet to hear such matters discussed.”

“Edith is only a year older than I am,” said Minnie, within herself, “but then she is almost a married lady.” And with this she comforted her heart, which was not without its private flutters too.

And Kate kept on her way, very bravely holding up her little flag of resolution. She sat in the room which they had all occupied together, and had coals heaped upon the two fires, and could not get warm. The silence of

the place made her sick and faint. She got up and walked about, in the hope of hearing at least her own step, and could not on the soft carpet. When she coughed, it seemed to ring all through the house. She got frightened when she caught a glimpse of herself in the great mirror, and thought it was a ghost. She sent to Westerton for all the novels that were to be had, and these were a help to her; but still, to sit in a quiet room, with yourself now and then seen passing through the glass like a thief, and nothing audible but the ashes falling from the grate, is a terrible experience for a girl. She heard herself breathing; she heard her cough echo down all the long galleries. She had her stable dog washed and brushed, and made fit for good society, in the hope that he would take to the drawing-room, and live with her, and give her some one to speak to. But, after all, he preferred the stables, being only a mongrel, without birth or breeding. This rather overcame Kate's bravery; but only once did she thoroughly break down. It was the day after

her aunt left, and with a sudden recollection of companionship and solace still remaining, she had said to Maryanne, "Go and call old Francesca." "Francesca, Miss!—oh! bless you, she's gone with her lady," said Maryanne; and Kate, who had not expected this, broke down all at once, and had a fit of crying.

"Never mind—it is nothing. I thought they meant to leave Francesca," she said, incoherently. Thus it became evident to her that they were gone, and gone for ever. And Kate went back to her melancholy solitude, and took up her novel; but when she had read the first page, she stopped, and began to think. She had done no wrong to anyone. If there was wrong, it had been done to her. She had tried even to resist all feelings of resentment, and to look as if she had forgotten the wrong done her. Yet it was she who was being punished, as if she were the criminal. Nobody anywhere, whatever harm they might have done, had been punished so sorely. Solitary confinement!—was not that the worst of all—the thing that drives people mad?



Then Mr. Courtenay wrote in a state of great fret and annoyance. What did Mrs. Anderson mean by leaving him in the lurch just then, she and her daughter? She had not even given him an address, that he might write to her and remonstrate (he had intended to supersede her in Spring, to be sure, but he did not think it necessary to mention that); and here he was in town, shut up with a threatening of bronchitis, and it was as much as his life was worth to travel now. Couldn't she get some one to stay with her, or get along somehow until Lady Caryisfort came home?

Kate wrote him a brave little letter, saying that of course she could get on—that he need not be at all troubled about her—that she was quite happy, and should prefer being left as she was. When she had written it, she lay down on the rug before the fire, and had a cry, and then came to herself, and sent to ask if Minnie Hardwick might spend the evening with her. Minnie's report brought her mother up next morning, who found that Kate had a bad cold, and sent for the doctor, and kept her in bed;

and all the fuss of this little illness—though Kate believed she hated fuss—did her good. Her own room was pleasanter than the drawing-room. It was natural to be alone there; and as she lay on the sofa, and was read to by Minnie, there seemed at times a possibility that life might mend. And next day and the next, though she recovered, this companionship went on. Minnie was not very wise, but she chattered about everything in heaven and earth. She talked of her brother—a subject in which Kate could not help taking an interest, which was half anger, half something else. She asked a hundred questions about Florence—

“Did you really see a great deal of Bertie? How funny that he should not have told us! Men are so odd!” cried Minnie. “If it had been I, I should have raved about you for ever and ever!”

“Because you are silly and—warm-hearted,” said Kate, with a sigh. “Yes, I think we saw them pretty often.”

“Why do you say *them*?”

“Why?—because the two were always together? We never expected to see one without the other.”

“Like your cousin and you,” said innocent Minnie. And then she laughed.

“Why do you laugh?” said Kate.

“Oh! nothing—an idea that came into my head. I have heard of two sisters marrying two brothers, but never of two pair of cousins—it would be funny.”

“But altogether out of the question, as it happens,” said Kate, growing stately all at once.

“Oh! don’t be angry. I did not mean anything. Was Bertie very attentive to Miss Anderson in Florence? We wonder sometimes. For I am sure he avoided her here; and mamma says she puts no faith in a gentleman avoiding a lady. It is as bad as—what do *you* think?—unless you would rather not say,” added Minnie, shyly; “or if you think I oughtn’t to ask——”

“I don’t know anything about Mr. Bertie

Hardwick's feelings," said Kate. And then she added, with a little sadness which she could not quite conceal, "Nor about anybody, Minnie. Don't ask me, please. I am not clever enough to find things out; and nobody ever confides in me."

"I am sure I should confide in you first of all!" cried Minnie, with enthusiasm. "Oh! when I recollect how much we used to be frightened for you, and what a funny girl we thought you; and then to think I should know you so well now, and have got so—fond of you—may I say so?" said the little girl, who was proud of her post.

Kate made no answer for a full minute, and then she said,

"Minnie, you are younger than I am, a great deal younger——"

"I am eighteen," said Minnie, mortified.

"But I am nineteen and a half, and very, very old for my age. At your age one does not know which is the real thing and which is the shadow—there are so many shadows in this world; and sometimes you take them for

truth, and when you find it out it is hard."

Minnie followed this dark saying with a puzzled little face.

"Yes," she said, perplexed, "like Narcissus, you mean, and the dog that dropped the bone. No, I don't mean that—that is too—too—common-place. Oh! did you ever see Bertie Eldridge's yacht? I think I heard he had it at the Isle of Wight. It was called the *Shadow*. Oh! I would give anything to have a sail in a yacht!"

Ah! that was called the *Shadow* too. Kate felt for a moment as if she had found something out; but it was a delusion, an idea which she could not identify—a Will-o'-the-Wisp, which looked like something, and was nothing. "I have a shadow too," she murmured, half to herself. But before Minnie's wondering eyes and tongue could ask what it meant, Spigot came solemnly to the door. He had to peer into the darkness to see his young mistress on the sofa.

"If you please, Miss Courtenay," he said,

“there is a gentleman downstairs wishes to see you; and he won't take no answer as I can offer. He says if you hear his name——”

“What is his name?” cried Kate. She did not know what she expected, but it made her heart beat. She sat up on her sofa, throwing off her wraps, notwithstanding Minnie's remonstrances. Who could it be?—or, rather, what?

“The Reverend Mr. Sugden, Miss,” said Mr. Spigot.

“Mr. Sugden!” She said the name two or three times over before she could remember. Then she rose, and directed Spigot to light the candles. She did not know how it was, but new vigour somehow seemed to come into her veins.

“Minnie,” she said, “this is a gentleman who knows my aunt. He has come, I suppose, about her business. I want you to stay just now; but if I put up my hand so, will you run upstairs and wait for me in my room? Take the book. You will be a true little friend if you will do this.”

“Leave you alone!—with a gentleman!” said Minnie. “But then of course he must be an old gentleman, as he has come about business,” she said to herself; and added hastily, “Of course I will. And if you don’t put up your hand—so—must I stay?”

“I am sure to put it up,” said Kate.

The room by this time was light and bright, and Spigot’s solemn step was heard once more approaching. Kate placed herself in a large chair. She looked as imposing and dignified as she could, poor child!—the solitary mistress of her own house. But how strange it was to see the tall figure come in—the watchful, wistful face she remembered so well! He held out his large hand, in which her little one was drowned, just as he used to do. He glanced round him in the same way, as if Ombra might be somewhere about in the corners. His Shadow too! Kate could not doubt that. But when she gave Minnie her instructions, she had taken it for granted that there would have been certain preliminaries to the conversation—inquiries about herself, or in-

formation about what she was doing. But Mr. Sugden was full of excitement and anxiety. He took her small hand into his big one, which swallowed it up, as we have said, and he held it, as some men hold a button.

“I hear they have left you,” he said. “Tell me, is it true?”

“Yes,” said Kate, too much startled to give her signal, “they have left me.”

“And you don’t know where they have gone?”

She remembered now, and Minnie disappeared, curious beyond all description. Then Kate withdrew her hand from that mighty grasp.

“I don’t know where they have gone. Have you heard anything of them, Mr. Sugden? Have you brought me, perhaps, a message?”

He shook his head.

“I heard it all vaguely, only vaguely; but you know how I used to feel, Miss Kate. I feel the same still. Though it is not what I should have wished—I am ready to be a brother to her. Will



you tell me all that has passed since you went away?"

"All that has passed?"

"If you will, Miss Kate—as you would be kind to one who does not care very much what happens to him! You are kind, I know—and you love her!"

The tears came to Kate's eyes. She grew warm and red all over, throwing off, as it were, in a moment, the palsy of cold and misery that had come over her.

"Yes," she said, suddenly, "I love her," and cried. Mr. Sugden looked on, not knowing why.

Kate felt herself changed as in a moment; she felt—nay, she was herself again. What did it matter whether they loved her?—she loved them. That was, after all, what she had most to do with. She dried her tears, and she told her story, straight off, like a tale she had been taught, missing nothing. And he drank it all in to the end, not missing a word. When she had finished he sat silent, with a sombre counte-

nance, and not a syllable was spoken between them for ten minutes at least. Then he said aloud, as if not talking, but thinking,

“The question is, which?” Then he raised his eyes and looked at her. “Which?” he repeated.

Kate grew pale again, and felt a choking in her throat. She bowed her head, as if she were accepting her fate.

“Mr. Bertie Hardwick!” she said.

## CHAPTER XV.

THIS strange little incident, which at the moment it was occurring seemed to be perfectly natural, but as soon as that moment was over became inexplicable, dropped into Kate's life as a stone drops into water. It made a curious commotion and bustle for the moment, and stirred faintly for a little while afterwards, and then disappeared, and was thought of no more.

Mr. Sugden would not stay, he would not even eat in the house. He had come down from town to the station six miles off, the nearest station for Langton-Courtenay, and there he meant to return again as soon as he had his information. Kate had been much troubled as to how she, in her unprotected condition, was to ask him to stay; but when she found out he would not stay, an uncomfortable sensation as

of want of hospitality came over her. But when he was actually gone, and Minnie Hardwick called back, somehow the entire incident appeared like a dream, and it seemed impossible that anything important had happened. Minnie was not curious; business was to her a sacred word, which covered all difficulties. The Curate was not old, as she had supposed; but otherwise being a friend of Mrs. Anderson's, and involved in her affairs, his sudden visit seemed perfectly natural. Just so men would come down from town, and be shut up with her father for an hour or two, and then disappear; and Kate as a great lady, as an heiress and independent person, no doubt must have the same kind of visitors.

Kate, however, thought a great deal of it that night—could not sleep, indeed, for thinking of it; but less next morning, and still less the day after, till at length the tranquillity settled back into its old stillness. Mr. Sugden had done her good, so far that he had roused her to consciousness of a hearty sentiment in herself, in-

dependent of anything from without—the natural affection which was her own independent possession, and not a reflection of other people's love. What though they did not love her even? She loved them; and as soon as she became conscious of this, she was saved from the mental harm that might have happened to her. It gave Kate pain when day after day passed on, and no word came from those who had departed from her so suddenly. But then she was young, and had been brought up in the persuasion that everything was likely to turn out right at the end, and that permanent unhappiness was a very rare thing. She was not alarmed about the safety of those who had deserted her; they were two, nay, three people together; they were used to taking care of themselves; so far as she knew, they had money enough and all that was required. And then her own life was so strange; it occupied her almost like a fairy-life. She thought she had never heard of any one so forlorn and solitary. The singularity of her position did her

good. She was half proud, half amused by it; she smiled when her visitors would remark upon her singular loneliness—"Yes, it seems strange to you, I suppose," she said; "but I don't mind it." It was a small compensation, but still it was a kind of compensation, indemnifying her for some at least of her trouble. The Andersons had disappeared into the great darkness of the world; but some day they would turn up again and come back to her and make explanations. And although she had been impressed by Mr. Sugden's visit, she was not actually anxious about the future of her aunt and cousin; some time or other things naturally would put themselves right.

This, however, did not prevent the feeling of her loneliness from being terrible to her—insupportable; but it removed all complications from her feelings, and made them simple. And thus she lived on for months together, as if in a dream, always assuring Mr. Courtenay that she did very well, that she wanted nothing, getting a little society in the Rectory

with the Hardwicks, and with some of her county neighbours who had called upon her. Minnie got used to the carriage, and to making expeditions into Westerton, the nearest town, and liked it. And strangely and stilly as ever *Châtelaine* lived in an old castle, in such a strange maiden seclusion lived Kate.

Where had the others gone? She ascertained before long that they were not at Shanklin—the Cottage was still let to “very nice people,” about whom Lucy Eldridge wrote very enthusiastic letters to her cousin—letters which Kate would sometimes draw her innocent moral from, not without a little faint pain, which surprised her in the midst of all graver troubles. She pointed out to Minnie how Lucy Eldridge had rejected the very idea of being friendly with the new-comers, much less admitting them to a share in the place Kate held in her heart. “Whereas now you will see I am forgotten altogether,” Kate said, with a conscious melancholy, that was not disagreeable to her. Minnie protested that with her such a thing

could never happen—it was impossible; and Kate smiled sadly, and shook her head in her superior knowledge. She took Minnie into her intimacy with a sense of condescension. But the friendship did her good. And Mrs. Hardwick was very kind to her. They were all anxious to “be of use” to the heiress, to help her through her melancholy hours.

When Bertie came down for his next flying visit, she manœuvred so that she succeeded in avoiding him, though he showed no desire this time to avoid her. But, Kate said to herself, this was something that she could not bear. She could not see him as if he were an indifferent stranger, when she knew well that he could reveal to her everything she wanted to know, and set the tangle right at last. He knew where they were without doubt—he knew everything. She could not meet him calmly, and shake hands with him, and pretend she did not remember the past. She was offended with him, both for their sake and her own—for Ombra’s sake, because of the secret;



and for her own, because of certain little words and looks which were an insult to her from Ombra's lover. No, she could not see him. She had a bad headache when he came with his mother to call; she was not able to go out when she was asked to the Rectory. She saw him only at church, and did nothing but bow when he hurried to speak to her in the churchyard. No, that she would not put up with. There was even a certain contempt mingled with her soreness. Mrs. Anderson had put all the blame upon him—the “other party to the secret;” while he, poor creature, would not even take the responsibility upon his own shoulders bravely, but blamed Ombra. Well! well! Kate resolved that she would keep her solitude unbroken, that she would allow no intrusion upon her of all the old agitations that once had made her unhappy. She would not consent to allow herself to be made unhappy any longer, or even to think of those who had given her so much pain.

Unfortunately, however, after she had made

this good resolution, she thought of nothing else, and puzzled herself over the whole business, and especially Bertie's share in it, night and day. He would suddenly start up into her mind when she was thinking of something else, with a glow over his face, and anxious gleam in his eyes, as she had seen him at the church door. Perhaps, then, though so late, he had meant to explain. Perhaps he intended to lay before her what excuses there might be—to tell her how one thing followed another, how they had been led into clandestine ways.

Kate would make out an entire narrative to herself, and then would stop short suddenly, and ask herself what she meant by it? It was not for her to explain for them, but for them to explain to her. But she did not want to think badly of them. Even when her wounds had been deepest, she had not wished to think unkindly; and it would have given her a kind of forlorn pleasure to be able to find out their excuses beforehand. This occupied her many an hour when she sat alone in the stillness, to

which she gradually became accustomed. After awhile her own reflection in the glass no longer struck her as looking like a ghost or a thief; she grew used to it. And then the way in which she threw herself into the parish did one good to see. Minnie Hardwick felt that Kate's activity and Kate's beneficence took away her breath. She filled the cottages with what Mrs. Hardwick felt to be luxuries, and disapproved of. She rushed into Westerton continually, to buy things for the old women. One had an easy-chair, another a carpet, another curtains to keep the wind out from the draughty cottage room.

“My dear, you will spoil the people; these luxuries are quite out of their reach. We ought not to demoralize them,” said the clergywoman, thinking of the awful consequences, and of the expectations and discontents that would follow.

“If old Widow Morgan belonged to me—if she was my grandmother, for instance,” said revolutionary Kate, “would there be anything

in the world too good for her? We should hunt the draughts out of every corner, and pad everything with velvet. And I suppose an old woman of eighty in a cottage feels it just as much."

Mrs. Hardwick was silenced, but not convinced; she was, indeed, shocked beyond measure at the idea of Widow Morgan requiring as many comforts as Kate's grandmother. "The girl has no discrimination whatever; she does not see the difference; it is of no use trying to explain to her," she said, with a troubled countenance. But, except these little encounters, there was no real disagreement between them. Bertie Hardwick's family, indeed, took an anxious interest in Kate. They were not worldly-minded people, but they could not forget that their son had been thrown a great deal into the society of a great heiress, both in the Isle of Wight and in Italy. The knowledge that he was in Kate's vicinity had indeed made them much more tolerant, though nobody said so, of his wanderings. They had not the

heart, they said, to separate him from his cousin, to whom he was so much attached; but behind this there was perhaps lurking another reason. Not that they would ever have forced their son's affections, or advised, under any circumstances, a mercenary marriage; but only, all other things being so suitable— Mrs. Hardwick, who liked to manage everybody, and did it very well, on the whole, took Kate into her hands with a glow of satisfaction. She would have liked to form her and mould her, and make her all that a woman in her important position ought to be; and, of course, no one could tell what might happen in the future. It was well to be prepared for all.

Mr. Courtenay, for his part, though not quite happy about his niece, and troubled by disagreeable pricks of conscience in respect to her, made all right by promises. He would come in a week or two—as soon as his cold was better—when he had got rid of the threatening of gout, which rather frightened his doctor. Finally, he promised without doubt that he would

come in the Easter recess, and make everything comfortable. But in the Easter recess it became absolutely necessary for him, for important private affairs, to go down to the Duke of Dorchester's marine palace, where there were some people going whom it was absolutely essential that he should meet. And thus it came to pass that Kate spent her twentieth birthday all alone at Langton-Courtenay. Nobody knew or remembered that it was her birthday. There was not so much as an old servant about the place to think of it. Maryanne, to be sure, might have remembered, but did not till next morning, when she broke forth with, "La, Miss Kate!" into good wishes and regrets, which Kate, with a flushed face and sore heart, put a stop to at once. No, no one knew. It is a hard thing, even when one is old, to feel that such domestic anniversaries have fallen into oblivion, and no one cares any longer for the milestones of our life; but when one is young—!

Kate went about all day long with this secret bursting in her heart. She would not tell it

for pride, though, if she had, all the Hardwick family, at least, would have been ready enough with kisses and congratulations. She carried it about with her like a pain that she was hiding. "It is my birthday," she said to herself, when she paused before the big glass, and looked at her own solitary figure, and tried to make a little forlorn fun of herself; "good morning, Kate, I will give you a present. It will be the only one you will get to-day," she said, laughing, and nodding at her representative in the glass, whose eyes were rather red; "but I will not wish you many returns, for I'm sure you don't want them. Oh! you poor, poor girl!" she cried, after a moment—"I am so sorry for you! I don't think there is anyone so solitary in all the world." And then Kate and her image both sat down upon the floor and cried.

But in the afternoon she went to Westerton, with Minnie Hardwick all unconscious beside her in the carriage, and bought herself the present she had promised. It was a tiny little

cross, with the date upon it, which Minnie marvelled at much, wondering if it was to herself that this memento was to be presented. Kate had a strong inclination to place the words "*Infelicissimo giorno*" over the date, but stopped, feeling that it might look romantic; but it was the unhappiest day to her—the worst, she thought, she had ever yet had to bear.

When she came home, however, a letter was put into her hands. It was from Mrs. Anderson at last.



## CHAPTER XVI.

KATE'S existence, however, was too monotonous to be dwelt upon for ever, and though all that can be afforded to the reader is a glimpse of other scenes, yet there are one or two such glimpses which may help him to understand how other people were affected by this complication of affairs. Bertie Hardwick went up to London after that second brief visit at the Rectory, when Miss Courtenay had so successfully eluded seeing him, with anything but comfortable feelings. He had never quite known how she looked upon himself, but now it became apparent to him that whatever might be the amount of knowledge which she had acquired, it had been anything but favourable to him. How far he had a right to Kate's esteem, or

whether, indeed, it was a right thing for him to be anxious about it, is quite a different question. He was anxious about it. He wanted to stand well in the girl's eyes. He had known her all his life, he said to himself. Of course they could only be acquaintances, not even friends, in all probability, so different must their lines of life be; but still it was hard to feel that Kate disliked him, that she thought badly of him. He had no right to care, but he did care. He stopped in his work many and many a day to think of it. And then he would lay down his book or his pen, and gnaw his nails (a bad habit, which his mother vainly hoped she had cured him of), and think—till all the law went out of his head which he was studying.

This was very wrong, and he did not do it any more than he could help; but sometimes the tide of rising thought was too much for him. Bertie was settling to work, as he had great occasion to do. He had lost much time, and there was not a moment to be lost in making up for it. Within the last three months, indeed, his

careless life had sustained a change which filled all his friends with satisfaction. It was but a short time to judge by, but yet, if ever man had seen the evil of his ways, and set himself, with true energy, to mend them, it was Bertie, everybody allowed. He had left his fashionable and expensive cousin the moment they had arrived in London. Instead of Bertie Eldridge's fashionable quarters, in one of the streets off Piccadilly, which hitherto he had shared, he had established himself in chambers in the Temple, up two pair of stairs, where he was working, it was reported, night and day. Bertie Eldridge, indeed, had so frightened all his people by his laughing accounts of the wet towels which bound the other Bertie's head of nights, while he laboured at his law-books, that the student received three several letters on the subject—one from each of his aunts, and one from his mother.

“My dear, it goes to my heart to hear how you are working,” the latter said. “I thank God that my own boy is beginning to see what is necessary to hold his place in life. But

not too much, dearest Bertie, not too much. What would it avail me if my son came to be Lord Chancellor, and lost his health, or even his life, on the way?"

This confusing sentence did not make Bertie ridicule the writer, for he was, strange to say, very fond of his mother, but he wrote her a merry explanation, and set her fears at rest. However, though he did not indulge in wet towels, he had begun to work with an energy no one expected of him. He had a motive. He had seen the necessity, as his mother said. To wander all over the world with Bertie Eldridge, whose purse was carelessly free, but whose way it was, unconsciously, while intending to save his friends from expense, to draw them into greater and ever greater outlay, was not a thing which could be done, or which it would be at all satisfactory to do for life. And many very grave thoughts had come to Bertie on the journey home. Perhaps he had grown just a little disgusted with his cousin, who saw everything from his own point of view, and could not

enter into the feelings and anxieties of a poorer man.

“Oh! bother! All will come right in the end,” he would say, when his cousin pointed out to him the impossibility for himself of the situation, so far as he himself was concerned.

“How can it come right for me?” Hardwick had asked.

“How you do worry!” said Bertie Eldridge. “Haven’t we always shared everything? And why shouldn’t we go on doing so? I may be kept out of it, of course, for years and years, but not for ever. Hang it, Bertie, you know all must come right in the end; and haven’t we shared everything all our lives?”

This is a sort of speech which it is very difficult to answer. It is so much easier for the richer man to feel benevolent and liberal than for the poorer man to understand his ground of gratitude in such a partnership. Bertie Eldridge had, no doubt, shared many of his luxuries with his cousin. He had shared his yacht, for instance—a delight which Bertie Hardwick

could by no means have procured himself—but, while doing this, he had drawn the other into such waste of time and money as he never could have been tempted to otherwise. Bertie Hardwick knew that had he not “shared everything” with his cousin he would have been a wealthier man; and how then could he be grateful for that community of goods which the other Bertie was so lavishly conscious of?

“He can have spent nothing while we were together,” the latter was always saying. “He must have saved, in short, out of the allowance my uncle gives him.”

Bertie Hardwick knew that the case was very different, but he could not be so ungenerous as to insist upon this in face of his cousin’s delightful sense of liberality. He held his tongue, and this silence did not make him more amiable. In short, the partnership had been broken, as partnerships of the kind are generally broken, with a little discomfort on both sides.

Bertie Eldridge continued his pleasant, idle life—did what he liked, and went where he liked, though, perhaps, with less freedom than of old; while Bertie Hardwick retired to Pump Court and worked—as the other said—night and day. He was hard at work one of those Spring afternoons which Kate spent down at Langton. His impulse towards labour was new, and, as yet, it had many things to struggle against. He had not been brought up to work; he had been an out-of-door lad, fond of any pursuit that implied open air and exercise. Most young men are so brought up now-a-days, whether it is the best training for them or not; and since he took his degree, which had not been accompanied by any distinction, he had been yachting, travelling, amusing himself—none of which things are favourable to work in Pump Court, upon a bright April afternoon. His window was open, and the very air coming in tantalized and tempted him. It plucked at his hair; it disordered his papers; it even blew the book close which he was bending over.

“Confound the wind!” said Bertie. But, somehow, he could not shut the window. How fresh it blew! even off the questionable Thames, reminding the solitary student of walks and rides through the budding woods; of the first days of the boating season; of all the delights of the opening year; confound the wind! He opened his book, and went at it again with a valorous and manful heart, a heart full of anxieties, yet with hope in it too, and, what is almost better than hope—determination. The book was very dry, but Bertie applied to it that rule which is so good in war—so good in play—capital for cricket and football, in the hunting-field, and wherever daring and patience are alike necessary—*he would not be beat!* It is, perhaps, rather a novel doctrine to apply to a book about conveyancing—or, at least, such a use of it was novel to Bertie. But it answered all the same.

And it was just as he was getting the mastery of his own mind, and forgetting, for the moment, the fascinations of the sunshine and the errant



breeze, that some one came upstairs with a resounding hasty footstep and knocked at his door. "It's Bertie," he said to himself, with a sigh, and opened to the new-comer. Now he was beat, but not by the book—by fate, and the evil angels—not by any fault of his own.

Bertie Eldridge came in, bringing a gust of fresh air with him. He seated himself on his cousin's table, scorning the chairs. His brow was a little clouded, though he was like one of the butterflies who toil not, neither do they spin.

"By Jove! to see you there grinding night and day, makes a man open his eyes—you that were no better than other people. What do you think you'll ever make of it, old fellow? Not the Woolsack, mind you—I give in to you a great deal, but you're not clever enough for that."

"I never thought I was," said the other, laughing, but not with pleasure; and then there was a pause, and I leave it to the reader to judge which were the different interlocutors in the

dialogue which follows, for to continue writing "Bertie," and "the other Bertie," is more than human patience can bear.

"You said you had something to say to me—out with it! I have a hundred things to do. You never were so busy in your life as I am. Indeed, I don't suppose you know what being occupied means."

"Of course it is the old subject I want to talk of. What could it be else? What is to be done? You know everything that has happened as well as I do. Busy! If you knew what my reflections are early and late, waking and sleeping——"

"I think I can form an idea. Has something new occurred—or is it the old question, the eternal old business, which you never thought of, unfortunately, till it was too late?"

"It is no business of yours to taunt me, nor is it a friend's office. I am driven to my wit's ends. For anything I can see, things may go on as they are for a dozen years."

"Everybody must have felt so from the begin-

ning. How you could be so mad, both she and you ; you most, in one way, for you knew the world better ; she most, in another, for it is of more importance to a woman."

"Shut up, Bertie. I won't have any re-discussion of that question. The thing is, what is to be done now ? I was such a fool as to write to her about going down to Langton, at my father's desire ; and now I dare not go, or she will go frantic. Besides, she says it must be acknowledged before long ; she must do it, if I can't."

"Good God !"

"What is there to be horrified about ? It was all natural. The thing is, what is to be done ? If she would keep quiet, all would be right. I am sure her mother could manage everything. One place is as good as another to live in. Don't look at me like that. I am distracted—going mad—and you won't give me any help."

"The question is, what help can I give ?"

"It is easy enough—as easy as daylight. If I were to go, it would only make us both miser-

able, and lead to imprudences. I know it would. But if you will do it for me——”

“Do you love her, Bertie?”

“Love her! Good heavens! after all the sacrifices I have made! Look at me, as I am, and ask me if I love her! But what can I do? If I speak now we are all ruined; but if she could only be persuaded to wait—only to wait, perhaps for a few days, or a few months——”

“Or a few years! And to wait for what? How can you expect any good to come to you, when you build everything upon your——”

“Shut up, I tell you! Is it my fault? He ought to treat me differently. I never would have entertained such a thought, but for—— Bertie, listen to me. Will you go? They will hear reason from you.”

“They ought not to hear reason. It is a cowardly shame! Yes, I don’t mind your angry looks—it is a shame! You and I have been too long together to mince matters between ourselves. I tell you I never knew anything more cowardly and wretched. It is a shame—a——”

“The question is, not what you think of it,” said the other, sullenly, “but will you go?”

“I suppose I must,” was the reply.

When the visitor left, half an hour later, after more conversation of this same strain, can it be wondered at if Bertie Hardwick's studies were no longer so steady as they had been? He shut up his books at last, and went out and walked towards the river. It was black and glistening, and very full with the Spring rains. The tide was coming up—the river was crowded with vessels of all kinds. Bertie walked to Chelsea, and got a boat there, and went up to Richmond with the tide. But he did not go to the “Star and Garter,” where his cousin was dining with a brilliant party. He walked back again to his chambers, turning over in his tired brain a hundred anxieties. And that night he did sit up at work, and for half an hour had recourse to the wet towel. Not because he was working day and night, but because these anxieties had eaten the very heart out of his working day.

## CHAPTER XVII.

FROM Pump Court, in the Temple, it is a long way to the banks of a little loch in Scotland, surrounded by hills, covered with heather, and populous with grouse—that is, of course, in the season. The grouse in this early Summer were but babies, chirping among the big roots of the ling, like barndoor chickens; the heather was not purple, but only greening over through the grey husks of last year's bloom. The gorse blossoms were forming; the birch-trees shaking out their folded leaves a little more and more day by day, against the sky, which was sometimes so blue, and sometimes so leaden. At that time of the year, or at any other, it is lovely at Loch Arroch. Seated on the high bank behind the little inn, on the soft grass,

which is as green as emeralds, but soft as velvet, you can count ten different slopes of hills surrounding the gleaming water, which receives them all impartially; ten distinct ridges, all as various as so many sportsmen, distinct in stature and character—from the kindly birch-crowned heads in front here, away to the solemn distant altitudes, folded in snow-plaids or cloud-mantles, and sometimes in glorious sheen of sunset robes, that dazzle you—which fill up the circle far away. The distant giants are cleft into three peaks, and stand still to have their crowns and garments changed, with a benign patience, greeting you across the loch. There are no tourists, and few strangers, except the fishermen, who spend their days not thinking of you or of the beauties of nature, tossed in heavy cobbles upon the stormy loch, or wading up to their waist in ice-cold pools of the river. The river dashes along its wild channel through the glen, working through rocks, and leaping precipitous corners, shrouding itself, like a coy girl, with the birchen tresses which

stream over it, till it comes to another loch—a big silvery clasp upon its foaming chain. Among these woods and waters man is still enough; but Nature is full of commotion. She sings about all the hillsides in a hundred burns, with delicatest treble; she makes her own bass under the riven rocks, among the foam of the greater streams; she mutters over your head with deep, sonorous melancholy utterance in the great pine-trees, and twitters in the leaflets of the birch. Lovely birks!—sweetest of all the trees of the mountains! Never were such haunts for fairies, or for mountain girls as agile and as fair, as those sweet birchen woods. “Stern and wild,” do you say? And surely we say it, for so Sir Walter said before us. But what an exquisite idea was that of Nature—what a sweet, fantastic conceit, just like her wayward wealth of resource, to clothe the slopes of those rude hills with the Lady of the Woods! She must have laughed with pleasure, like a child, but with tears of exquisite poet satisfaction in her eyes, when she first saw



the wonderful result. And as for you poor people who have never seen Highland loch or river shine through the airy foliage, the white-stemmed grace and lightness of a birch-wood, we are sorry for you, but we will not insult your ignorance ; for, soft in your ear, the celebrated Mr. Cook, and all his satellites who make up tours in the holiday season, have never, Heaven be praised ! heard of Loch Arroch ; and long may it be before the British tourist finds out that tranquil spot.

I cannot tell how Mrs. Anderson and her daughter found it out. The last Consul, it is true, had been from Perthshire, but that of itself gave them little information. They had gone to Edinburgh first, and then, feeling that scarcely sufficiently out of the way, had gone further north, until at last Kinloch-Arroch received them ; and they stayed there, they could not tell why, partly because the people looked so kind. The note which Kate received on her birthday had no date, and the post-mark on it was of a distant place, that no distinct

clue might be given to their retreat ; but Ombra always believed, though without the slightest ground for it, that this note of her mother's, like all her other injudicious kindnesses to Kate, had done harm, and been the means of betraying them. For it was true that they were now in a kind of hiding, these two women, fearing to be recognised, not wishing to see any one, for reasons which need not be dwelt upon here. They had left Langton-Courtenay with a miserable sense of friendlessness and loneliness, and yet it had been in some respects a relief to them to get away ; and the stillness of Loch Arroch, its absolute seclusion, and the kind faces of the people they found there, all concurred in making them decide upon this as their resting-place. They were to stay all the summer, and already they were known to everybody round. Old Francesca had already achieved a great *succès* in the Perthshire village. The people declared that they understood her much better than if she had been "ane o' thae mincing English." She was supposed to be

French, and Scotland still remembers that France was once her auld and kind ally. The women in their white mitches wondered a little it is true, at the little old Italian's capless head, and knot of scanty hair; but her kind little brown face, and her clever rapid ways, took them by storm. When she spoke Italian to her mistress they gathered round her in admiration. "Losh! did you ever hear the like o' that?" they cried, with hearty laughs, half restrained by politeness—though half of them spoke Gaelic, and saw nothing wonderful in that achievement.

Ombra, the discontented and unhappy, had never in her life before been so gentle and so sweet. She was not happy still, but for the moment she was penitent, and subdued and at peace, and the admiration and the interest of their humble neighbours pleased her. Mrs. Anderson had given a description of her daughter to the kind landlady of the little inn, which did not tally with the circumstances which the reader knows; but probably she had her own

reasons for that, and the tale was such as filled everybody with sympathy. "You maunna be doon-hearted, my bonnie lamb," the old women would say to her ; and Ombra would blush with painful emotion, and yet would be in her heart touched and consoled by the homely sympathy. Ah! if those kind people had but known how much harder her burden really was! But yet to know how kindly all these poor stranger folk felt towards them was pleasant to the two women, and they clung together closer than ever in the enforced quiet. They were very anxious, restless, and miserable, and yet for a little while they were as nearly happy as two women could be. This is a paradox which some women will understand, but which I cannot pause to explain.

Things were going on in this quiet way, and it was the end of May, a season when as yet few even of the fishers who frequent that spot by nature, and none of the wise wanderers who have discovered Loch Arroch had begun to arrive, when one evening a very tall man,

strong and heavy, trudged round the corner into the village, with his knapsack over his shoulders. He was walking through the Highlands alone at this early period of the year. He put his knapsack down on the bench outside the door, and came into the little hall, decorated with glazed cases, in which stuffed trout of gigantic proportions still seemed to swim among the green, green river weeds, to ask kind Mrs. Macdonald, the landlady, if she could put him up. He was "a soft-spoken gentleman," courteous, such as Highlanders love, and there was a look of sadness about him which moved the mistress of the "Macdonald Arms." But all at once, while he was talking to her, he started wildly, made a dart to the stair, which Francesca at that moment was leisurely ascending, and upset, as he passed, little Duncan, Mrs. Macdonald's favourite grandchild.

"The man's gane gyte!" said the landlady.

Francesca for her part took no notice of the stranger. If she saw him, she either did not recognise him, or thought it expedient to ignore

him. She went on, carrying high in front of her a tray full of newly-ironed fine linen, her own work, which she was carrying from the kitchen. The stranger stood at the foot of the stairs and watched her, with his face lifted to the light, which streamed from a long window opposite. There was an expression in his countenance (Mrs. Macdonald said afterwards) which was like a picture. He had found what he sought!

“That is old Francesca,” he said, coming back to her, “Mrs. Anderson’s maid. Then, of course, Mrs. Anderson is here.”

“Ou ay, sir, the leddies are here,” said Mrs. Macdonald—“maybe they are expecting you? There was something said a while ago about a gentleman—a brother, or some near friend to the young goodman.”

“The young goodman?”

“Ou ay, sir—him that’s in India, puir gentleman!—at sic a time, too, when he would far rather be at hame. But ye’ll gang up the stair? Kath’rin, take the gentleman up the

stair—he's come to visit the leddies—and put him into No. 10 next door. Being so near the leddies, I never put no man there that I dinna ken something about. You'll find Loch Arroch air, sir, has done the young mistress good."

The stranger followed upstairs, with a startled sense of other wonders to come ; and thus it happened that, without warning, Mr. Sugden suddenly walked into the room where Ombra lay on a sofa by the fireside, with her mother sitting by. Both the ladies started up in dismay. They were so bewildered that neither could speak for a moment. The blood rushed to Ombra's face in an overpowering blush. He thought he had never seen her look so beautiful, so strange—he did not know how ; and her look of bewildered inquiry and suspicion suddenly showed him what he had never thought of till that moment—that he had no right to pry into their privacy—to hunt her, as it were, into a corner—to pursue her here.

"Mr. Sugden !" Mrs. Anderson cried in dismay ; and then she recovered her prudence,

and held out her hand to him, coming between him and Ombra. "What a very curious meeting this is!—what an unexpected pleasure! Of all places in the world, to meet a Shanklin friend at Loch Arroch! Ombra, do not disturb yourself, dear; we need not stand on ceremony with such an old friend as Mr. Sugden. My poor child has a dreadful cold."

And then he took her hand into his own—Ombra's hand—which he used to sit and watch as she worked—the whitest, softest hand. It felt so small now, like a shadow, and the flush had gone from her face. He seemed to see nothing but those eyes, watching him with fear and suspicion—eyes which distrusted him, and reminded him that he had no business here.

And he sat down by the sofa, and talked ordinary talk, and told them of Shanklin, which he had left. He had been making a pedestrian tour in Scotland. Yes, it was early, but he did not mind the weather, and the time suited him. It was a surprise to him to see Francesca, but he had heard that



Mrs. Anderson had left Langton-Courtenay——

“Yes,” she said briefly, without explanation ; and added—“We were travelling, like you, when Ombra fell in love with this place. You must have seen it to perfection if you walked down the glen to-day—the Glencoe Hills were glorious to-day. Which is your next stage? I am afraid Mrs. Macdonald has scarcely room——”

“Oh! yes, she has given me a room for to-night,” he said ; and he saw the mother and daughter look at each other, and said to himself, in an agony of humiliation, what a fool he had been—what an intrusive, impertinent fool!

When he took his leave, Mrs. Anderson went after him to the door ; she asked, with trepidation in her voice, how long he meant to stay. This was too much for the poor fellow ; he led the way along the passage to the staircase window, lest Ombra should hear through the half-open door.

“Mrs. Anderson,” he said, hoarsely, “once you promised me if she should ever want a

brother's help or a brother's care—not that it is what I could have wished——”

“Mr. Sugden, this is ridiculous; I can take care of my own child. You have no right to come and hunt us out, when you know—when you can see that we wish—to be private.” Then, with a sudden change, she added—“Oh, you are very good—I am sure you are very good, but she wants for nothing. Dear Mr. Sugden, if you care for her or me, go away.”

“I will go away to-morrow,” he said, with a deep sigh of disappointment and resignation.

She looked out anxiously at the sky. It was clouding over; night was coming on—there was no possibility of sending him away that night.

“Mr. Sugden,” she said, wringing her hands, “when a gentleman thrusts himself into any one's secrets he is bound not to betray them. You will hear news here, which I did not wish to be known at present—Ombra is married.”

“Married!” he said, with a groan, which he could not restrain.

“Yes, her husband is not able to be with

her. We are waiting till he can join us—till he can make it public. You have found this out against our will; you must give me your word not to betray us.”

“Why should I betray you?” he said; “to whom? I came, not knowing. Since ever I knew her I have been her slave, you know. I will be so now. Is she—happy, at least?”

“She is very happy,” said Mrs. Anderson; and then her courage failed her, and she cried. She did not burst into tears—such an expression does not apply to women of her age. The tears which were, somehow, near the surface, fell suddenly, leaving no traces. “Everything is not so—comfortable as might be wished,” she said, “but, so far as *that* goes, she is happy.”

“May I come again?” he said. His face had grown very long and pale; he looked like a man who had just come back from a funeral. “Or would you rather I went away at once?”

She gave another look at the sky, which had cleared; night was more distant than it had seemed ten minutes ago. And Mrs. Anderson

did not think that it was selfishness on her part to think of her daughter first. She gave him her hand and pressed his, and said—

“You are the kindest, the best friend. Oh, for her sake, go!”

And he went away with a heavy heart, striding over the dark unknown hills. It was long past midnight before he got shelter—but what did that matter? He would have done much more joyfully for her sake. But his last hope seemed gone as he went along that mountain way. He had hoped always to serve her sometime or other, and now he could serve her no more!

## CHAPTER XVIII.

THIS was the reason why Kate heard no more from Mr. Sugden. He knew, and yet he did not know. That which had been told him was very different from what he had expected to hear. He had gone to seek a deserted maiden, and he had found a wife. He had gone with some wild hope of being able to interpose on her behalf, "as her brother would have done," and bring her false lover back to her—when, lo! he found that he was intruding upon sacred domestic ground, upon the retreat of a wife whose husband was somewhere ready, no doubt, to defend her from all intrusion. This confounded him for the first moment. He went away, as we have said, without a word, asking no explanation. What right had he to any explanation?

Probably Ombra herself, had she known what his mission and what his thoughts were, would have been furious at the impertinence. But her mother judged him more gently, and he, poor fellow, knew in his own soul how different his motives were from those of intrusion or impertinence.

When he came to the homely, lonely little house, where he found shelter in the midst of the night, he stopped there in utter languor, still confused by his discovery and his failure. But when he came to himself he was not satisfied. Next day, in the silence and loneliness of the mountains, he mused and pondered on this subject, which was never absent from his mind ten minutes together. He walked on and on upon the road he had traversed in the dark the night before, till he came to the point where it commanded the glen below, and where the descent to Loch Arroch began. He saw at his feet the silvery water gleaming, the loch, the far lines of the withdrawing village roofs, and that one under which she was. At the sight the

Curate's mournful heart yearned over the woman he loved. Why was she there alone, with only her mother, and she a wife? What was there that was not "exactly comfortable," as Mrs. Anderson had said?

The result of his musing was that he stayed in the little mountain change-house for some time. There was a desolate little loch near, lying, as in a nook, up at the foot of great Schehallion. And there he pretended to fish, and in the intervals of his sport, which was dreary enough, took long walks about the country, and, without being seen by them, found out a great deal about the two ladies. They were alone. The young lady's husband was said to be "in foreign pairts." The good people had not heard what he was, but that business detained him somewhere, though it was hoped he would be back before the Autumn. "And I wish he may, for yon bonnie young creature's sake!" the friendly wife added, who told him this tale.

The name they told him she was called by

was not a name he knew, which perplexed him. But when he remembered his own observations, and Kate's story, he could not believe that any other lover could have come in. When Mr. Sugden had fully satisfied himself, and discovered all that was discoverable, he went back to England with the heat of a sudden purpose. He went to London, and he sought out Bertie Hardwick's rooms. Bertie himself was whistling audibly as Mr. Sugden knocked at his door. He was packing his portmanteau, and stopped now and then to utter a mild oath over the things which would not pack in as they ought. He was going on a journey. Perhaps to her, Mr. Sugden thought; and, as he heard his whistle, and saw his levity, his blood boiled in his veins.

“What, Sugden!” cried Bertie. “Come in, old fellow, I am glad to see you. Why, you've been and left Shanklin! What did you do that for? The old place will not look like itself without you.”

“There are other vacant places that will be



felt more than mine," said the Curate, in a funereal voice, putting himself sadly on the nearest chair.

"Oh! the ladies at the Cottage! To be sure, you are quite right. They must be a dreadful loss," said Bertie.

Mr. Sugden felt that he flushed and faltered, and these signs of guilt made it doubly clear.

"It is odd enough," he said, with double meaning, "that we should talk of that, for I have just come from Scotland, from the Highlands, where, of all people in the world, I met suddenly with Miss Anderson and her mother."

Bertie faced round upon him in the middle of his packing, which he had resumed, and said, "Well!" in a querulous voice—a voice which already sounded like that of a man put on his defence.

"Well!" said the Curate—"I don't think it is well. She is not Miss Anderson now. But I see you know that. Mr. Hardwick, if you know anything of her husband, I think you should urge him not to leave her alone there. She

looks—not very well. Poor Ombra!” cried the Curate, warming into eloquence. “I have no right to call her by her name, but that I—I was fond of her too. I would have given my life for her! And she is like her name—she is like a shadow, that is ready to flit away.”

Bertie Hardwick listened with an agitated countenance—he grew red and pale, and began to pace about the room; but he made no answer—he was confused and startled by what his visitor said.

“I daresay my confession does not interest you much,” Mr. Sugden resumed. “I make it to show I have some right—to take an interest, at least. That woman for whom I would give my life, Mr. Hardwick, is pining there for a man who leaves her to pine—a man who must be neglecting her shamefully, for it cannot be long since he married her—a man who——”

“And pray, Mr. Sugden,” said Bertie, choking with apparent anger and agitation, “where did you obtain your knowledge of this man?”

“Not from her,” said the Curate; “but by

chance—by the inquiries I made in my surprise. Mr. Hardwick, if you know who it is who is so happy, and so negligent of his happiness——”

“ Well ? ”

“ He has no right to stay away from her after this warning,” cried the Curate, rising to his feet. “ Do you understand what a thing it is for me to come and say so ?—to one who is throwing away what I would give my life for ? But she is above all. If he stays away from her, he will reproach himself for it all his life ! ”

And with these words he turned to go. He had said enough—his own eyes were beginning to burn and blaze. He felt that he might seize this false lover by the throat if he stayed longer. And he had at least done all he could for Ombra. He had said enough to move any man who was a man. He made a stride towards the door in his indignation ; but Bertie Hardwick interrupted him, with his hand on his arm.

“ Sugden,” he said, with a voice full of emotion, “ I am not so bad as you think me ; but I am not so good as you are. The man you

speaking shall hear your warning. But there is one thing I have a right to ask. What you learnt by chance, you will not make any use of—not to her cousin, for instance, who knows nothing. You will respect her secret there?"

"I do not know that I ought to do so—but I promised her mother," said the Curate, sternly. "Good morning, Mr. Hardwick. I hope you will act at once on what you have heard."

"Won't you shake hands?" said Bertie.

The Curate was deeply prejudiced against him—hated him in his levity and carelessness, amusing himself while she was suffering. But when he looked into Bertie's face, his enmity melted. Was this the man who had done her—and him—so much wrong? He put out his hand with reluctance, moved against his will.

"Do you deserve it?" he said, in his deep voice.

"Yes—so far as honesty goes," said the young man, with a broken, agitated laugh.

The Curate went away, wondering and unhappy. Was he so guilty, that open-faced

youth, who seemed yet too near boyhood to be an accomplished deceiver?—or was there still more in the mystery than met the eye?

This was how Kate got no news. She looked for it for many a day. As the Summer ripened and went on, a hungry thirst for information of one kind or another possessed her. Her aunt's birthday letter had been a few tender words only—words which were humble, too, and sad. "Poor Ombra," she had said, "was pretty well." Poor Ombra!—why *poor* Ombra? Kate asked herself the question with sudden fits of anxiety, which she could not explain to herself; and she began to watch for the post with almost feverish eagerness. But the suspense lasted so long, that the keenness of the edge wore off again, and no news ever came.

In July, however, Lady Caryisfort came, having lingered on her way from Italy till it became too late to keep the engagement she had made with Mr. Courtenay for Kate's first season in town. She was so kind as to go to Langton-Courtenay instead, on what she called a long visit.

“Your uncle has to find out, like other people, that he will only find aid ready made to his hand when he doesn’t want it,” she said —“that is the moment when everything becomes easy. I might have been of use to him, I know, two months ago—and accordingly my private affairs detained me, and it is only now, you see, that I am here.”

“I don’t see why you should have hurried for my uncle,” said Kate; “he has never come to see me, though he has promised twenty times. But you are welcome always, whenever you please.”

“Thanks, dear,” said Lady Caryisfort, who was languid after her journey. “He will come now, when you don’t want him. And so the aunt and the cousin are gone, Kate? You must tell me why. I heard, after you left Florence, that Miss Anderson had flirted abominably with both these young men—behind your back, my poor darling, when you were with me, I suppose; though I always thought that young Eldridge would have suited you pre-

cisely—two nice properties, nice families—everything that was nice. But an ideal match like that never comes to pass. They tell me she was called *la demoiselle à deux cavaliers*. Don't look shocked. Of course, it could only be a flirtation ; there could be nothing wrong in it. But, you dear little innocent, is this all new to you ?”

“Mr. Hardwick and Mr. Eldridge used to go with us to a great many places ; they were old friends,” said Kate, with her cheeks and forehead dyed crimson in a moment ; “but why people should say such disagreeable things—”

“People always say disagreeable things,” said Lady Caryisfort ; “it is the only occupation which is pursued anywhere. But as you did not hear about your cousin, I am glad to think you cannot have heard of me.”

“Of you !” Kate's consternation was extreme.

“They were so good as to say I was going to marry Antonio Buoncompagni,” said Lady Caryisfort, calmly, smoothing away an invisible wrinkle from her glove. But she did not look

up, and Kate's renewed blush and start were lost upon her—or perhaps not quite lost. There was a silence for a minute after, for the tone, as well as the announcement, took Kate altogether by surprise.

“And are you?” she asked, in a low tone, after that pause.

“I don't think it,” said Lady Caryisfort, slowly. “The worst is, that he took it into his head himself—why, heaven knows! for I am—let me see—three, four, five years, at least, older than he is. I think he felt that you had jilted him, Kate. No, it would be too much of a bore. He is very good-natured, to be sure, and too polite to interfere; but still, I don't think— Besides, you know, it would be utterly ridiculous. How could I call Elena Strozzi aunt? In the meantime, my Kate—my little heiress—I think I had better stay here and marry you.”

“But I don't want to be married,” cried Kate.

“The very reason why you will be,” said her new guardian, laughing. But the girl stole



shyly away, and got a book, and prepared to read to Lady Caryisfort. She was fond of being read to, and Kate shrank with a repugnance shared by many girls from this sort of talk ; and, indeed, I am not sure that she was pleased with the news. It helped to reproduce that impression in her mind which so many other incidents had led to. She had always remembered with a certain amount of gratitude poor Antonio's last appearance at the railway, with the violets in his coat, and the tender, respectful farewell he waved to her. And all the time he had been thinking of Lady Caryisfort ! What a strange world it was, in which everything went on in this bewildering, treacherous way ! Was there nobody living who was quite true, quite real, meaning all he or she said ? She began to think not, and her very brain reeled under the discovery. Her path was full of shadows, which threatened and circled round her. Oh ! Ombra, shadow of shadows, where was she ? and where had disappeared with her all that tender, bright life, in which Kate be-

lied everybody, and dreamt of nothing but sincerity and truth? It seemed to have gone for ever, to return no more.

## CHAPTER XIX.

ALL that Summer, Mr. Sugden wandered about the world like a soul in pain. He went everywhere, unable to settle in one place. Some obliging friend had died, and left him a little money, and this was how he disposed of it. His people at home disapproved much. They thought he ought to have been happy in the other curacy which they had found him quite close to his own parish, and should have invested his legacy, and perhaps looked out for some nice girl with money, and married as soon as a handy living fell vacant. This routine, however, did not commend itself to his mind. He tore himself away from mothers'-meetings, and clothing-clubs, and daily services; he went wandering, dissatisfied and unhappy, through

the world. He had been crossed in love. It is a thing people do not own to readily, but still it is nothing to be ashamed of. And not only was it the restlessness of unhappiness that moved him ; a lingering hope was yet in his mind that he might be of use to Ombra still. He went over the route which the party had taken only a year before ; he went to the Swiss village where they had passed so long, and was easily able to glean some information about the English ladies, and the one who was fond of the Church. He went there after her, and knelt upon the white flags and wondered what she had been thinking of, and prayed for her with his face towards Madonna on the altar, with her gilt crown, and all her tall artificial lilies.

Poor honest, broken-hearted lover ! If she had been happy, he would have been half cured by this time ; but she was not happy—or, at least, he thought so, and his heart burned over her with regretful love and anguish. Oh, if Providence had but given her to him, though unworthy, how he would have shielded and

kept her from all evil ! He wandered on to Florence, where he stayed for some time, with the same vain idol-worship. He remained until the Autumn flood of tourists began to arrive, and the English Church was opened. And it was here he acquired the information which changed all his plans. The same young clergyman who was a friend of Bertie Eldridge's, and had known the party in Florence, returned again that Winter, and officiated once more in the Conventicle of the English visitors. And Mr. Sugden had known him, too, at school or college ; the two young clergymen grew intimate, and, one day, all at once, without warning, the Curate had a secret confided to him, which thrilled him through and through from head to heel. His friend told him of all the importunities he had been subjected to, to induce him to celebrate a marriage, and how he had consented, and how his conscience had been uneasy ever since. " Was I wrong ? " he asked his friend. " The young lady's mother was there and consenting, and the man—you know him—was of full age, and

able to judge for himself; the only thing was the secrecy—do you think I was wrong?"

Mr. Sugden gave no answer. He scarcely heard the words that were addressed to him; a revolution had taken place in all his ideas. He had not spent more than half his legacy, and he had half the Winter before him, yet immediately he made up his mind to go home.

Two days after he started, and in a week was making his way down to Langton-Courtenay, for no very intelligible reason. What his plea would have been, had he been forced to give it, we cannot tell, but he did not explain himself even to himself; he had a vague feeling that something new had come into the story, and that Kate ought to be informed—an idea quite vague, but obstinate. He went down, as he had gone before, to Westerton, and there engaged a fly to take him to Langton. But, when he arrived, he was startled to find the house lighted up, and all the appearance of company. He did not know what to do. There was a dinner-party, he was told, and he felt that

he and his news, such as they were, could not be obtruded into the midst of it. He was possessed by his mission as by incipient madness. It seemed to him like a divine message, which he was bound to deliver. He went back to the little inn in the village, and dressed himself in evening clothes—for he had brought his portmanteau on with him all the way, not having wits enough left to leave it behind. And when it was late, he walked up the long avenue to the Hall. He knew Kate well enough, he thought, to take so much liberty with her—and then his news! What was it that made his news seem so important to him? He could not tell.

Mr. Courtenay was at Langton, and so was Lady Caryisfort. The lady, who should have been mentioned first, had stayed with Kate for a fortnight on her first visit, and then, leaving her alone all the Summer, had gone off upon other visits, promising a return in Autumn. It was October now, and Mr. Courtenay too had at last found it convenient to pay his niece a visit. He had brought with him some people

for the shooting, men, chiefly, of respectable age, with wives and daughters. The party was highly respectable, but not very amusing, and indeed Lady Caryisfort found it tedious; but such as it was, it was the first party of guests which had ever been gathered under Kate's roof, and she was excited and anxious that everything should go off well. In six months more she would be her own mistress, and the undue delays which had taken place in her life were then to be all remedied.

“You ought to have been introduced to the world at least two years ago,” said Lady Caryisfort. “But never mind, my dear; it does not matter for you, and next season will make up for everything. You have the bloom of sixteen still, and you have Langton-Courtenay,” the lady added, kissing her.

To Kate there was little pleasure in this speech; but she swallowed it, as she had learned to swallow a great many things.

“I have Langton-Courtenay,” she said to herself with a smile of bitter indignation—“that



makes up for everything. That I have nobody who cares for me does not matter in comparison."

But yet she was excited about her first party, and hoped with all her heart it would go off well. There were several girls besides herself; but there were only two young men—one a wealthy and formal young diplomatist, the other a penniless cousin of Lady Caryisfort's—"too penniless and too foolish even to try for an heiress," she had assured Mr. Courtenay. The rest were old bachelors—Mr. Courtenay's own contemporaries, or the respectable married men above described. A most safe party to surround an heiress, and not amusing, but still, as the first means of exercising her hospitality in her own house, exciting to Kate.

The dinner had gone off well enough. It was a good dinner, and even Uncle Courtenay had been tolerably satisfied. The only thing that had happened to discompose Kate was that she had seen Lady Caryisfort yawn twice. But that was a thing scarcely to be guarded

against. When the ladies got back to the drawing-room, she felt that the worst of her labours were over, and that she might rest; but her surprise was great when, half an hour later, she suddenly saw Mr. Sugden standing in a corner behind her. He had come there as if by magic—like a ghost starting up out of nothing. Kate rose to her feet suddenly with a little cry, and went to him. What a good thing that it was a dull, steady-going party, not curious, as livelier society is! She went up to him hurriedly, holding out her hand.

“Mr. Sugden! When did you come? I never saw you. Have you dropped through from the skies?”

“I ought to apologise,” said the Curate, growing red.

“Oh, never mind apologising! I know you have something to tell me!” cried Kate.

“But how can I tell you here? Yes, it is something—not bad news—oh, not bad news—don’t think so. I came off at once without thinking. A letter might have done as well;

but I get confused, and don't think till too late——”

“I am so sorry for you!” cried Kate impulsively, holding out her hand to him once more.

He took it, and then he dropped it, poor fellow! not knowing what else to do. Kate's hand was nothing to him, nor any woman's, except the one which was given into another man's keeping. He was still dazed with his journey, and all that had happened. His theory was that, as he had found it out another way, he was clear of his promise to Mrs. Anderson; and then he had to set a mistake right. How could he tell what harm that mistake might do?

“Your cousin—is married,” he said.

“Married!” cried Kate. A slight shiver ran over her, a thrill that went through her frame, and then died out, and left her quite steady and calm. But, somehow, in that moment her colour, the bloom of sixteen, as Lady Caryisfort called it, died away from her cheek. She stood with her hands clasped, and her face raised, looking

up to him. Of course it was only what she felt must happen some day ; she said to herself that she had known it. There was nothing to be surprised about.

“She was married last year, in Florence,” the Curate resumed. And then the thrill came back again, and so strongly that Kate shook as if with cold. In a moment there rose up before her the group which she had met at the doorway on the Lung-Arno, the group which moved so quickly, and kept so close together ; Ombra leaning on her husband’s arm. Yes, how blind she had been ! That was the explanation—at a glance she saw it all. Oh ! heaven and earth, how the universe reeled under her ! He had looked at herself, spoken to her, touched her hand as only he had ever touched, and looked, and spoken—after that ! The blood ebbed away from Kate’s heart ; but though the world spun and swam so in the uncertainty of space, that she feared every moment to fall, or rather to be dashed down by its swaying, she kept standing, to all appearance immovable, before the tall

Curate, with her hands clasped, and a smile upon her pale face.

“Kate!” said some one behind her—“Kate!”

She turned round. It was Lady Caryisfort who had called her. And what was there more to be told? Now she knew all. Spigot was standing behind her, with a yellow envelope upon a silver tray. A telegram—the first one she had ever got in her life! No civility could hesitate before such a letter as that. But for the news which she had just heard she would have been frightened; but that preparation had steeled her. She tore it open and read it eagerly. Then she raised a bewildered look to Lady Caryisfort and Mr. Sugden, who were both close by her.

“I don’t understand it,” she said. She held it up to him, because he was nearest. And then suddenly put up her hand to stop him, as he began to read aloud. “Hush! hush! Mrs. Hardwick is here,” she said.

“What is the matter?” said Lady Caryisfort, rising to shield this group, which began to at-

tract the eyes of the party. "Kate, what is your telegram about?"

Kate held it out to her without a word. The message it contained was this: "*Sir Herbert Eldridge died here last night.*"

"Sir Herbert Eldridge?" repeated Lady Carysfort. "What is he to you, Kate? What does it mean? Child, are you ill? You are like a ghost!"

"He is nothing in the world to me," said Kate, rousing herself. "If I am like a ghost it is because—oh! I am so cold!—because—it is so strange! I never saw Sir Herbert Eldridge in my life. Mr. Sugden, what do you think it means?"

She looked up and looked round for the Curate. He was gone. She gazed all round her in consternation.

"Where is he?" she cried.

"The gentleman you were talking to went out a minute ago. Who is he? Kate, dear, don't look so strange. Who was this man, and what did he come to tell you about?"

“I don’t know,” said the girl, faintly, her eyes still seeking for him round the room. “I don’t know where he came from, or where he has gone to. I think he must have been a ghost.”

“What was he telling you—you must know that at least?”

Kate made no reply. She pushed a chair towards the fireplace, and warmed her trembling fingers. She crushed up the big yellow envelope in her hand, under her laced handkerchief.

“‘Sir Herbert Eldridge died last night.’ What is that to me? What have I to do with it?” she said.

## CHAPTER XX.

THE reason of Kate's strange paleness and agitation was afterwards explained to be the fact that she had suddenly heard, no one knew how, of the death of Mrs. Hardwick's brother; while that lady was sitting by her, happy and undisturbed, and knowing nothing. This was the reason Lady Caryisfort gave to several of the ladies in the house, who remarked next morning on Miss Courtenay's looks.

"Poor Kate did not know what to do; and the feelings are strong at her age. I daresay Mrs. Hardwick, when she heard of it, took the news with perfect composure," said Lady Caryisfort; "but then at twenty it is difficult to realize that."

"Ah! now I understand," said one of the



ladies. "It was told her, no doubt, by that tall young man, like a clergyman, who appeared in the drawing-room all of a sudden, after the gentlemen came downstairs, and disappeared again directly after."

"Yes, you are quite right," said Lady Caryisfort. She said so because she was aware that to have any appearance of mystery about Kate would be fatal to that brilliant *début* which she intended her to make; but in her own mind she was much disturbed about this tall young man like a clergyman. She had questioned Kate about him in vain.

"He is an old friend, from where we lived in the Isle of Wight," the girl explained.

"But old friends from the Isle of Wight don't turn up everywhere like this. Did he come about Sir Herbert Eldridge?"

"He knows nothing about Sir Herbert Eldridge. He came to tell me about—my cousin."

"Oh! your cousin! *La demoiselle aux deux chevaliers*," said Lady Caryisfort. "And did he bring you news of her?"

“A little,” said Kate, faintly, driven to her wit’s end; but she was not a weak-minded young woman, to be driven to despair; and here she drew up and resisted. “So little, that it is not worth repeating,” she added, firmly. “I knew it almost all before, but he was not aware of that. He meant it very kindly.”

“Did he come on purpose, dear?”

“Yes, I suppose so, the good fellow,” said Kate, gratefully.

“My dear, he may be a very good fellow; but curates are like other men, and don’t do such things without hope of reward,” said Lady Caryisfort, doubtfully. “So I would not encourage him to go on secret missions—unless I meant to reward him,” she added.

“He does not want any of my rewards,” said Kate, with that half bitterness of still resentment which she occasionally showed at the suspicions which were so very ready to enter the minds of all about her. “I at least have no occasion to think as they do,” she added to herself, with a feeling of sore humility. “Of all

the people I have ever known, no one has given me this experience—they have all preferred her, without thinking of me.”

It was with this thought in her mind that she withdrew herself from Lady Caryisfort's examination. She had nothing more to say, and she would not be made to say any more. But when she was in the sanctuary of her own room, she went over and over, with a heart which beat heavily within her breast, Mr. Sugden's information. That Ombra should have married Bertie did not surprise her—that she had foreseen, she said to herself. But that they should have married so long ago, under her very eyes, as it were, gave her a strange thrill of pain through and through her. They had not told her even a thing so important as that. Her aunt and Ombra, her dearest friends, had lived with her afterwards, and kissed her night and morning, and at last had broken away from her, and given her up, and yet had never told her. The one seemed to Kate as wonderful as the other. Not in their constant com-

panionship, not when that companionship came to a breach—neither at one time nor the other did they do her so much justice. And Bertie!—that was worst of all. Had his look of gladness to see her at the brook in the park, when they last met, been all simulation?—or had it been worse than simulation?—a horrible disrespect, a feeling that she did not deserve the same observance as men were forced to show to other girls! When she came to this question, her brain swam so with wrath and a sense of wrong, that she became unable to discriminate. Poor Kate!—and nothing of this did she dare to confide to a creature round her. She who had been so outspoken, so ready to disclose her thoughts—she had to lock them up in her own bosom, and never breathe a word.

Unconnected with this, but still somehow connected with it, was the extraordinary message she had received. On examining it afterwards in her own room, she found it was sent to her by “Bertie.” What did it mean? How did he dare to send such a message to her, and what

had she to do with it? Had it been a mistake? Could it have been sent to her, instead of to the Rectory? But Kate ascertained that a similar telegram had been received by the Hardwicks the same night, when they went home from her dinner-party. Minnie Hardwick stole up two days later to tell her about it. Minnie was very anxious to do her duty, and to feel sad, as a girl ought whose uncle has just died; but though the blinds were all down in the Rectory, and the village dressmaker and Mrs. Hardwick's maid were labouring night and day at "the mourning," Minnie found it hard to be so heart-broken as she thought necessary.

"It is so strange to think that one of one's own relations has gone away to—to the Better Land," said Minnie, with a very solemn face. "I know I ought not to have come out, but I wanted so to see you; and when we are sorrowful, it is then our friends are dearest to us. Don't you think so, dear Kate?"

"Were you very fond of your uncle, Minnie?"

“I—I never saw very much of him. He has been thought to be going to die for ever so long,” said Minnie. “He was very stout, and had not a very good temper. Oh! how wicked it is to remember that now! And he did not like girls; so that we never met. Mamma is very, very unhappy, of course.”

“Yes, it is of course,” Kate said to herself, with again that tinge of bitterness which was beginning to rise in her mind; “even when a man dies, it is of course that people are sorry. If I were to die, they would try how sorrowful they could look, and say how sad it was, and care as little about me as they do now.” This thought crossed her mind as she sat and talked to Minnie, who was turning her innocent little countenance as near as possible into the expression of a mute at a funeral, but who, no doubt, in reality, cared much more for her new mourning than for her old uncle—a man who had neither kindness to herself, nor general goodness to commend him. It was she who told Kate of the telegram which had been found

waiting at the Rectory when they went home, and how she had remembered that Kate had got one too, and how strange such a coincidence was (but Minnie knew nothing of the news contained in Kate's), and how frightened she always was for telegrams.

"They always bring bad news," said Minnie, squeezing one innocent little tear into the corner of her eye. Her father had gone off immediately, and Bertie was already with his cousin. "It is he who will be Sir Herbert now," Minnie said with awe; "and oh! Kate, I am so much afraid he will not be very sorry! His father was not very kind to him. They used to quarrel sometimes—I ought not to say so, but I am sure you will never, never tell anyone. Uncle Herbert used to get into dreadful passions whenever Bertie was silly, and did anything wrong. Uncle Herbert used to storm so; and then it would bring on fits. Oh! Kate, shouldn't we be thankful to Providence that we have such a dear, kind papa?"

Thus this incident, which she had no conneo-

tion with, affected Kate's life, and gave a certain colour to her thoughts. She lived, as it were, for several days within the shadow of the blinds, which were drawn down at the Rectory, and the new mourning that was being made, and her own private trouble, which was kept carefully hidden in her heart of hearts. This gave her such abundant food for thought, that the society of her guests was too much for her, and especially Lady Caryisfort's lively observations. She had to attend to them, and to look as cheerful as she could in the evenings; but they all remarked what depression had stolen over her. "She does not look the same creature," the other ladies said to Lady Caryisfort; and that lively person who had thought Kate's amusing company her only indemnification for putting up with all this respectability, yawned half her time away, and felt furious with Mr. Courtenay for having deluded her into paying this visit at this particular time. It does not do, she reflected, to put off one's engagements. Had she kept her tryst in Spring, and brought



Kate out, and done all she had promised to do for her, probably she would have been married by this time, and the trouble of taking care of her thrown on other shoulders. Whereas, if she went and threw away her good looks, and settled into pale quietness and dulness, as she seemed about to do, there was no telling what a burden she might be on her friends. With these feelings in her mind, she told Mr. Courtenay that she thought that he had been very unwise in letting the Andersons slip through his fingers. "They were exactly what she wanted; people who were amenable to advice; who would do what you wished, and would take themselves off when you were done with them—they were the very people for Kate, with her variable temper. It was a weakness which I did not expect in you, Mr. Courtenay, who know the world."

"I never saw any signs of variable temper in Kate," said Mr. Courtenay, who felt it necessary to keep his temper when he was talking to Lady Caryisfort.

“Look at her now!” said that dissatisfied woman. And she added to herself that it was vain to tell *her* that Kate knew nothing about Sir Herbert Eldridge, or that the strange appearance for half an hour, in the drawing-room, of the young man who was like a clergyman had no connection with the change of demeanour which followed it. This was an absurd attempt to hoodwink her, a woman who had much experience in society, and was not easily deceived. And, by way of showing her sense of the importance of the subject, she began to talk to Kate of Bertie Eldridge, who had always been her favourite of the two cousins.

“Now his father is dead, he is worth your consideration,” she said. “His father was an ill-tempered wretch, I have always heard; but the young man is very well, as young men go, and has a very nice estate. I have always thought nothing could be more suitable. For my own part, I always liked him best—why? I don’t know, except, perhaps, because most people preferred his cousin. I should think, by

the-way, that after knocking about the world with Bertie Eldridge, that young man will hardly be very much disposed to drop into the Rectory here, like his father before him, which, I suppose, is his natural fate."

At that moment there came over Kate's mind a recollection of the time when she had gravely decided to oppose Mr. Hardwick in the parish, and not to give his son the living. The idea brought an uneasy blush to her cheek.

"Mr. Bertie Hardwick is not going in to the Church; he is reading for the bar," she said.

"Well, I suppose the one will need as much work as the other," said Lady Caryisfort. "Reading for the bar!—that sounds profitable; but, Kate, if I were you, I would seriously consider the question about Bertie Eldridge. He is not bad-looking, and, unless that old tyrant has been wicked as well as disagreeable, he ought to be very well off. The title is not much, but still it is something; and it is a thoroughly good old family—as good as your own. I would not throw such a chance away."

“But I never had the chance, as you call it, Lady Caryisfort,” said Kate, with indignation, “and I don’t want to have it; and I would not accept it, if it was offered to me. Bertie Eldridge is nothing to me. I don’t even care for him as an acquaintance, and never did.”

“Well, my love, you know what a good authority has said—‘that a little aversion is a very good thing to begin upon,’” said Lady Caryisfort, laughing; but in her heart she did not believe these protestations. Why should Kate have got that telegram if Sir Herbert was nothing to her? Thus, over-wisdom led the woman of the world astray.

Before long, Kate had forgotten all about Sir Herbert Eldridge. It was not half so important to her as the other news which nobody knew of—indeed, it was simply of no interest at all in comparison. Where was Ombra now?—and how must Bertie have deceived his family, who trusted in him; as much as his—wife—was that the word?—his wife had deceived herself. Where were they living? or were they together, or

what had become of these two women? Then Kate's heart melted, and she cried within herself—What had become of them? An unacknowledged wife!—a woman who had to hide herself, and bear a name and assume a character which was not hers! In all the multitude of her thoughts, she at last stopped short upon the ground of deep pity for her cousin, who had so sinned against her. Where was she?—under what name?—in what appearance? The thought of her position, after all this long interval, with no attempt made to own her or set her right with the world, made Kate's heart sick with compassion in the midst of her anger. And how was she to find Ombra out?—and when she had found her out, what was she to do?

## CHAPTER XXI.

IT is hard to be oppressed with private anxiety and care in the midst of a great house full of people, who expect to be amused, and to have all their different wants attended to, both as regards personal comfort and social gratification. Kate had entered upon the undertaking with great zeal and pleasure, but had been suddenly chilled in the midst of her labours by the strange accidents which disturbed her first dinner-party. She had been so excited and confused at the moment, that it had not occurred to her to remember that Mr. Sugden's information was quite fragmentary, and that he did not tell her where to find her cousin, or give her any real aid in the matter. His appearance, and disappearance too, were equally sudden and mysterious. She

ascertained from Spigot when he had come, and it was sufficiently easy to comprehend the noiseless way he had chosen to appear before her, and convey his news ; but why had he disappeared when he saw the telegram ? Why had he said so little ? Why, oh ! why had they all conspired to leave her thus, with painful scraps of information, but no real knowledge—alone among strangers, who took no interest in her perplexities, and, indeed, had never learned Ombra's name. She could not confide in Mrs. Hardwick, for many reasons, and there was no one else whom she could possibly confide in.

She got so unhappy at last that the idea of consulting Lady Caryisfort entered her mind more and more strongly. Lady Caryisfort was a woman of the world. She would not be so shocked as good Mrs. Hardwick would be ; and then she could have no prejudice in the matter, and no temptation to betray poor Ombra's secret. Poor Ombra ! Kate was not one of those people who can dismiss an offender out of their mind as soon as his sin is proved. All kinds of re-

lentings, and movements of pity, and impulses to help, came whispering about her after the first shock. To be sure Ombra had her mother to protect and care for her, and how could Kate interfere, a young girl? What could she do in the matter? But yet she felt that if she were known to stand by her cousin, it would be more difficult for the husband to keep her in obscurity. And there was in her mind a longing that Bertie should learn that she knew, and know what her opinion was of the concealment and secrecy. She did as women, people say, are not apt to do. She threw all the blame on him. Her cousin had concealed it from her—but nothing more than that. He had done something more—he had insulted herself in the midst of the concealment. If Kate had followed her own first impulse, she would have rushed forth to find Ombra, she would have brought her home, she would have done what her husband had failed to do—acknowledged, and put her in her right place. All these things Kate pondered and mused over, till sometimes the impulse to



action was almost too much for her ; and it was in these moments that she felt a longing and a necessity to consult some one, to relieve the pent-up anxieties in her own heart.

It happened one afternoon that she was alone with Lady Caryisfort, in that room which had been her sitting-room under Mrs. Anderson's sway. That very fact always filled her with recollections. Now that the great drawing-room and all the house was open, this had become a refuge for people who had "headaches," or any of the ethereal ailments common in highly-refined circles. The ladies of the party were almost all out on this particular afternoon. Some had gone into Westerton on a shopping expedition. Some had driven to see a ruined abbey, one of the sights of the neighbourhood ; and some had gone to the covert-side, with luncheon for the sportsmen, and had not yet returned. Kate had excused herself under the pretext of a cold, to remedy which she was seated close by the fire, in a very low and comfortable easy-chair. Lady Caryisfort reclined upon a sofa

opposite. She had made no pretence at all to get rid of the rest of the party. She was very pettish and discontented, reading a French novel, and wishing herself anywhere but there. There had been at least half an hour of profound silence. Kate was doing nothing but thinking; her head ached with it, and so did her heart. And when a girl of twenty, with a secret on her mind, is thus shut up with an elder woman whom she likes, with no one else within hearing, and after half an hour's profound silence, that is the very moment in which a confidential disclosure is sure to come.

"Lady Caryisfort," said Kate, faltering, "I wonder if I might tell you something which I have very much at heart?"

"Certainly you may," said Lady Caryisfort, yawning, and closing her book. "To tell you the truth, Kate, I was just going to put a similar question."

"You have something on your mind too!" cried Kate, clasping her hands.

"Naturally—a great deal more than you can

possibly have," said her friend, laughing. "But, come, Kate, you have the *pas*. Proceed—your secret has the right of priority; and then I will tell you mine—perhaps—if it is not too great a bore."

"Mine is not about myself," said Kate. "If it had been about myself, I should have told you long ago—it is about—Ombra."

"Oh! about Ombra!" Lady Caryisfort shrugged her shoulders, and the languid interest which she had been preparing to show suddenly failed her. "You think a great deal more about Ombra than she deserves."

"You will not think so when you have heard her story," said Kate, with some timidity, for she was quickly discouraged on this point. While they were speaking, a carriage was heard to roll up the avenue. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "I thought we were safe. I thought I was sure of you for an hour. And here are those tiresome people come back!"

"An hour—all about Ombra!" Lady Caryisfort ejaculated, half within herself; and then she

added aloud, "Perhaps somebody has come to call. Heaven send us some one amusing! for I think you and I, Kate, must go and hang ourselves if this lasts."

"Oh! no; it must be the Wedderburns come back from Westerton," said Kate, disconsolate. There were sounds of an arrival, without doubt. "They will come straight up here," she said, in despair. "Since that day when we had afternoon tea here, we have never been safe."

It was a terrible reward for her hospitality; but certainly the visitors were coming up. The sound of the great hall-door rang through the house; and then Spigot's voice, advancing, made it certain that there had been an arrival. The new-comers must be strangers, then, as Spigot was conducting them; and what stranger would take the liberty to come here?

Kate turned herself round in her chair. She was a little flushed with the fire, and she was in that state of mind when people feel that anything may happen—nay, that it is contrary to the order of Nature when something does not

happen, to change the aspect of the world. Lady Caryisfort turned away with a little shrug, which was half impatience, half admiration of the girl's readiness to be moved by anything new. She opened her book again, and went nearer the window. The light was beginning to fade, for it was now late in October, and Winter might almost be said to have begun. The door opened slowly. The young mistress of the house stood like one spell-bound. Already her heart forecasted who her visitors were. And it was not Spigot's hand which opened that door. There was a hesitation, a fumbling and doubtfulness—and then—

How dim the evening was! Who were the two people who were standing there looking at her? Kate's heart gave a leap, and then seemed to stand still.

"Come in," she said, doubtful, and faltering. And just then the fire gave a sudden blaze up, and threw a ruddy light upon the new-comers. Of course, she had known who it must be all along. But they did not advance; and she

stood in an icy stupor, feeling as if she were not able to move.

“Kate,” said Ombra, from the door, “I have been like an evil spirit to you. I will not come in again, unless you will give me your hand and say I am to come.”

She put herself in motion then, languidly. How different a real moment of excitement always is from the visionary one which you go over and over in your own mind, and to which you get used in all its details! Somehow all at once she bethought herself of Geraldine lifted over the threshold by innocent Christabel. She went and held out her hand. Her heart was beating fast, but dull, as if at a long distance off. There stood the husband and wife—two against one. She quickened her steps, and resolved to spare herself as much as she could.

“Ombra,” she said, as well as her quick breath would let her, “come in. I know. I have heard about it. I am glad to receive you, and—and your husband.”

“Thanks, Kate,” said Ombra, with strange

confusion. She had thought—I don't know why—that she would be received with enthusiasm corresponding to her own feelings. She came into the room, leaning upon him, as was natural, with her hand within his arm. He had the grace to be modest—not to put himself forward—or so, at least, Kate thought. But how much worse this moment was than she had supposed it would be! She felt herself tremble and tingle from head to heel. She forgot Lady Caryisfort, who was standing up against the light of the window, roused and inquisitive; she turned her back upon the new-comers, even, and poked the fire violently, making the room full of light. The ruddy blaze shot up into the twilight; it sprang up, quivering and burning into the big mirror. Kate saw the whole scene reflected there—the two figures standing behind her, and Ombra's black dress; black!—why was she in black, and she a bride? And, good heaven!—

She turned round breathless; she was pricked to the quick with anger and shame. “Ombra,”

she said, facing round upon her cousin, "I told you I knew everything. Why do you come here thus with anybody but your husband? This is Mr. Eldridge. Did anyone dare to suppose—Why is it Mr. Eldridge, and not *him* who has brought you here?"

Ombra's ice melted as when a flood comes in Spring. She rushed to the reluctant, angry girl, and kissed her, and clung to her, and wept over her. "Oh! Kate, don't turn from me!—Bertie Eldridge is my husband—no one else—and who else should bring me back?"

No one but Ombra ever knew that Kate would have fallen, but for the strenuous grasp that held her up—no one but Ombra guessed what the convulsion of the moment meant. Ombra felt her cousin's arms clutch at her with the instinct of self-preservation—she felt Kate's head drop quite passive on her shoulder, and with a new-born sympathy, she concealed the crisis which she dimly guessed. She kept whispering into her cousin's ear, holding her fast, kissing her, terrified at the extent of the



emotion which had been so carefully and so long concealed.

“Now let Kate shake hands at least with me,” said Bertie behind, “and forgive me, if she can. It was all my fault. Ombra yielded to me because I would not give her any peace, and we dared not make it known. Kate, she has been breaking her heart over it, thinking you could never forgive her. Won’t you forgive me too?”

Bertie Eldridge was a careless, light-hearted soul—one of the men who run all kind of risks of ruin, and whom other people suffer for, but who always come out safe at the end. At the sound of his ordinary easy, untragic voice, Kate roused herself in a moment. What had all this exaggerated feeling to do with him?

“Yes,” she said, holding out her hand, “Bertie, I will forgive you; but I would not have done so half an hour ago, if I had known. Oh! and here is Lady Caryisfort in the dark, while we are all making fools of ourselves. Ombra, keep here; don’t go away from me,”

she whispered. "I feel as if I could not stand."

"Kate, mamma is in your room; and one secret more," whispered Ombra. "Oh! Kate, it is not half told!—Lady Caryisfort will forgive us—I could not stay away a day—an hour longer than I could help."

"I will forgive you with all my heart, and I will take myself out of the way," said Lady Caryisfort. "I daresay you have a great deal to say to each other, and I congratulate you, at the same time, Lady Eldridge; one must take time for that."

"Lady Eldridge!" cried Kate. Oh! how thankful she was to drop out of Ombra's supporting arm into a seat, and to laugh, in order that she might not cry. "Then that was why I had the telegram, and that was why poor Mr. Sugden disappeared, that you might tell me yourself? Oh! Ombra, are you sure it is true, and not a dream? Are you back again, and all the shadows flown away, and things come right?"

"Except the one shadow, which must never

flee away," said Bertie, putting his arm round his wife's waist. He was the fondest, the most demonstrative of husbands, though only a fortnight ago— But it is needless to enlarge on what was past.

"But, Kate, come to your room," said Ombra, "where mamma is waiting; and one secret more——"

## CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. ANDERSON was waiting in Kate's room, when Maryanne, sympathetic, weeping and delighted, introduced her carefully. "Oh, mayn't I carry it, ma'am?" she cried, longing; and when that might not be, drew a chair to the fire—the most comfortable chair—and placed a footstool, and lingered by in adoring admiration. What was it that this foolish maiden wanted so much to go down upon her knees before and do fetish worship to? Mrs. Anderson sat and pondered over this one remaining secret, with a heart that was partly joyful and partly heavy. This woman was a compound of worldliness and of something better. In her worldly part she was happy and triumphant, but in her higher part she was more humbled,

almost more sad, than when she went away in what she had felt to be shame from Langton-Courtenay. She felt for the shock that this discovery would give to Kate's spotless maiden imagination, unaware of the possibility of such mysteries. She felt more for Kate than for her own child, who was happy and victorious. She sent Maryanne away to watch, and waited very nervously, with a tremble in her frame. How would Kate take it? How would she take *this*, which lay upon Mrs. Anderson's knee? She would not have the candles lighted. The dark, which half concealed and half revealed her, was kinder, and would keep her secret best. A film seemed to come over her eyes when she saw the two young women come into the room together. The first thing she was sure of was Kate's arms, which crept round her, and Kate's voice in her ear crying, "Oh! aunty, how could you leave me—oh! how could you leave me? I have wanted you so!"

"Take it!" cried Mrs. Anderson, with sudden energy; and when the white bundle had been

removed from her knee, she clasped her second child in her arms. It is not often that a mother gets to love an adopted child in competition with her own; but during all this past year, Kate had appeared before her many a day, in the sweet docility and submission of her youth, when Ombra was fretful, and exacting, and dissatisfied. The poor mother had not acknowledged it to herself, but she wanted those arms round her—she wanted her other child.

“Oh!” she said, but in a whisper, “my darling! I can never, never tell you how I have wanted you!”

“Here it is!” cried Ombra, gaily. “Mamma, let her look at him, you can kiss her after. Kate, here is my other secret. Light the candles, Maryanne—quick, that your mistress may see my boy.”

“Yes, my lady,” cried Maryanne, full of awe.

A little laugh of unbounded happiness and exultation came from Ombra’s lips. To come back thus triumphant, vindicated from all reproaches; to have the delight of showing her

child ; to be reconciled, and at last at liberty to love her cousin without any jealousy or painful sense of contrast ; and, finally, to hear herself called my lady—all combined to fill up the measure of her content.

Up to this moment it had not occurred to Kate what the other secret was. Mrs. Anderson felt the girl's arms tighten round her, felt the sudden leap of her heart. Who will not understand what that movement of shame meant ? It silenced Kate's very heart for the moment. This shock was greater than the first shock. She blushed crimson on her aunt's shoulder, where happily no one saw her. Her thoughts wandered back over the past, and she felt as if there was something shameful in it. This was absurd, of course ; but it was some moments before she could so far overcome herself as to raise her head in answer to her cousin's repeated demands.

“ Look at him, Kate !—look at him ! Mamma will keep—you can have her afterwards. Look at my boy !”

Ombra was disinterring the baby out of cloaks and veils and shawls, in which it was lost. Her cheeks were sparkling, her eyes glowing with happiness. In her heart there was no sense of shame.

But we need not linger over this scene. Kate was glad, very glad, to get free from her duties that evening—to escape from the dinner and the people, as well as from the baby, and get time to think of it all. What were her feelings when she sat down alone, after all this flood of new emotions, and realized what had happened? The shock was over. The tingling of wonder, of pleasure, of pain, and even of shame, which had confused her senses, was over. She could look at everything, and see it as it was. And as the past rose out of the mists elucidated by the present, of course it became apparent to her that she ought to have seen the true state of affairs all the time. She ought to have seen that there was no affinity between Bertie Hardwick and her cousin, no natural fitness, no likelihood, even, that they could choose each other.



Of course she ought to have seen that he had been made a victim of, as she herself had been made a victim of, though in a less degree. She ought to have known that Bertie, he whom she had once called her Bertie, in girlish, innocent freedom (though she blushed to recall it), could not have been disrespectful to herself, nor treacherous, nor anything but what he was. She owed him an apology, she said to herself, with cheeks which glowed with generous shame. She owed him an apology ; and she would make it, whenever it should be in her power.

As for all the other wonderful events, they gradually stole off into the background, compared with this central fact that she owed an apology to Bertie. She fell asleep with this thought in her mind, and, waking in the morning, felt so happy that she asked herself instinctly what it was. And the answer was, "I must make an apology to Bertie!" Ombra and her mysteries, and her new grandeur, and even her baby, faded off into nothing in comparison with this. Somehow that double

secret seemed to be almost a hundred years old. The revelation of Bertie Hardwick's blamelessness, and the wrong she had done him, was the only thing that was new.

Sir Herbert and Lady Eldridge stayed at Langton-Courtenay for about a week before they went home, and all the minor steps in the matter were explained by degrees. He had rushed down to Loch Arroch, where she had been all this time, to fetch his wife, as soon as his father's death set him free. With so much depending on that event, Bertie Eldridge could scarcely, with a good grace, pretend to be sorry for his father; but the fact that Sir Herbert's had been a triumph, and not a sorrow to him, was chiefly known away from home, and when he went back he went in full pomp of mourning. The baby even wore a black ribbon round its unconscious waist, for the grandpapa who would have disinherited it had he known of its existence. Probably nobody made much comment upon "the Eldridges." They were accepted, all things having come right, without much

censure, if with a great deal of surprise. It was bitter for Mrs. Hardwick to realize that "that insignificant Miss Anderson" was the wife of the head of her house, the mistress of all the honours and riches of the Eldridges; but she had to swallow it, as bitter pills must always be swallowed.

"Heaven be praised, my Bertie did not fall into her snares! Though I always said his taste was too good for such a piece of folly!" she said, taking the best piece of comfort which remained to her.

Bertie Hardwick came down to spend Christmas with his family, and it was not an uncheerful one, though they were all in mourning. It was not he, but his cousin, who had sent the telegram to Kate, in the confusion of the moment, not remembering that to her it would convey no information. But when the little party who had been together in Florence met again now, they talked of every subject on earth but that. Instinctively they avoided the recollection of these confused months, which had

brought so much suffering in their train. The true history came to Kate in confidential interviews with her aunt, and was revealed little by little. It was to shield Bertie Eldridge from the possibility of discovery that Bertie Hardwick had been forced to make one of their party continually, and to devote himself, in appearance, to Ombra as much as her real lover did. He had yielded to his cousin's pleadings, having up to that time had no thought nor desire which the other Bertie had not shared. But this service which had been exacted from him had broken his bonds. He had separated from his cousin immediately on their return, and begun his independent life, though he had still continued to be, when it was not safe for them to meet, the mode of communication between Ombra and her husband.

All this Kate learned, partly from Mrs. Anderson, partly at a later period. She did not learn, however, what a dreary time had passed between the flight of the two ladies from Langton-Courtenay and their return. Her aunt did not tell her

what wretched doubts had beset them, what sense of neglect, what terrors for the future. Bertie Eldridge had not been so anxious to shield his wife from the consequences of their imprudence as he ought to have been. But all is well that ends well. His father had died in the nick of time, and in Ombra's society he was the best of young husbands—proud, and fond, and happy. There was no fault to be found in him *now*.

When "the Eldridges" went to their house, in great pomp and state, they left Mrs. Anderson with Kate; and to Kate, after they were gone, the whole seemed like a dream. She could scarcely believe that they had been there—that all the strange story was true. But she had perfectly recovered of her cold, and of her despondency, and was in such bloom when she took leave of her departing guests, that all sorts of compliments were paid to her.

"Your niece has blossomed into absolute beauty," said one of the old fogies to Mr. Courtenay. "You have shut her up a great deal too

long. What a sensation she will make with her fortune, and with that face!"

Mr. Courtenay shrugged his shoulders, and made a grimace.

"I don't see what good that face can do her," he said, gruffly. He was suspicious, though he scarcely knew what he was suspicious of. There seemed to him something more than met the eye in this Eldridge business. Why the deuce had not that girl with the ridiculous name married young Hardwick, as she ought to have done? He was the first who had troubled Mr. Courtenay's mind with previsions of annoyance respecting his niece. And, lo! the fellow was coming back again, within reach, and Kate was almost her own mistress, qualified to execute any folly that might come into her head.

There was, however, a lull in all proceedings till Christmas, when, as we have prematurely announced, but as was very natural, Bertie Hardwick came home. Mr. Courtenay, too, being suspicious, came again to Langton-Cour-

tenay, feeling it necessary to be on the spot. It was a very quiet Christmas, and nothing occurred to alarm anyone until the evening of Twelfth Day, when there was a Christmas-tree in the school-room, for the school children. It had been all planned before Sir Herbert's death; and Mrs. Hardwick decided that it was not right the children should suffer "for our affliction—with such an object in view I hope I can keep my feelings in check," she said. And indeed the affliction of the Rectory was kept very properly in check, and did not appear at all in the school-room. Kate enjoyed this humble festivity, with the most thorough relish. She was a child among the children. Her spirits were overflowing. To be sure, she was not even in mourning; and when all was over, she declared her intention of walking home up the avenue, which, all in its Winter leaflessness, was beautiful in the moonlight. It was a very clear, still Winter night—hard frost and moonlight, and air which was sharp and keen as ice, and a great deal more exhilarating than champagne to those whose

lungs were sound, and their hearts light. Bertie walked with her, after she had been wrapped up by his sisters. Her heart beat fast, but she was glad of the opportunity. No appropriate moment had occurred before; she would make her apology now.

They had gone through the village side by side, talking of the school children and their delight; but as they entered the avenue they grew more silent. "Now is my time!" cried Kate to herself; and though her heart leaped to her mouth, she began bravely,

"Mr. Bertie, there is something I have wished to say to you ever since Ombra came back. I did you a great deal of injustice. I want to make an apology."

"An apology!—to me!"

"Yes, to you. I don't know that I ever did anybody so much wrong. I do not want to blame Bertie Eldridge. It is all right now, I suppose; but I thought once that you were her——"

Bertie Hardwick turned quickly round upon



her, as if in resentment; his gesture felt like a moral blow. Wounded surprise and resentment—was it resentment? And somehow, though the white moonlight did not show it, Kate felt that she blushed.

“Please don’t be angry. I am confessing that I was wrong; and I never felt that you could have done it,” said Kate, in a low voice. “I believed it, and yet I did not believe it. That was the sting. To think you could have so little faith in me—could have deceived me, when we are such old friends!”

“And was that all?” he said. “Was it only the concealment you thought me incapable of?”

“The concealment was the only thing wicked about it, I suppose,” said Kate, “now that it has turned out all right.”

Bertie took no notice of the unconscious humour of this definition. He turned to her again with a certain vehemence, which seemed to have some anger in it.

“Nay,” he said, almost sharply, “there was more than that. You knew I did not love

Ombra—you knew she was nothing to me.”

“I did not—know—anything about it,” faltered Kate.

“How can you say so? Do you mean that you have ever doubted for a moment—that you have not *known*—every day we have been together since that day at the brook-side? Bah! you want to make a fool of me. You tempt me to put things into words that ought not to be spoken.”

“But, Mr. Bertie,” said Kate, after a pause to make sure that he had stopped—and her voice was child-like in its simplicity, “I like things to be put into words—I don’t like people to break off in the middle. You were saying since that day by the brook-side?”

He turned to her with a short, agitated laugh. “Perhaps you don’t remember about it,” he said. “I do—everything that happened—every word that was said—every one of the tears. You don’t cry now as you used to do, or open your heart.”

“I don’t cry when people can see me,” said

Kate. "I have cried enough, if you had been in the way to perceive it, this last year."

"My poor, sweet——" Here he stopped; his voice had melted and changed. But all of a sudden he stopped short, with quite a different kind of alteration. "Should you be afraid to go the rest of the way alone?" he said abruptly. "I will stand here till I see you on the steps, and you can call to me if you are afraid."

"I am not in the least afraid," said Kate, proudly. "I was quite able to walk up the avenue by myself, if that was all." And then she laughed. "Mr. Bertie," she said, demurely, "it is you who are afraid, not I."

"I suppose you are right," he said. "Well, then, as you are strong, be merciful—don't tempt me. If you like to know that there is some one to be dragged at your chariot wheels, it would be easy to give you that satisfaction. Perhaps, indeed, as we have begun upon this subject, it is better to have it out."

"Much better, I think," said Kate, with a glibness and ease which surprised herself. Was

it because she was heartless? The fact was rather that she was happy, which is a demoralizing circumstance in some cases.

“Well,” he said, with a hard breath, “since you prefer to have it in plain words, Miss Courtenay, you may as well know, once for all, that since that day at the brook-side I have thought of no one but you. I don’t suppose it is likely I shall ever think of anyone else all my life in that way. It can be no pleasure to me to speak, or to you to hear, of any such hopeless and insane notion. It is more your fault than mine, after all; for if you had not cried, I should not have leaped over the hedge, and trespassed, and——”

“What would you do?” said Kate softly, “if you saw the same sight again now?”

“Do?” he said, with an unsteady laugh—“make an utter fool of myself, I suppose—as, indeed, I have done all along. I am such a fool still, that I can’t bear to be cross-examined about my folly. Don’t say any more about it, please.”

“But, if I were you, I would say a great deal more about it,” said Kate, growing breathless with her resolution. “Look here, Bertie—don’t start like that—of course I have always called you Bertie within myself. I wonder how the Queen felt, when—I am very, very much ashamed of myself; but you can’t see me, which is one good thing. Is it because I am rich you are afraid? For if that is all——”

“What then?—what then, Kate?”

Half an hour after, Kate walked into the little drawing-room, where so many things had happened, where her aunt was sitting alone, waiting for her return. Her eyes were like two stars, and blazed in the light which dazzled them, and filled them with moisture. A red scarf, which had been wrapped round her throat, hung loosely over her shoulders. Her face was all aglow with the clear, keen night air. She came in quietly, and came up to Mrs. Anderson, and knelt down by her side in front of the fire. “Aunt,” she said, “don’t be angry. I have been doing a very strange thing. I hope you

will not think it wicked. I have proposed to Bertie Hardwick."

"Kate, my darling, are you mad?—are you out of your senses?"

"No," said the girl quietly, and with a sigh. "But I am a kind of a princess. What can I do? He gave me encouragement, aunty, or I would not have done it; and I think he has accepted me," she said, with a laugh; then, putting down her crimsoned face upon the lap of the woman who had been a mother to her, burst into a tempest of tears.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

THERE is nothing perfect in this world. If Bertie Hardwick had been like his cousin, a great county potentate, on the same level as Miss Courtenay of Langton-Courtenay, they would both have been happier in their betrothal. Royal marriages are sometimes very happy, but it must be hard upon a Queen to be obliged to take the initiative in such a matter; and it was hard upon Kate, notwithstanding that she did it bravely, putting away all false pride. And though Bertie Hardwick went home floating, as it were, through the wintry air, in one sense, in a flood of delicious and unimaginable happiness; yet, in another sense, he walked very prosaically along a flinty, frost-bound road, and knocked his feet against stones and frozen cart-ruts, as

he took the short way home to the Rectory. Cold as it was, he walked about the garden half the night, and smoked out many cigars, half thinking of Kate's loveliness and sweetness, half of the poor figure he would cut—not even a briefless barrister, a poor Templar reading for the law—as the husband of the great heiress. Why had not she been Ombra, and Ombra the heiress? But, in that case, of course, they could not have married, or dreamt of marrying at all. He thought it over till his head ached, till his brain swam. Ought he to give up such a hope? ought he to wound her and destroy all his own hopes of happiness, and perhaps hers, because she was rich and he was poor?—or should he accept this happiness which was put into his hands, which he had never hoped for, never dared to do anything to gain?

His mother waking, and hearing steps, rushed to the window in the cold, and looking out saw the red glow of his cigar curving round and round, and out and in among the trees.



What could be the matter with the boy? She opened the window, and put out her head, though it was so cold, and called to him that he would get his death; that he would be frost-bitten; that he was mad to expose himself so. "My dear boy, for heaven's sake, go to bed!" she cried; and her voice rung out into the deep night and stillness so that it was heard in the sexton's cottage, where it was supposed to be a cry for help against robbers. Old John drew the bed-clothes over his old nose at the sound, and breathed a sigh for his Rector, who, he thought, was probably being smothered in his bed at that moment—but it was too cold to interfere.

Next morning, Bertie had a long conversation with his father, and the two together proceeded to the Hall, where they had a still longer interview with Mr. Courtenay. It was not a pleasant interview. Kate had already seen her uncle, as in duty bound seeing the part which she had taken upon herself in the transaction, and Mr. Courtenay had foamed at the mouth with disgust and rage.

“Is it for this I have watched over you so carefully?” he cried, half-frantic.

“Have you watched over me carefully?” said Kate, looking at him with her bright eyes.

And what could he reply? She would be of age in six months, and then it would matter very little what objections or difficulties he might choose to make. It was with the full consciousness of this that all parties discussed the question. Had the heiress been eighteen, things would have borne a very different aspect; but as she was nearly twenty-one, with the shadow of her coming independence upon her, she had a right to her own opinion. Her guardian did all a man could do in the circumstances to make himself disagreeable, but that could not, of course, last.

And when it was all over, the news went somehow like an electric shock through the whole neighbourhood. The Rectory received it first, and lay for ten minutes or so as if stunned by the blow; and then gradually, no one could tell how, it spread itself abroad. It had

been fully determined that Bertie should return to town two days after Twelfth Night ; but now he did not return to town—what was the use ? “ If I must be Prince Consort,” he said, with a sigh, that was half real and half fictitious, “ I had better make up my mind to it, and go in for my new duties.” These duties, however, consisted, in the meantime, in hanging about Kate, and following her everywhere. They were heavy enough, for she teased him, as it was in her nature to do ; but he did not feel them hard. They made a pilgrimage to the brookside, where, as Kate said, “ it was all settled,” six years ago. They talked over a thousand recollections, half of which would never have occurred to them but for this sweet leisure, and the new light under which the past glowed and shone. They did a great many foolish things, as was to be expected ; and they were as happy as most other young people in the same foolish circumstances. It was only when he was away from her that Bertie ever grew red at the thought of the contrast of

fortune. He called himself Prince Consort in Kate's company; but then the title did not hurt. It did—a little—when he was alone, and had time to think. But, after all, even when there is a prick like this in it, it is easy to content one's self with happiness, and to find a score of excellent reasons why that, and nothing else, should be one's lot.

Lady Caryisfort had gone away a week before. She came back, when she heard of it, in consternation, to remonstrate, if that was possible. But when she arrived at Langton-Courtenay, and saw how things were, Lady Caryisfort was much too sensible a woman to make herself disagreeable. She said, on the contrary, that she had divined how it would be from the beginning, and had been quite certain since the marriage of "the Eldridges" had been made known to the world. I hope what she said was true; but it was not to say this that she had come all the way from Dorsetshire. She remained only two days, and took a very affectionate leave of Kate, and sent her a charming

present when she married ; but it was a long time before they met again. It was disappointing not to have an heiress to present to the world, to carry about in her train ; but then it was her own fault. Had she not lingered in Italy till the last season was over, how different things might have been ! She had no good answer to give to Mr. Courtenay when he taunted her with this. She knew very well herself why she lingered, and probably so did he ; and it had come to nothing after all. However, we may say, for the satisfaction of the reader, that it did not end in nothing. Lady Caryisfort continued her independent, and, as people said, enjoyable life for some years more. Then it suddenly occurred to her all at once that to go every year from London to Paris, and from Paris to Italy, and from Italy back to London, with a quantity of dull visits between, was an unprofitable way of spending one's life ; so she went to Florence early one season, and married Antonio Buoncompagni after all. I hope she was very comfortable, and liked it ; but, at

all events, so far as this story is concerned, there was an end of her.

Mrs. Anderson stayed with her niece for a very long time; naturally her presence was necessary till Kate married—and then she returned to receive the pair when they came back after their honeymoon. But when the honeymoon was long over Mrs. Anderson still stayed, and was more firmly established at Langton-Courtenay than in her daughter's great house, where old Lady Eldridge lived with the young people, and where sometimes there were shadows visible, even on the clear sky of prosperity and well-doing. Ombra was Ombra still, even when she was happy—a nature often sweet, and never intentionally unkind, but apt to become self-absorbed, and disposed to be cloudy. Her mother never uttered a word of complaint, and was very happy to pay her a visit now and then; but her home gradually became fixed with her adopted child. She and old Francesca faded and grew old together—that is to say, Mrs. Anderson grew older, while Francesca

bloomed perennial, no more aged at seventy, to all appearance, than she had been at fifty. Never was such an invaluable old woman in a house. She was the joy of all the young generation for twenty years, and her stories grew more full of detail and more lavishly decorated with circumstances every day.

There is not much more to add. If we went further on in the history, should we not have new threads to take up, perhaps new complications to unravel, new incidents with every new hour? For life does not sit still and fold its hands in happiness any more than in sorrow—something must always be happening; and when Providence does not send events, we take care to make them. But Providence happily provided the events in the house of Kate and Bertie. He made an admirable Prince Consort. He went into Parliament and took up politics warmly, and finally got up to a secondary seat in the Cabinet, which Kate was infinitely proud of. She made him rich and important—which, after all, as she said, were things which any

cheesemonger's daughter could have done, who had money enough. But he made her, what few people could have done, the wife of a Cabinet Minister. When the Right Honourable H. Hardwick came down to Westerton, the town took off its hat to him, and considered itself honoured as no Mr. Courtenay of Langton-Courtenay had ever honoured it. Thus things went well with those who aimed well, which does not always happen, though sometimes it is permitted us for the consolation of the race.

THE END.



# MESSRS. HURST AND BLACKETT'S

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