

ORPHANS.

A CHAPTER IN A LIFE.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

‘MARGARET MAITLAND,’ ‘LILLIESLEAF,’

“THE DAYS OF MY LIFE,”

&c., &c.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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ORPHANS.

CHAPTER I.

I WAS left an orphan at eight-and-twenty years old.

Does anybody smile? It does not look a very helpless age—yet I doubt if an orphan of eight, or of eighteen, could have felt it as I did; I was past my youth—serious life beyond romance had begun for me. I had neither friend nor lover near me in this great emergency of nature; my father and my mother were dead, and I was alone.

It is needless to tell how I loved them; but it might be more to the purpose, and easier, if

I were to say how they loved me. I was their only child and the child of their old age; they had married late and had received me, almost, as it seemed, out of the special hand of God, like one of the miraculous children of the old times; by the time I grew up, they were old, and all their personal interests in life were failing. With an intense, jealous, all-absorbing love they encompassed their only child. I was their one sole link to the common life and sunshine of the world. I could not be a day from home without knowing that the house was desolate without me, nor show especial preference for any friend without feeling that even in that, there lay a suggestion of the terrible possibility, that one day I might love somebody else more than them. I say terrible possibility—*they* did not say it;—on the contrary, they spoke of the chances of my marrying and leaving them with smiles as you would have supposed; and no match-making mother could have been more dis-

pleased by neglect or indifference to her daughter than my mother was. They liked to see me receiving attentions such as other young women received—they even disturbed the calm of their old age that I might have all the pleasures belonging to my youth; yes, more than that—they once gave their consent, and we were all too tremulously and intensely happy for anything but a dream. God forbid that I should blame them so much as by a thought! but it was not to be so.

And then, when in my saddened heart and life I thought I was growing old—then, when the heat and the burden of the day had come, and the only joy I looked for was to comfort them—then they died. I was terribly unreasonable, unthankful, embittered in my mind; then, half-a-dozen years after, when everything was over, and all sacrifices accomplished, and my life settled for ever—then—God help me, they died.

I had no near relatives; my father and mother

had both been, like myself, the only children of their houses; and, though I knew a great many people, I was intimate with none—partly from circumstances, partly because I did not care much, while *they* lived, to make friends. What was almost worse than that, I was an heiress, sole and solitary proprietor of the old family house and lands and revenues. Everything they had, of course, came to me; they had taken pleasure in reminding me of all my future possessions, and keeping the idea of this forlorn and lonely wealth before me: but I never realised it. The thought came upon me like the shock of an earthquake when it did come. Few things, except one thing, had ever crossed my will before. I had been building myself up in the idea of the sacrifice I had made for them, and of the prolonged and tender patriarchal life which lay before them, and the long years of devoted service by which their only child could prove her love and gratitude.

I am superstitious ; I think, since then, that whenever one has a vision of particular completeness, rightness—of doing one's duty in the full natural unlimited way, without obstruction or hindrances—when one has such a vision for the future, that is the time for some of the grand meddlers of this existence, perhaps Death himself, the greatest of all, to come in and mar the plan. When one has returned, after a great aberration, a great trial, anything which pierces to the heart, to solace one's self with the old calm duties of Nature, to please one's self with pictures of a virtuous tranquil time to come, then is the period for the earthquake. It was so with me ; I was staying my heart with the thought of being good to them, tender to them, the comfort of their old age ; and straightway they died.

I was left, accordingly, at eight-and-twenty, alone in my father's house ; alone, and, for a month or two, entirely and wilfully desolate,

seeking nothing better. That could not last, being unnatural. I awoke to remember that I was not dead yet, much though I might wish to be; that I had two thousand pounds a-year and no one to be the better of it but myself, in my black mourning, and the servants in their sables. I was terribly foolish sometimes, but not a fool. I could not suppose that God meant all this to keep me, a single person, a tree without either fruit or shadow, all by myself, in solitary state, like a permanent blot upon the common sunshine. So rich, so unshackled, so terribly free to do anything I liked; no one could have had a more dreary position than mine. Nobody had any right to control me; no one any conscious influence to remonstrate. I was dependent upon no will, moved by no caprices but my own; free to go or to stay, just as my own inclination moved me; but supposed to be fortunate enough among my neighbours, who knew only of my two thousand a-year.

When I came to this thought—the process was hard enough and long enough—but not needful to be told, nor, perhaps, possible to tell. I began to question with myself, whether I had any friends; I once had one, a dear friend, as girls are; but Mary was travelling with her husband in Greece or in Italy, those countries of the imagination; and I drew back into myself when I thought upon this contrast. I think her brother was with them too; therefore, of course, she was the last person in the world whom I could write to, or tell how lonely I was. All the world beside were only acquaintances, people whom I knew and perhaps shook hands with, who paid me visits of condolence, and left their cards afterwards with “kind inquiries.” Of course, among them, there were many who would gladly have given me help and counsel.

There was the rector, a very good man, with a very good wife, who was “truly sorry” for me, and would have taken much pains to

cheer me, if I could have borne it ; and there was Sir Willoughby Greenfield, whom my father's will had named my guardian, when I was young enough to have needed one ; but I was sore and troubled in my mind, as well as sorrowful. I think for a time there was even something (at that time unconscious to myself) of resentment in my grief ; a strange ill-feeling, as though Providence had foiled me in my best endeavours, and made my goodness vain.

The nearest relative I knew of was a cousin of my father's, a widow, whose husband had been another cousin, and who, consequently, bore the same name as myself ; an officer's widow, living on a scanty income, in one of the genteel little country towns where such people abound. Though I had no need of a *chaperone* at my age, I had been brought up in all the prejudices of propriety, and naturally deferred to them ; almost as soon as I found heart enough to bestir myself, I wrote to Mrs.

Nugent. I thought it best not to pause and consider, whether I should like her or not. What if I did not like her? She was no less John Nugent's daughter, Herbert Nugent's wife, more entirely born of the house, though her father and her husband were both of the younger branch, than I.

She replied to me very soon, accepting my invitation. She thought it exceedingly judicious, as well as kind, that I should wish for her society, and trusted she would be able to make herself a comfort to me. I think I almost smiled at this; I had not been thinking of comfort, nor wishing for it either, I believe.

Our house was an old English manor-house, picturesque enough, but not remarkable; with a high pitched roof, and a great number of gables striking up through rich foliage, richer than I ever saw anywhere else. The garden had the sunniest southern slope of any in the county, and a flight of white steps, dazzling

white in the sunshine, ascended the green bank of the lawn, towards the little terrace, guarded by a balustrade of stone, which ran along the front of the house. The garden was rich and old-fashioned, with hedges of clipped yew, and a profusion of all the old flowers, which have no pretensions to call themselves rare; but yet are better than rare, and bear the names of the poets; and there was a pretty small park, which wandered off on one side into the wood, and on the other was bounded by the river. Within, there were two solemn rooms towards the front, looking out upon the terrace and the lawn, grave rooms soberly furnished, the dining-room and library; and at the back was our drawing-room, with its deep recess, a step lower than the rest of the apartments—a great round bay, full of sunshine almost all day long. Here, to me, the past and the dead lived still in a visionary stillness; the servants went about softly, as if still afraid to disturb the

dying, or to break the solemn state of the house where death was. I, myself, when I had entered one of these rooms, remained in it, and did not care to move; it was the house of the dead and not of the living; but to go away had never occurred to me. I thought I should be best content to live a mourner all my days.

It was to this house, solitary and sorrowful, and to my own sole company, unenlivened save by an occasional visit from Sir Willoughby and from the rector, and the cards and "kind inquiries" of the country people near, that I invited Mrs. Nugent; and here, a stranger and solitary, like myself, not a great deal older than I was, but as one might suppose still more sorely bereaved, she was about to come. I had seen her, but knew little of her; she was coming as a permanent inhabitant, not as a guest; but it was not till the night of her arrival, that my vague sense of justice and propriety

in bringing her here quickened into interest. Henceforth she was to be my daily and permanent companion; the thought startled me; yet, till I heard the wheels of her carriage at the door, I had scarcely realised what this arrival was.

CHAPTER II.

I HAD not prepared myself to like my cousin, but certainly I had still less prepared myself to dislike her; and when that first evening darkened, when she had opened all the sashes of the great bow-window, letting in the mingled sounds and perfumes of the garden and the park, and the far away river, and, sitting in the shade, began to tell me old stories of the family—of her own branch of the family, which once had been flourishing with hosts of sons and daughters, but now was like the elder house beginning to decay—and of all their strangely-mingled fortunes; John, who was in India, and had lost so many children; Harry, who was a physician in London; Maria, whose

husband had been so imprudent ; and Edward, who was so clever and might be whatever he pleased, yet never did accomplish anything at all, I began to feel my heart warm with something like human sympathy and natural feeling. She told everything so quietly, without excuse for any one's follies, or reproach for any one's faults, such and such a thing had happened, that was all ; and had so many people to talk about by their christian names, and to speak of getting letters from, that I felt for the moment as if I, a forlorn wandering spirit, had been suddenly dragged over a family threshold, as innocent Christabel dragged the lady of her vision.

Mrs. Herbert, as she chose to be called, took possession of me in the quietest way, and I could not help wondering, when I went to my room that night, how it was that I supposed her so distant a cousin, or set so little store by this bond of relationship. I was very shy of demonstrations of affection, having lived so

much alone ; but I was not proof against her quiet consciousness that it was quite natural she should come here, or her gentle and unexpressed appropriation of mine and me.

In the morning, when I came down to breakfast, I found her waiting me. She looked prettier than I had before thought her ; a little woman, very gentle and pleasant in her movements ; intelligent, with a quick eye, a light step, and a pretty little soft hand, which she made large use of in conversation ; she was in mourning, but not in widow's weeds, and had a clear, healthful complexion, which the colourless black and white of her dress became very well. She came forward to kiss me, in the same familiar usual sisterly way which had rather taken me by surprise on the previous night, as if she were in reality, and without dispute, my natural companion, almost guardian. When we sat down at table, she attended to my plate, and watched over my appetite with a quiet kind of attention which was not obtrusive, all

being done with no appearance of novelty or strangeness, but with an everyday familiar usage, extremely surprising to me, which nevertheless disarmed all resistance; her conversation was the same; quiet, assured, pleasant—a kind of family style of talk which took it entirely for granted that I was as much at home and interested in her favourite subjects as herself.

“My dear Clara,” she said—this was almost the only point in which Mrs. Herbert did not show her usual tact, for my name was Clare, so called from some family connection with that title, and the softer syllable did not belong to me at all, “I think we should leave Estcourt for a week or two, while this fine weather continues. We shall have winter presently. I think we must set off quietly by ourselves to some quiet little place at the seaside. Nothing is such rest and refreshment to the mind as the sea. Where should you like to go, dear?”

I answered hastily, almost angrily, “No-

where—no, no, I cannot leave home ;” but as I spoke the sudden yearning came upon me, which comes upon the sick at heart—that yearning for the unattainable refuge which perhaps exists somewhere, if one could but find it—that sudden impulse of taking wing like the dove and finding rest.

“ No ?” said Mrs. Herbert in her gentle inquiring tone, no way moved by my hasty negative. “ Don’t you like the sea ? But, my dear, you must not decide so hastily, we can talk of it another time. I want to hear something of your friends. The rector—I remember his wife a great many years ago, when she was always having babies ; the babies are grown up by this time, I daresay ; little plagues ! they do remind one so how time goes on. There is Bertie, my brother John’s Bertie, you know, who was sent to me from India ; you can’t conceive how that boy grows.”

“ Did he live with you ?” I asked in some surprise.

“ Yes, till I sent him to his aunt Matilda, his mother’s sister ; his mother’s friends ought to take the trouble of these poor little Indian children as well as we ; little brown things, one never knows what to do with them ; but I am really proud of Bertie, he has improved so much since he came home. By the way,” said Mrs. Herbert, “ does the rector ever take pupils, Clara, do you know ? for Bertie is quite my boy, and I should like to have him near me ; my poor dear Herbert was his godfather, and he has grown quite like a child of my own.”

“ I did not know you had made such a sacrifice for me,” I said, hastily, divided between an involuntary and momentary suspicion, and the impulse of inviting Bertie immediately to Estcourt. I had never heard of him before, and to hear of him was somewhat embarrassing, especially in this way.

“ My dear child !” cried Mrs. Herbert, with a slight pressure of my hand. “ No ; Bertie

grows a great boy, too much for feminine management; but if the rector took pupils—however, we can talk of that again.”

“The rector is rich, and a man of family,” said I. “I do not know why he took the living, but I never heard of him taking pupils; he has no need.”

“Oh, my dear Clara, *I* can tell you why he took the living,” said Mrs. Herbert, with a shake of her head; “it was quite worth his while *then*; he had nothing but a wife and quantities of children. I would not blame your poor dear papa, my love, not for the world—but Estborne is a family living; it has always been held by a Nugent—and I have never quite got it out of my mind that Edward’s unsettledness, poor fellow, all began with the change of his destination in the first place. He was to have taken orders, you know; but when your poor dear papa gave Estborne to Dr. Harley there was an end of that. Dr. Harley is a very excellent man,

and I am sure it was a most wise selection; but he was not rich, though of course he was a man of family. However, perhaps he has a curate who would take Bertie; but we can talk of that another time. Do you see much of Sir Willoughby, my dear?"

"His sister calls sometimes," said I.

"I should be very glad to know her. I went to school with a younger sister, a pretty, sweet girl who died," said Mrs. Herbert. "Now Clara, dear, if you have done breakfast, go and get your bonnet; I should so like a ramble in the park.

I obeyed her quite docilely. I rather liked the quiet household authority which entered into no discussion of rights, but simply took its superior place for granted. It saved us both a great deal of trouble. We went out accordingly to the park, down across the sunny turf, so warm and fragrant with the early light, to the river side. It was quite a little river, with flat banks,—green grass

broken into an outline of mimic little bays and promontories ; and on the other side, at some distance, the little town of Estbury, with its two graceful old spires. It was very pretty, very peaceful, but its calm was the calm of the morning, full of action and life, and not the repose of the night.

I thought of this unconsciously as we returned again and came into the Lime Walk, where, through the stately green colonnade, our old house, with its gables and its yew trees, looked tranquilly down the avenue. The servants there, too, were astir ; the gardener out and busy among his plants. Again the calm of the morning ; that sweet, steady, working-day quietness which was neither of the Sabbath nor of the night.

My companion's thoughts were not running in the same channel as mine. She looked up, like me, through the lovely living green of the limes, fluttering with their cool transparent leaves in the morning breeze, and round upon

the park with its fine trees and greensward, and back to the old house basking in the sunshine. Then she drew a long breath and looked at me. What was she thinking?—what was I thinking? Inscrutable creatures to each other, neither of us could tell.

“My dear Clara,” said Mrs. Herbert, “if I could envy any one, I think it would be you.—Such a fine old house—such a pretty manageable property!—yours is just such a fortune as one could thoroughly enjoy.”

“Do you think so?” said I, somewhat languidly. “In the mean time it is a great deal too much for me. All this space, and all my own desert of unoccupied time, not to say affections. I cannot think God meant such a waste. I should like to find some use for it all.”

“Do not fear, my dear; you will soon find a tenant for your affections—not to say that you pay me a poor compliment,” said Mrs. Herbert, smiling. “At your age, Clara, and

in your circumstances, one should not speak of waste, or of what God meant ; all this will be filled up in time."

As she spoke she looked at me closely. I could not help some degree of agitation—but I did not blush—I was past that—and it was some comfort to feel that I only turned pale. "You must know," I said, as quietly as was possible, "something of my past life ; and now, I should like you to understand me ; I shall always be Clare Nugent, of Estcourt. If I make any plans just now, they are not for a temporary occasion, but for my life. When I say that there ought to be some one besides me to enjoy this place, I mean it honestly and without any inference ; and when I say that it is not right nor in nature to suffer myself, God having taken away all natural ties from me, to stiffen into arbitrary selfishness and keep all that I have for my own pleasure, I say only the truth and nothing else. Do not mistake me ; I mean nothing at all romantic

or highflown, but only the plain homely truth."

"Which is, that you do not mean to keep your fortune all to yourself. That is very simple, my dear," said Mrs. Herbert, who never contradicted any one. "But to speak of all natural ties being taken from you is quite unjust and unkind, not like you, Clara. So far from that, we have quite a number of relations. You might be a benevolent providence, like the hero of a French novel, if you had a mind, among ever so many people. That would be very nice—delightful to me, I am sure, who know what it is to be in straitened circumstances; and I know you would do it so generously and tenderly, finding out really who wanted it most, and sending such a delicate, delightful surprise to one embarrassed family and another. Dear child! I love you for the thought; the only drawback is, that we shall not be able to see all the charming little scenes of relief and gratitude; but I,

who know what difficulties are, can imagine them very well."

I do not know how it happened. I could not suppose Mrs. Herbert had any intention of the kind; yet somehow this fancy picture struck me with sudden shame and a sense of the ludicrous. I had not the faintest idea of making myself and my wealth into a French providence, or fate. I blushed involuntarily at the idea, and was silent. Charming little scenes of gratitude, or dramatic surprises of benevolence were not at all in my way; neither was I prepared to be the good genius of a scattered and struggling family. I became quite silent about my plans at once—but not so Mrs. Herbert, who continued to make constant reference to them, and told me a hundred tales of the struggles of poverty, and the embarrassments of limited income, which were very new to me, and often very interesting; but I fear they did not tend to increase the benevolence of my thoughts.

CHAPTER III.

SHE had gained her point very easily; our trunks stood in the hall, carefully packed and directed; we were to travel—"the only way in which ladies can travel in comfort," Mrs. Herbert said—under the guardianship of a man and a maid; we were going to the sea, to Hastings. I scarcely know why, except that Mrs. Herbert chose it so; for I should have been pleased to keep nearer home.

"My dear Clara, we have some relations there," said Mrs. Herbert, "cousins of mine; cousins rather far off of yours. You ought to see them. I fear, poor girls, they are not too well off. Ah! Clara, one can never be too thankful for a defined position. These poor

things now keep struggling to get into a little better society, and keep up an appearance above their means. It is very sad; perhaps you could take a little notice of them; befriend them a little. I dare say, being of our blood, you will think they have a claim upon the heiress of Estcourt; and, of course, according to your view, so they have."

"I shall be very glad to see them," I said, quietly.

"And they to see you, I am sure," said Mrs. Herbert, with a rather too expressive smile. "One thing only I beg of you, my love, don't ask them here; for, really, if we were to establish a general refuge for branches of the family, Estcourt would be quite an hospital presently. I do trust you will like the Misses Nugent, poor things. Now, dear, I believe the carriage is ready—let us go."

We went, accordingly; and as we drove up the gentle little ascent, which to our midland horses is something of a hill, and looked down

through a break in the trees upon my own sunny Estcourt, lying warm in the sunshine, I did not desire to see it a family hospital, any more than Mrs. Herbert. What I wanted would have been, somehow to establish the usual succession of Nature in that solitary house; to have the trees grow and the river run in the eyes of youth. I was not married, nor ever would be; but for that matter, my cousin and companion was as childless and out of the current as I. What then? I was not disposed to think, being very unlikely to form any new ties on my own part, that it was quite impossible for a woman, unmarried or childless, to do a woman's duty in the world.

I thought a good deal upon this problem. How I had been thrown out of the usual tide, was a thing past and no longer to be dwelt upon; and I was just a common woman with a little woman-pride, and did not like to suppose that I must be helpless and useless because I was alone.

At the same time, my country breeding made me very shy of anything which could be called public, and I had been used all my life to hear a good deal of ridicule of female philanthropists. I thought upon this a great deal as we left home. Perhaps, after all, it might be best to make Estcourt a family harbour of refuge, and do my duty of succour and tendance to the widows and solitary women, the shipwrecked brothers and children from India; this view of the subject was rather appalling, and took away my breath; so I endeavoured to leave it and suspend my judgment; waiting to see how it should be influenced by the Misses Nugent at Hastings, whither we were bound.

We arrived there late in August, on a glorious harvest-day. I was not familiar with the sea; I cannot tell how it was that the great calm benignant flood came as with a veritable touch to my heart. As soon as we had established ourselves in the lodgings,

which Mrs. Herbert had provided, I went out, rejoicing to be alone. My griefs and wounds of heart grew still under the great hush of the sea. I went as near as I could and stood by, while the beautiful waves came hushing and whispering up to my very feet. It was a wonderful evening. The water was so full and the sun so low, that the ruddy western rays shone through the crest of the waves, making them glorious with that illumination; the sea was of many tints, deep ocean blue and green, and other tender indescribable hues, melting and moving into one another; some white sails, some red ones of fishing-boats, and the sun striking in a misty fulness upon the cliffs on the left hand, and the grassy downs receding away into the sky, while still the waves came hush, hush, with a lave and flow of comfort up to my feet; I never knew, as I did then, the solace of the sea.

Then I was very glad we had come here;

I was old enough to know, and that is a hard saying, that I could not grieve for ever; and my grief was far enough off to bear this hush which arrested thought. My sore heart began to feel healed a little; began to cease that unconscious involuntary protest against Providence. Those waves which came up like successive sorrows, but still were stayed and did not overwhelm the land; those waves which came like the generations, one coming and another going; standing by them I began to feel, what a little corner of life these trials of mine were, and what the whole was, and how, perhaps, if God willed it so, I should think of them with smiles, when all the tides were over, and we were all safe together in the completed life.

I was interrupted by the approach of a true sea-side party, the leaders of which were two tall middle-aged women, dressed with pretension, but rather poorly, in great brown hats, which made the most of their unloveliness;

they were talking with rather an air of patronage to a homely looking couple, attended by three nice children, the youngest of whom was hunting with ill success, but despairing perseverance, for shells on the beach. Without the slightest inclination to listen, I could not help hearing the conversation of the group.

“She is quite an heiress, poor thing, and I believe a timid creature, who knows nothing of the world; you shall come to us and meet her, if she feels equal to it,” said one of the ladies. “Poor dear girl, I long to comfort her, she is left *so* much alone; and, of course, as she is so near a relative, and comes here expressly for the comfort of our society, we shall have to devote a great deal of our time to her. I long for the meeting and yet I dread it. She was so tenderly attached to her parents; such a sweet susceptible nature—dear Clare!”

“Dear Clare!” exclaimed an echoing voice, so nearly alike that but for the pause between,

and the apparent difference of place, I could not have told the one from the other; "but we trust we shall still see a great deal of you, Mrs. Austin, and these delightful children; we should be quite grieved, even for our cousin's sake, to risk the loss of your society, the greatest pleasure we have found here."

"Thank you, my wife is always at home; you know where to find her," said some one rather gruffly; and then, after a pause, a delicate piping voice asked: "When does your cousin arrive, Miss Nugent? I should like to know her; I am always very sorry for orphans. James, don't you think we could do something to cheer her up a little? We could drive her out sometimes. James!"

I could not hear the second appeal to James, as they had passed me by this time; but I could bear Miss Nugent's smiling, condescending acknowledgment on my behalf.

"My dear Mrs. Austin, we are so much obliged to you!—but I have no doubt my

cousin has her own carriage and horses. You are so good, it is so like you—I shall be sure to let dearest Clare know.”

When they were quite gone, I turned and hastened back to our lodgings somewhat dismayed. They had not noticed me at all, I suppose; nor perceived my start of astonishment at the sound of my own name. I made great haste to get in, fearing lest I should meet and recognise them, and forgetting that I was quite safe in their ignorance of me. I could still see their tall, somewhat heavy figures, the little bits of veil and feather flapping with the broad brims of their hats, in the distance, as I returned. This sudden glimpse of these new cousins was a renewed perplexity thrown into my cogitations. I judged of them hastily and at once, as was natural from our abrupt meeting, and their proposed affectionateness for the “dearest Clare,” whom they never saw. They struck in, very inharmoniously, upon my former

thoughts ; unconsciously I thought of the brown hats, the bits of veil and stunted feathers in the park at Estcourt, the big figures and chiming voices in our silent drawing room. I shrank from the idea, with no delight whatever in the "duty," which appeared in such a shape, and never thought Mrs. Herbert so pleasant as when I found her with her quiet ways and light steps, and lady's voice, waiting for me in the new lodgings, which she had already made to look like home.

CHAPTER IV.

THAT same evening, while we were taking tea, the Misses Nugent paid us their first visit.

I had made no mention to Mrs. Herbert of my chance encounter with my unknown cousins. Pleasant and gentle though she was, I was by no means on confidential terms with my companion, and I had an unwilling and only half conscious suspicion, that my distaste for our other relatives was precisely the sentiment which would best please her. Accordingly, I kept it to myself, though it was not difficult to perceive by the half smile which played upon her pretty features, her glances from the window and evident expectation, that she quite anticipated the impression

which the new comers would make. They came, filling the little drawing-room which we occupied with a rustle and sweep, and overpowering *bouquet* of perfumery. They had changed their dress a little, and were now arrayed in light coarse muslin, much flounced and ornamented; each of them took me into her arms with an effusion of tenderness; each of them addressed me as dear cousin Clare, and affectionately trusted I would be benefited by the sea breezes. Then, the commotion of such an arrival being safely over, each sat down, and both protested in a breath, that they were shocked at themselves for disturbing us so soon; but *so* anxious to know how poor dear Clare had borne the journey. I, the subject of all this tenderness, could not express my own amazement and awkwardness. Affection which one does not deserve, and unhappily can make no response to, is about the most embarrassing thing in the world.

“Fancy, how fortunate! dear Sophy heard

only this morning from Mr. Edward Nugent, that you were to arrive to-day; of course we have been expecting you for some time; but to know where you were, and be able to see you at once in this delightful family way is so pleasant," said the elder Miss Nugent; "I should never have known, Eleanor, but for cousin Edward; it was so kind of him; you are so fond of taking one by surprise, you sly thing; but Edward is such a dear frank fellow, such a nice escort for us, so many ladies—I was quite delighted to see him here."

"Is Edward here?" said Mrs. Herbert, clapping her pretty hands in apparent surprise, though she coloured slightly. "He is really the most erratic, the least to be calculated upon! I dare say he thought Clara and I would want a gentleman to look after things for us. It is just like him, so kind and so foolish. Poor Edward! but Sophy and you, I presume, are quite settled here."

"Oh, perfectly, quite at home; able to

show cousin Clare all the lions," said Miss Sophy, taking off her hat, and shaking down her curls, which were very long and not very becoming. "Now, I shall get on famously. I did so want a companion. How fortunate that dear Clare and I are about the same age. Oh, I do so hope you'll like me! I want a friend, of all things."

"Sophy never recollects that she is not a child now," said Miss Nugent, indulgently.

For my own part, I cannot help confessing that I looked with considerable dismay at Miss Sophy, and somehow was not prepared to admit that we were the same age. I believed myself old; but I suppose it was some remnant of vanity which made me feel extremely disconcerted and uncomfortable at the idea of being like Sophy Nugent. She was what people call "very plain," with large features, and a coarse complexion, long since deprived of all traces of the freshness and elasticity of youth. The faces of both the sisters had set-

tled down into dryness and hardness ; they were unlovely, uncomely, faces which one did not desire to look at again ; yet they were Nugents, of a good race, and had been gifted with a good education and brought up in good society. How they managed to look so coarse, and hard and unrefined in feature and complexion I cannot tell ; but I know that I contemplated the idea of being as old as Sophy Nugent with no small degree of dismay.

Upon this, even Mrs. Herbert looked with a faint half visible smile of amusement, and I rather suspected, a little malicious satisfaction. She took much less part in the conversation than was usual with her ; only enough to draw out the strangers, and make full exhibition of their habits and customs. The subjects were nothing loth.

“ You know Kate Crofton ? ” said Miss Nugent, turning to me ; “ do you know she is going to make a great marriage, that little thoughtless thing ? for my part, I sympathise

with her husband—he will have enough to trouble him, poor man, whoever he may be.”

“ I know Mary Crofton,” I said, rather faintly; it was something like a stab, sudden and unlooked for, and Mrs. Herbert kept looking at me.

“ Oh, yes, Mary Crofton is very well married; we meet them a great deal in society. Her husband is an extremely handsome man. It must be rather a bore to have a very handsome husband,” said Miss Nugent. “ They have been travelling abroad for some time, as of course you know, and now they are expected home; and as soon as possible after their arrival, as I understand, the marriage is to take place.”

“ What marriage? ” asked Mrs. Herbert.

“ We were seeing Kate’s *trousseau* just before we left town, such beauties of things!” said Sophy. “ And the person who supplies her told us she had all the trouble in the world, sending all over the town for Mechlin lace,

because Kate had set her heart on having her nightcaps trimmed with it; lace at some frightful price a yard. I never knew such a capricious little creature, and so extravagant. Men have the oddest fancies, I declare, and marrying is the most ridiculous affair in existence. Who could have dreamt of Kate Crofton and her cousin, of all people in the world."

"Kate Crofton and her cousin! is that the marriage you were talking of? it is strange," said Mrs. Herbert. "I should like to know now, if Edward is here, why he does not come to see me. He is the strangest creature; I suppose he thinks it would not be kind to intrude upon you, Clara, the very first night."

I am sure this was very kind of her, this diversion; but I had much rather she had not shown any consciousness, but suffered them rather to talk on.

"It took every one quite by surprise, I assure you," said Miss Nugent. "I understand he is dreadfully quarrelsome, and fell

out with some one he was to be married to, on the very eve of his wedding day. Horrid, isn't it? I should never hope for any peace with such a man."

"Kate's courageous," said Miss Sophy, "and, of course, a girl like her would risk a good deal for such an establishment. I don't know, cousin Clare, whether you care for such things; but, if you should be in town, do go and have a peep at Kate's *trousseau*."

"That embroidered work that they trim everything with now-a-days, is so pretty," said Miss Nugent, apologetically; "but I dare say, cousin Clare has other things to think of, Sophy. Now, really, we must think of going home. Though one can almost do what one likes at the sea-side, still I don't like being out late without a protector, or at least a *chaperone*. We shall look for you at lunch tomorrow, dear Clare and Eleanor. Pray, do take us in a friendly way, and come; we shall be quite alone, and we can arrange for a drive

somewhere afterwards; good night, dear Clare; I am so glad to know you, and I trust you will get quite strong and cheerful at Hastings; good night."

"Good night, love," whispered Sophy, in an embrace. "I do so hope you'll like me! you are just the companion I have always longed for."

Well! it was quite right and according to nature; this was the kind of life and society into which I must drop if I would; and Kate Crofton, Kate Crofton! but it was a great deal better not to speak, much less think of it, except just thus far, that very soon, when it was all over, I might write to Mary, and gain, perhaps, as in the time when we were girls, my old friend.

Oh, that time when we were girls! I wonder if it could but return, leaving us all our experience, if things would be different? I do not suppose they would.

I was rather afraid of Mrs. Herbert that

night, afraid of her saying something, or inferring something, or being sorry for me. To prevent her, I took a great deal more than my usual part in the conversation, and spoke about things and persons I knew very little of with a liveliness and interest which I still less felt. I dare say her quick eyes traced signs of agitation and disquietude, even in my unusual exertions to be cheerful; but I kept up, notwithstanding, and baffled her curiosity; and she did not make the slightest allusion to what we had heard.

When I got safely to my own room, I opened the window and stood by it for a long time; I cannot say I was looking out—there was nothing to be seen in the darkness; I was only holding out my heart like a troubled child to the hush of the sea; and the water came up softly, softly, a great soothing tender murmur through the night. Kate Crofton! well, it was nothing to me; I lay down and said my prayers and went to sleep. One can sleep

when one is resolved to do it—and it was not for me to consume my heart with vain groans over the present, or recollections of the past.

CHAPTER V.

WAKING in the morning with something to come into one's thoughts, almost before one is awake, something which has been lying in wait all the night, that is different from the happy uprising of youth. But then, that was all I had to look for; youth was over, years ago. It would be foolish under any circumstances to look for its renewal; though somehow it seemed hard to be pursued as with another and another buffet, and get no time for rest; all this might have happened well enough without me hearing anything about it. To hear about it was a teasing, troublesome, vexatious aggravation, if nothing more.

Before we went out Mrs. Herbert's brother

called, another Nugent. I was surprised to find him looking quite young; that is, young for a man. I suppose, perhaps, he was still older than myself. He was rather handsome, soft of speech, and with good manners; considerably like Mrs. Herbert. To me, and I presume to ladies generally, he bore himself with that old-fashioned courtly air of deference, which, though it has worn out of fashion, still somehow associates itself with the heroic, in the minds of women. I was not at all prepared to meet such a person, and could not have supposed that this was the volatile and unsteady Edward, who never did anything. By his own conversation one would have believed him a man of many affairs, and full of occupation.

“Now, Eleanor, make what use you can of me,” he said; “my time will soon be up, you know. Busy men, cousin Clare, can only snatch a mere passing glimpse of felicity. About the only reason, I think, *we* have to

envy those rich fellows who can follow their inclinations, and go where they will. But there's always compensation. What can I do for you, sister Nell?"

"Are you so dreadfully busy, Edward?" said Mrs. Herbert laughing; "pray don't allow us to interrupt such very serious occupation; Clara and I can get on very well, and I am extremely glad to hear such accounts of you."

"It is extremely kind of you to be extremely glad," said Edward, in a grave tone of displeasure, while even I partially resented on his behalf the laugh of his sister. "However, I don't mean to lose time in discussion.—Are your lodgings comfortable? Do you like the place? What can I do for you? Does my cousin ride, Eleanor? Really, asking questions and getting no answer is not the most amusing thing in the world."

"I think I may answer these," said I. "Our lodgings are very well, and for my own part I like the place; but I do not ride, at

least, I have not ~~done so for years—not since I was a girl.~~”

“When might that remote period be?” said Edward, with a complimentary smile and bow. “However, Eleanor, I am at your disposal till four, when I have an engagement at my hotel with a man from town, who comes down to see me on some business affairs. What have you planned for to-day?”

“We are going to lunch with Matilda and Sophy Nugent, and drive out with them after,” said Mrs. Herbert, very demurely.

Mr. Edward cried “oh!” and shrugged his shoulders with a look of commiseration. “Poor Cousin Clare! does she know what is in store for her?” he said, making a lamentable face. “One requires to make up one’s mind to that. Well! I expect to meet with a due appreciation of my services and self-sacrifice; even there, ladies, behold your devoted attendant!”

“Till four!” said Mrs. Herbert, with a malicious little smile.

“Till four!” repeated her brother, gravely; and he immediately turned to me, and began to speak so feelingly of the bustle of town, and the cheering sensation of rest which one could only experience in the country, that I could not help supposing his sister to have made a great mistake about him. I felt for him instantly that sympathy and indulgence which one feels for a person whose worth one is the first to discover, and whom nobody has ever understood.

Presently we went out for a ramble along the sands, the tide being sufficiently out to permit that luxury. Edward was an entertaining companion enough, and knew that common gossip of “society,” which, for a little, is very amusing to people quite out of the same; and I having no desire to brood over anything, but a very sincere one to be

as little unhappy as possible, and to vindicate to myself, if I could, my own sound and steady mind—I was very glad to be amused and occupied. Mrs. Herbert, too, under the influence of her brother, expanded a little. We were a cheerful-looking group, as we wandered along close by the edge of the rising tide; and when Edward, with an outcry of comic dismay, looked at his watch, and informed us that it was nearly one o'clock, I was sorry too, for I had a little personal horror of the Misses Nugent—something of that painful repulsion which one feels when a disagreeable picture of what one may some day look like one's self becomes suddenly visible. I had no feeling of this kind with Mrs. Herbert or her brother, though both of them were as solitary, as unoccupied, possibly more selfish, than the old young ladies, in their cheap flowers and straw hats, whom I almost disliked, and they did not hesitate to laugh at. The hour came, however, and we

turned back. The ladies lived in a very little house rather close upon the harbour, but certainly very near the sea, where they had two little rooms, furnished dingily, as cheap sea-side lodgings were like to be. When we entered, however, my heart smote me a little, to find the amount of excitement and preparation about this poor little meal, which we, the invited guests, cared for so little. They had decked their table with flowers, and I have no doubt, spent a great deal of time, perhaps the whole morning, brightening up their little room for our reception. Pity that their time was of so little value! but I could not help feeling a little compunction, and even some shame, when I perceived how they had prepared for us; we, who thought it all only a virtuous complaisance on our part, and a great bore.

“What a nice little room,” said Mrs. Herbert, looking round with a critical eye; “not very commodious certainly; but so nice for

the kind of thing. I am sure you have been quite fortunate in finding such a snug little place."

"Yes," said Miss Nugent, who had reddened a good deal, and exchanged a rather vindictive look with Miss Sophy. "I said at once when we came here, how much it reminded me of those dear little rooms of yours at Leamington, where you lived so long. Quite plain and small, and inexpensive of course; but so nice! you remember what I said, Sophy. I felt sure Mrs. Herbert would like our place; it would put her so in mind of old times."

"Oh, don't speak of them, in mercy," cried Mrs. Herbert, who felt the home-thrust very acutely, but tried to cover it under a fixed look of inspection, and a most constrained and vengeful smile. "Don't, for pity's sake, speak of Leamington; such little holes! oh, quite different from this charming little cottage here."

“It *was* a little den of a place that you had at Leamington,” said Edward; “rather hard upon ladies, I should say, to shut them up in such boxes, ten feet square. A solitary old bachelor like myself gets on well enough.”

“Oh, you quiz! and why should not ladies get on,” cried Miss Sophy, with a playful air.

“Ah, my cousin—crinoline!” said Edward, “not to talk of any more prosaic reasons. I, of course, am more or less occupied from morning till night, and a man does not care what sort of a den it is in which he smokes his final cigar. But the ladies, delicate creatures! with their sweet love of home, and their fairy employments—I appeal to your excellent sense, Matilda; can even crochet bestow animation upon a little sea-faring apartment like this?”

“I presume you allude to the model of the ship. I am told it is a yacht belonging to Lord Bridgman, who cannot, of course, in the

slightest degree deserve the epithet seafaring," said Miss Nugent, with some state; "and Sophy and I, I am delighted to say, have many resources, independent of crochet, which is a very nice amusement, though all men seem to think themselves privileged to sneer at it. I have seen gentlemen themselves very much less usefully employed; but as for what you say of yourself, cousin Edward, it is charming, and I am delighted. How glad you must be, Eleanor! It must be so nice to be occupied from morning till night!"

This second sally left Miss Nugent for the time master of the field. Edward, however, was too lively for her, partially supported, as he was, by Sophy, and very soon made head against the heavy and solemn sarcasm of the elder sister. The little party were almost too busy with this little family contest and trial of strength between themselves to remember me, who happened to be the guest of the day, and I could not help looking on upon the

whole group, if sometimes with a more painful feeling, with amused observation, perceiving their side play of conscious rivalry, and civil, friendly opposition. Mrs. Herbert took such pains to praise everything at table, with quite a fine lady's approval; while Edward, with still more telling force, demolished Miss Nugent's satisfaction in her preparations by condolences on the impossibility of getting anything fit to eat in a place full of sea-bathing people. The only relief to this agreeable family intercourse was, when they remembered it, reference from one side and the other to me. I was pressed to eat with the tenderest affection by the Misses Nugent, while Mrs. Herbert, with her quiet assumption of guardianship, appropriated me and my tastes so cleverly that I could not but admire her skill. For so far I was quite passive, supposing myself justified in making a spectator of myself, and watching them all, in virtue of my motive, which I knew, though

they did not know it. After lunch, we drove out, attended by our squire on horseback, to one of the ordinary lions of the district. This happened to be a very pretty wooded dell, hidden in the heart of those free breezy, exhilarating downs, which were more attractive to me, being less familiar. I suppose it was a place which a more congenial party would have found great pleasure in. The order of our little expedition, however, was not, I thought, much conducive to pleasure. Before us went pretty little Mrs. Herbert, with her quick eyes and delicate footstep, and Matilda Nugent, big and heavy in her muslin flounces and brown hat. They were both talking a good deal, a soft voice and a harsh one, neither in much harmony with the trickle of unseen water, and the wind among the leaves; and neither pausing much for that other tender colloquy of nature which their talk disturbed; while, by my side, in closest attendance, closer than I by any means felt

desirable, came Edward Nugent, cousin Sophy keeping affectionately on the other hand, "making friends," she said. To me, country born, and much accustomed to solitude and freedom, it was not very delightful to be handed about by Edward Nugent, who made difficult the passage which he pretended to make easy; and we had pretty dells in our own country, which were everyday friends to me. When we came to a spot where it was proper to pause to look at something—a well, or a waterfall, or a lover's seat, I forget which—Mrs. Herbert, with her playful malicious look, held up her watch to her brother.

"Four o'clock!" said this squire of dames, with a start. "Ten minutes to four—oh, time enough yet for a gallop—pardon me, ladies—a thousand pardons, cousin Clare—but no, I can't do it—hang business! the fellow must wait."

"Oh, pray do not wait on our account; we can manage very well," said I, really with

some anxiety. He made me a deep bow of mock homage.

“No! pray do not add commands which it is cruel to hear, horrid to disobey. I can't leave you to return by yourselves; impossible! My man will wait for me. I shall set all right in a minute. Of course, to a party of ladies, everything gives way.”

“Does everything give way to a party of ladies?” said I. Mrs. Herbert looked at him, and then looked at me, with her little smile of pleasant malice, shaking her head as to a dear indulged incurable, whom it was useless finding fault with. “Ah, Edward, I hope Clara will prove a better teacher than I can pretend to be,” said his smiling sister. Once more I drew back from her implied interpretation of my words. A teacher was the last thing in the world I meant to be.

While all the time the Miss Nugents answered me in a flutter—“Dear Clare, of

course! what are you thinking of? To leave ladies for business would be horrid; and of course these shocking business people ought to give way."

CHAPTER VI.

EDWARD NUGENT remained day after day—even, as these passed, week after week—in attendance upon his sister and myself; and professedly much distracted by claims of business, which he resisted only because he was in chains, as he said, and could not withdraw himself from our society. This gave me great annoyance after a while. I had little experience of love making, and was very unused to consider myself a likely subject for the same; yet, bye-and-bye, I could not shut my eyes to the fact, that Edward Nugent's "attentions" came to be very marked and significant, and that he addressed me and looked at me in a manner which I, waking up out of the supposed

security of my years' and settled life, at first resented rather warmly, as impertinence.

That, however, was nonsense; for my respectable cousin did not know much of my purposes; perhaps, if he had known them, would still have thought them within the reach of change—and had as good a right to fall in love with Estcourt as any other man. When I became less angry, my first idea, of course, was to let him know as easily as possible, and, if possible, indirectly, what my feelings and purposes were. We had been only about three weeks at Hastings when I made this discovery—soon enough, one would suppose; but during that time the gallant Edward had not been absent from us a day.

I was here, accordingly, in the midst of a strange little society—one phase of the world. I was no longer young, and I thought myself (except in presence of Sophy Nugent) older than I was. One can make great allowances for young people attached to each other; one

can understand how a young man should waste one summer of his days, and a young girl lose hers in a dream, under the spell of that sole wizard who can make the two hearts one. Somehow, that is not waste: one approves of it, because it is the true holiday and charmed leisure of nature, seemly and lovely to behold. But there was nothing of this sweet idleness in these three or four weeks which Edward Nugent spent at Hastings. He was not even "in love" with me. But he was not at all a bad fellow. I almost think he might have been "in" something which he himself could believe to be "love," if I had liked, and even now did not think me a disagreeable appendage to the property; but I was too old to be pleased by such an entire relinquishment of time and professed sacrifice of business made for me. So I count our whole little circle pretty much alike in these particulars. We were all out of the common tide of life. We had nothing to do, any of us, but "enjoy our-

selves," as people say. We had no very close ties in the world—nothing to lead us out of ourselves, nothing to occupy our faculties. We were all together, single useless persons; together, but with no principle of union among us—dry trees, leafless, shadeless, unnecessary, of no use to any one upon the face of the earth.

For instance, I could not tell, for my life, how Mrs. Herbert spent those days which glided over her so equably and gently. We breakfasted before ten, generally; after that she disappeared, and was understood to write letters—letters about nothing, addressed to people perfectly indifferent to her, for whom she would not have walked half a mile out of her way, but to whom she filled two or three sheets of note-paper pleasantly in a morning. After that she talked a little, dressed a little, perhaps went out, lunched, dined, took tea—and so came softly floating towards the night again, the rest of labouring souls. When this calm was broken, it was only by the pleasant

business of making a special toilette and going out to dinner—a thing which occurred seldom at the present time. Strange to think that these quiet days were gradually making this pretty little woman old, and drawing her near to those great, primitive realities which, one day or other, the smallest soul must come across. One could not suppose an end coming to such a perfectly seemly, useless, graceful kind of existence. You could suppose, contemplating her life day by day, that Mrs. Herbert Nugent must live for ever.

Yet she was a most lively, vivacious, cheerful little person, enjoying a great many things, and had, I assure you, a most pleasant conviction of the importance and value of her life.

So here we were, five of us, all the same; one of us only rich, four of us poor; all of us having, poor souls, nothing to do with ourselves—unpressed by any good necessity of nature. I could not help pausing to look at the group we made, wondering over it, feeling it so

strange that no one seemed to think of our common circumstances save I.

The Misses Nugent had a very small income; perhaps it made some little occupation to them contriving how they were to squeeze their autumnal change of air, their ribbons and gloves, their hats and flounces, besides all the inevitable expenses of their little house in London, out of their annuity. *That* must have amused their minds greatly, and given them a considerable advantage, though they did not appreciate it. And Edward, I presume, had no income at all, which must have been still more interesting, and quite a dramatic excitement for his faculties. Otherwise, we were all, as I say, entirely unoccupied, with nothing to do but to "enjoy ourselves"—which occupation the majority of our party turned into a most skilful system of annoying ourselves, by all sorts of little emulations and single combats. I suppose there were a considerable number of little "circles" by that

same sea-margin not much unlike us. It was a very hard problem for me. Somehow it seemed as if God had sent us into the world with nothing to do. Were we to accept that as His will and purpose concerning us? Were we to try anything? I read a great deal upon the subject—many books, novels and otherwise, which were said to be “protests” against the conventions of society, and cries wrung from the victims of the same; but I found no consolation in my literature. Whether women could be watchmakers or jewellers did not so much interest me, though, perhaps, that too might be important enough; and in my novels I found the “protest” so vehement on the mere personal particular that Providence had not sent such a hero as the heroine could marry, that I was silenced and cast back, if I had chosen to be cast back, upon thoughts of my own not the most delightful in the world. But still, withal, there was no solution to my question. Having no thought

of marriage, no possibility of children, no one of my own to lay upon me the undeniable claims of nature, and yet, being very reluctant to come to the same state of existence as Mrs. Herbert and Matilda and Sophy Nugent—what was *I* to do?

It happened, too, as a further difficulty—though, perhaps, it was rather good for me, at this present stage—that I had been accustomed to hear a good deal of such female philanthropical agents as were known in my time, of whom, in our quarter at least, there existed no very high appreciation. Tory country gentlemen, who held stoutly by Church and State, yet were not very deeply informed either about the one or the other, looked with great distrust upon anything at all done out of “the common,” more especially when the agent happened to be a woman; and my father himself, and others who, perhaps, had equal influence upon me in my youth, had impressed upon me a great terror

of "stepping out of my own sphere," or leaving the natural retirement of an English gentlewoman even for the holiest work of charity. Perhaps my own mind consented withal. There were no Miss Nightingales in those days; but, even with my unsatisfied mind, I could not have gone out as a nurse, I fear, or served in an hospital. I took into painful consideration whether I could carry out the scheme which once had crossed my mind, and make Estcourt a family receptacle for all the branches of the race which had fallen in the battle. I thought of a collection of people like ourselves here—single individuals, attached to each other only by arbitrary connection, and far-off bonds of relationship, which were just sufficient to add piquancy to dislike, and vehemence to emulation—making a flutter and crowd in the peaceful rooms and quiet parks of Estcourt. I thought of the widows and maiden ladies whose business had been to keep up appearances, and of the

younger brothers grown old, and antique branches of the house of Nugent who had failed in life; every one by himself, every one by herself—all useless—no one caring to be of any use. My heart failed quite before such a prodigious undertaking. I could not make myself a martyr—a martyr after so wearisome and ignoble a fashion—to the blood and race of Nugent. I had a due regard for my name and family, but not so much as that.

While I came to this conclusion, Edward became more and more an annoyance to me. I had sufficient friendliness for him to be sorry, almost ashamed to remain a spectator of this foolishness; and in the meantime he was astonishingly skilful in continuing to misunderstand every inference by which I endeavoured to make him aware what my mind and intentions were. I had nothing to complain of in Mrs. Herbert; she was the most impartial of sisters. She watched him, and was perfectly aware of his motives, but used no influence on

his behalf. I found her pleasant, quiet self-regard quite beneficial to me in these troublesome circumstances. Whether she herself wished to make any private use of the revenues and importance of Estcourt, or whether she was merely satisfied with what she had, and did not desire to relinquish the principal place even to her brother, I cannot tell; but certainly she did not interfere in the slightest degree to further his wishes.

After a while, when I began to see it was inevitable, and began to be impatient also, and was no longer particular how to avoid the interview which should make an end of it, Edward spoke to me. It was only the second time in my life—it agitated me a little; for I could not help remembering, even in the set phrases of the man who wooed Estcourt, other words which it was better I should not think of. However, it all turned out very well—much better than I expected. There was so little real sentiment in the matter, that we got

over it pretty easily; and though he was disappointed, and a little mortified, I had the most comfortable persuasion that Edward Nugent would not break his heart.

After that, he left us. Then it began to grow chill a little, and the Misses Nugent to get weary of their lodgings, and even Mrs. Herbert thought of going home. I was extremely well pleased to go home. I felt that I returned refreshed and invigorated, carrying a steady heart with me for whatever might befall; and that was a great thing to say, when I remembered that it was scarcely a year yet since the family vault was opened, and I, the last survivor of my immediate house, was left, sore, disappointed, in despair, alone in the world.

CHAPTER VII.

A FEW days after we returned home, our doctor, who was in attendance upon a visionary cold of Mrs. Herbert's, came in with a very serious face. Being an honest, sincere man, he was so really occupied at this present moment, that he forgot even to ask for his patient. He sat down with an air of fatigue, and had no smile for Mrs. Herbert's civilities. "Sad work, Miss Nugent—sad work," he said, addressing me.—"I have been, since morning, at the Rectory; I dont believe he'll see out the day."

"Who? Poor little Johnnie? Oh, doctor, must the poor child die?" I cried, not very much surprised, but grieved to hear of it; for

Johnnie was one of those precocious little cripples whom one never expects to live.

The doctor heaved a great sigh, and wiped his forehead.—“Far worse than Johnnie,” he said, shaking his head; “it’s all up with Dr. Harley—the father of all these children. Good heavens! it’s terrible work.”

“Dr. Harley!” Mrs. Herbert struck in, with keen interest, as I did also anxiously. The doctor scarcely seemed to hear our flood of inquiries—he paused again, and then resumed his story slowly—almost too much occupied with it, to be conscious of us—

“The day before yesterday, when he called here, he thought himself a rich man and a strong one,” said the doctor. “Last night he got information of extraordinary losses. The bulk of his money, which he had foolishly put within the power of his wife’s brother, a swindling, disreputable sort of fellow, for some wonderful speculation or other, all lost. The poor man took an apoplectic fit when he heard

of it; he has had two or three since, and I don't believe will see out the night."

Terrible work! So it was. Dreadful, incomprehensible, appalling work—and his wife's brother—oh, poor Mrs. Harley! It seemed too dreadful almost to believe.

"Has she anyone with her?—should I go?" I asked.

"Please!" said the doctor, rising instantly with an air of relief. "Not a creature with her—breaking her heart in lamentations which can do no good. Well, well; it's not easy to make rules for great calamities. But she might as well wait. There will be enough of time to cry."

He went off again hastily, while I prepared to follow. He had not so much as asked for Mrs. Herbert's cold; but she was not offended. On the contrary, when I entered the room with my bonnet on to get something I wanted, I found her, somewhat agitated, pacing about between the windows, waiting for me. As I

was about to go out again, she hurried forward with an excited motion, and caught my hand. "My dearest Clara! pardon me for speaking to you now—you will excuse a sister's anxiety—but if this should be true about poor dear Dr. Harley, remember Edward—remember poor Edward; he was always destined for the Church."

I stood aghast for a moment; I was very much shocked; then I drew my hand away. "Dr. Harley is alive," I said. Mrs. Herbert took no notice of the reproof, nor the half disgusted amazement of my tone.

"My dear, I trust he may live for ever," she said with a little impatience.—"I am shocked at the idea of anything happening to him—a man in the prime of life and with so many children; but it is my duty, my love, to prepare your mind for serious scenes. The doctor assured me he could not live over to-night, and if so—though I shall be grieved beyond expression—if so, dear Clara, think of poor

Edward, your own cousin. His welfare will be in your hands."

I broke away abruptly. I could not bear that dreadful "if so;" "if so!"—if that poor woman whose brother had done it all, were made a widow, and these children fatherless. If the family house were depeopled and desecrated—the family scattered in unexpected helplessness and poverty—the whole world and firmament changed in the twinkling of an eye.—"If so!"—this too was terrible work.

Presently I came to the Rectory—that sunny rectory, with its lawn, and its flowers, and its fine old trees—the most homelike house in the whole parish, a very dwelling place of rest and comfort, where one was used to see the rector, portly and dignified, taking his morning walk, and his pretty wife, sitting with her girls about her in the long summer evenings. The garden was deserted to-day, the blinds down, the house already looking forlorn and wretched. Within there was not a trace nor

a sound of those happy children, some of whom were always bounding about, here or there, in former times; and the only sound in the aching stillness was that painful, hushed bustle of stealthy footsteps; servants stealing up and down stairs towards the sick room; and, at intervals, a sharp, subdued cry. I asked what that was. "My mistress has had a bad attack of hysterics, ma'am," said the man. It seemed the last aggravation of household distress—but I forgave Mrs. Harley, because it was her brother's fault.

And the poor children. I went up to the nursery where they were all assembled under charge of Alice, the eldest, who was just thirteen. I do not think I ever saw anything more pathetic and touching than the self-command in this child's face. Now and then when she thought of it, when I entered first, when I spoke to her, she seemed on the point of giving way. But with the tears glancing in her eyes, and all her face moving, this dear

little woman turned her head aside and composed herself once more. "Oh, don't, Miss Nugent, don't be sorry for me! I mustn't cry," exclaimed poor Alice, with one single sob. The next little girl, who was my god-child, and named Clara, sat in a corner, crying silently. The younger children gazed at all with their big open eyes; and poor little cripple Johnnie, in his wheel chair, tried what he could, like a little hero, to keep the two youngest, who were almost babies, amused and still. This was how it had been possible to keep everything so quiet in this full house.

"And mamma is ill, too," said Alice, turning to me with a whisper, to ease her poor little heart. It was so sad a sight to see this mournful little cluster of children, that I had very nearly left them again, for my own relief. Strange—strange! I could not help thinking this an unexplainable calamity; a father who had all these children breaking

his heart, and dying for the loss of his fortune—a mother, whose husband's life was in the greatest peril, and whose children were left alone, screaming in hysterics. Yet it was all natural—quite natural! I thought it quite unaccountable, and very strange.

Within a few hours—before the night fell—Dr. Harley died. I remember that night with great distinctness; an autumn evening, full of sighs and mysterious gusts of wind, with showers of leaves whirling, now and then, round the deserted garden paths and across the lawn. All the children were in bed when it happened, except Clara and Alice, who sat close by me, clinging to me, listening with their intent childish ears, which could hear the faintest sound. When there was a sudden sound, a cry, a muffled, hushed, stealthy noise of doors opened and closed, and a deadly silence following after, I knew it was all over. I told them to wait while I went down to inquire. They were carrying the widow—

a white, helpless figure in a faint—away from her dead husband's side, when I descended the stair. She had been with him at the end. Then I went up again to my two desolate children; they knew somehow without my telling them, and fell into my arms in their passion of childish anguish, sobbing and crying for papa. Papa—why did he leave them—was his money worth dying for, when he had them to live for? I carried the children into their nursery, my heart sore, and impatient and resentful within me. It was very wrong in that awe-stricken house, where there was nothing now but reverence for the dead. Yet I could not help thinking of it with bitterness and an impulse of upbraiding. With all these dear tender arguments for living, and his life's work which God had given him, how, for some paltry loss of fortune, could he venture to die?

Then I went down to the mother—the poor mother who was a widow. She was

still lying in her faint upon a sofa, motionless, unconscious—and a thoughtful maid, whom I liked ever after, was gathering up, out of that bedchamber which he would occupy no more, some trifling matters of the rector's—little things so terribly suggestive of the difference between to-day and yesterday that my own heart ached to see them. Then came the doctor, very grave and much concerned. A most distressing scene followed when the poor widow came to herself; but when I had brought to her the two poor children, who were sobbing in the dark up-stairs, and found that she was best left alone with them, I saw nothing better than returning home, as it grew late. John was waiting with a cloak and lantern to guard me home. It was a very dark autumn night—no moon, no stars, only a pale stormy-looking breadth of sky, and heavy black clouds, driven into masses by the wind. The same wind blew ghastly through the colourless black trees, and rustled

in the leaves behind us like a patter of footsteps. It was the kind of night on which one has least comfort in thinking of a soul gone away on that solitary journey. Dreary images came to my mind against my will—dismal heathen similitudes of the disembodied, the hopeless antique shade, the funereal ghost; and then with some swaying of the leaves my ear caught the burst of that weird and rugged dirge of the North country which so many people remember.

“ If hosen and shoon thou gav’st nane,
The whins shall jag thee intill the bane.”

The fascination grew so strong upon me, that I could almost imagine the chant—“ Every one and alle,” and the adjuration which there means no mercy, “ Christ receive thy saul,” sounding solemnly among the trees, which bowed and trembled to the wind. Oh, that wonderful strange death! that unseen world! where, by this time, was the solemn traveller,

who went out so lately from among us into the darkness and the night?

But at this moment there came into my mind Mrs. Herbert's last words to me—Remember Edward! I was angry at myself when I did recall it, yet I suppose it must be so—and I turned from the great sorrow, the death, whose presence I had just quitted, to those dreadful, ignoble, vulgar necessities of life which must go on in spite of all. Poor Dr. Harley was only some hour or two departed, yet already, in spite of myself, my mind became entangled in all the embarrassing and vexatious details of his successor's appointment. I felt then as I have done in some of the solemn services of the Church, when foolish impertinent thoughts, quite away from the serious matters in hand, have pressed themselves in to disturb my composure. Yet I could not banish the intruders, though their coming was a sacrilege. Against my will, I thought of Edward Nugent in Dr. Harley's

place; of all the children removed out of their home; of my cousin's family claim to the living, incompetent and useless as he was. And with that all my old frets returned upon me, heightened by dislike and disgust of those "arrangements" which came so closely following upon that death which no arrangements could balk or delay. So I was very glad when I found that Mrs. Herbert had not waited for me, and that I was free to go to my own room at once and rest; but I did not sleep a great deal that night.

CHAPTER VIII.

“OH, dear Miss Nugent ; oh, Clare ! look at them all ! what shall I do ? ”

I was looking at them all ; my heart swelled to see them. I thought she was very rich, though she was poor.

“ We have a great many relatives, but I know of none who will help us,” said poor Mrs. Harley, putting up her handkerchief softly now and then to her wet eyes. “ I think I could make a struggle for the younger ones ; but my dear boy, my Maurice, to think of him losing his career ! Oh, Clare, his poor dear papa would have broken his heart at the thought ; he was so anxious to bring on the boys, to get them established in life ; and Maurice

would be a first-class man, if I could let him stay at College; but what can I do with eight of them? and I have no one to advise me. If your dear mamma had but been alive—oh, Clare!”

“They are all dead,” said I; “we must make shift by ourselves, I, as well as you.”

“You, Clare! oh, my dear, my dear, you don’t know what you are speaking of,” cried Mrs. Harley, with a little vehemence, and a fresh burst of tears; “you are young and unencumbered. I am a widow with all the responsibility and cares of my family; look at all these dear children, brought up so differently, and instead of the dear Rectory and our fortune which I have been accustomed to so long, think of having just enough to keep them in the barest way, in some little cottage with no advantages. *His* children, whom he was so proud of; and to snatch Maurice from the very beginning of his career!”

“I do not know how to advise. Can anything be done; what would you wish?” said I, doubtful what help I could offer. Mrs. Harley answered me with some eagerness.

“I think, perhaps,” she said, “if my uncle knew, he would adopt Maurice. I have been thinking so for some time. My uncle was not kind to us when we were first married; but he could not stand out against my distress, and my dear boy’s talents; and, perhaps if he does not, God will raise me up some other friend who will; and poor dear Alice, if I could see my way to education for her—and my own little Johnnie. Oh, Clare, such a change! such a change!”

She fell upon my lap, poor woman, with a fresh burst of grief. While she bowed down her face upon my hand, clinging to me in her great distress, and I sat looking on, with grieved sympathy and consideration, trying to see what she wanted me to do, a sudden

thought struck me. If she could part with them—could she?—I almost shrank from making so harsh a proposition.

“Listen to me a moment,” I said, after a very long pause, “and if what I say wounds or grieves you, forgive me and think no more of it; will you leave Alice and Clara at Est-court? I will take charge of their education. They could spend their holidays with you, as if they were simply at school; forgive me, if I pain you; but I should be very glad if you could make up your mind to that.”

“Oh, Clare, Clare, how good you are!” cried the widow, raising her face and kissing me; “that, indeed, would be a kindness; grieve me! pain me! no, dear, no; it is only your kind heart that would say so. If you could, indeed, without troubling yourself take such a charge—oh, thank heaven, my heart would be eased for my dear girls!”

She looked at me so wistfully, I could not refrain from stooping to kiss her, and assure

her that I was perfectly in earnest. Strange; I suppose it was that force of love which denies itself with joy for the child's sake, seeking its good, and not its own.

Finally, we made this arrangement. They were all living at Estcourt for a week or two, till their arrangements for their future home were completed, and when the family left me, Alice and Clara were to stay. Mrs. Harley, strangely enough, told the children so in my presence. The result of the first intimation was, that Clara ran into her mother's arms, clung to her, and burst into an inconsolable wailing, which awoke once more into agony the widow's quiescent grief. Alice, prompted by the same impulse at the first moment, made a hurried, agitated pause, and then composing herself with that pathetic, childish, self-control of hers, turned aside and bent her head over poor little Johnnie in his wheel-chair, arranging his hair with her trembling little fingers, and hiding her tears. I trust no one will sup-

pose me to imply, that I, who knew little of children, perceived this distinction of character better than the mother. Mrs. Harley did her heroic little daughter no injustice; but when she came to herself drew Alice into her arms, kissing her, and calling her a comfort to her mother. The scene was a touching one, and it was still more touching to see poor Mrs. Harley make a pitiful effort to look happy, lest I should suppose she was not sufficiently grateful, nor the children pleased enough at the thought of staying with me. She was a good mother, and loved her children; perhaps more dearly, after all, in securing thus for them the external advantages to which they had been accustomed, than if she had struggled and toiled to keep them with herself, as some mothers do; perhaps—I do not know.

When I told Mrs. Herbert of the charge I had undertaken, she raised her eyebrows, and gave the slightest possible shrug to her pretty shoulders; but the only expression of her sen-

timents on the subject which I could elicit was a quiet "I am not surprised," which, simple as the words were, carried a provoking amount of meaning, and went as far towards making me uncomfortable as any words from Mrs. Herbert could do; the matter, however, fortunately, was quite beyond her interference; not so another matter which began to give me considerable annoyance, the vacant living of Estborne. The very next day, when the Harley's had all gone out to see a cottage which the widow thought of taking, Mrs. Herbert made a formal attack upon me.

"Clara," she said, "I have just had a letter from Edward, and I really must beg you to come to a decision; I cannot see why you should hesitate. You were shocked at me for suggesting such a thing before Dr. Harley's death; but really Dr. Harley was quite a stranger to me, and *very* great feeling on my part was not to be looked for. Now, when you have vindicated your regard for him by

your kind intentions towards the two little girls, perhaps you will let me remind you once more of my brother. I know you are not *very* much influenced by family claims; still, he is the only one in the family who is really eligible, and Estborne is a *family* living. Your right to decide for yourself is undeniable; but it is a family living, and was meant to provide for younger branches of the family. I trust a sister may be excused for reminding you of that."

"But Edward is not a clergyman," said I, in despair.

"Edward has all but taken orders, and can do so immediately," said his sister. "You pay him a very poor compliment by your hesitation, I assure you, Clara; after all the friendship you bestowed upon him, it seems quite unaccountable to me."

I was very nearly angry; but she was my guest, and in a measure dependent on me. At the same time, I felt excessively embarrassed

and uncomfortable. "I will consult Sir Willoughby," I said, taking a little comfort from the idea. Mrs. Herbert slightly tossed her head; but she did not so much demur to this view of the subject; she had no particular objections to Sir Willoughby, who was, as she said with emphatic approbation, a man of the world. Whether a man of the world was the best person to consult about the vacant living and who should fill it, seemed rather dubious. But, at all events, these last few weeks had been full of occupation, and had given to my solitude something to do, and a great deal to be anxious and troubled about. I suppose pain and care are, after all, the truest symptoms of life; now, that I began to have responsibilities and to discover them, I was certainly much less at ease and leisurely in my own mind and thoughts.

CHAPTER IX.

“To be sure,” said Sir Willoughby Greenfield, “to be sure—the fellow’s your cousin; if you like him, let him have it; if you don’t like him, send him to Jericho—that’s the thing to do. I told you I’d settle it in a twinkling. Now, Mrs. Heiress, have you got any more predicaments? Out with them—for there’s Polly looking out for you down below.”

“No more,” said I. “But about the living still. Do you think my cousin has a claim upon it?—do you think he has the first right? For, still, in spite of your kind advice, I don’t see what to do.”

“Nothing very strange in that,” said the

baronet, laughing. "We've all heard speak before now of a woman who didn't know her own mind. No offence, Clare. If you can't be sure whether you like him or don't like him, toss up!—that's your plan—and no time lost, either. He's a brother of this here lady's, isn't he?—this Mrs. Herbert—pooty little woman! I warrant it's easier for her to make up her mind."

"It would be easy enough for me, if I toss'd up," said I. "But, Sir Willoughby, when old Mr. Lincoln, at Fen-Osier, died, was that the way you filled his place?"

"Polly—Polly—she's the woman! I hadn't even that trouble," said Sir Willoughby. "I'll tell you what, though, Clare—get married. It's good advice, though I don't take it myself. Get married—save you a world of trouble; and if you don't like this fellow, I'd see him far enough before I'd give him the living. That's my advice."

Whereupon Sir Willoughby rattled away

down stairs in his spurs, to join the party who were enjoying on the lawn a rare gleam of summer in October. Sir Willoughby, who was a ladies' man in his way, could not quite forget that he had known me as a child, and went down before me without hesitation. The group on the lawn was rather a pretty one. Little Alice and Clara, playing in their subdued way; Mrs. Herbert, in her semi-winter dress, with a big cloak lined with crimson lying across her knee, and a pretty little bit of knitting, long white pins of ivory, and brilliant Berlin-wool, purple and green, in her hand; and Miss Polly Greenfield, in her old-fashioned hat and riding-habit, standing by. Miss Polly was as like her brother, in stature, appearance, and likings, as a meek maiden lady of evangelical principles could be like a fox-hunting baronet of the old school; and the resemblance was much stronger than you could suppose likely. Before you got round the edge of her stiff man's hat, you could not have imagined

what a womanly—more than that—what an old-womanly face lay in its shadow, nor that the big old amazon, who rode to cover boldly in the morning, went sidling softly in and out among the cottages afterwards, with her bundle of tracts covered with brown paper, and her little basket on her arm; nor that this bold horsewoman was a timid and nervous old lady, starting at a sudden sound or shadow, considerably alarmed about robbers; meek, neat, orderly and punctilious as an ancient maiden need to be. Standing in her habit and hat, with a whip in her hand, and a large foot in a boot distinctly revealed as she held up her long riding-skirt beside Mrs. Herbert, I daresay a stranger would have made involuntary comparison between the delicate little feminine woman and the amazon—in which comparison, as in so many others made with the same amount of knowledge, the said stranger would have been ridiculously wrong.

“Clare, dear, I want to speak to you. I

should not let these children play on the damp grass at this time of the year," said Miss Polly. "Pretty dears! Such a nice age for companions, poor things! But one never knows; there might be consumption somehow in the family; there's no telling how it comes. I'd keep them on the gravel or indoors—do, there's a dear child, especially as they're not your own. Other people's children are always a responsibility. I used to think so even—though I never was so pleased all my life—when the little Cornwalls were at the Hall."

"I told Clara so when she took them," said Mrs. Herbert, with rather a wicked glance from Sir Willoughby to me; "but, though she asks advice sometimes, she does not always take it—at least from me."

"Ha! ha!" said Sir Willoughby, with his big laugh, which was half a cough, and very guttural, "one pooty woman don't suit to advise another; best stick to an old fellow like myself, that knows the world. Women,

you see—no offence, ladies—speak according to their feelings. I'm a man that goes upon a rule. 'D'ye like it?' says I; 'well, do it, and make the best of it. Don't you like it? why, send it to Jericho.' That's my advice; and I never knew a man follow it yet without as much to-do as if 'twas murder—which proves it's capital advice. Ha! ha!"

"Sir Willoughby, however, my dear, doesn't know anything about children," said Miss Polly, nervously; "an old woman's best for children. Send the sweet little things in, there's a dear."

"When I have any *very* difficult matters to decide," said Mrs. Herbert, still speaking *at* me, though she smiled upon Sir Willoughby, "I shall bring them to you. I think your rule is the cleverest possible—if you are sure you are not quizzing, and mean what you say."

The baronet was gallant—he louted very low, before the "pooty little woman" half

reclining on the rustic bench, and looking as captivating as possible: "Always mean what I say to a lady, except when its disagreeable," said Sir Willoughby. "When I say it's not pleasant to come to Estcourt, that's a lie! Different place now from what it used to be in her father's time, poor old chap! As for me, I'd like to see more stir yet. I'd like to give her away—to see her married, mum—which was what the old people couldn't bear the thought of. More's the pity," added the baronet, lowering his tone, and turning half away from me; "fine young fellow, too."

I turned round and called to the children—loudly, rudely—they were half frightened; I could not help myself—I was not made of wood.

"Go in—run in—there! You must not stay out any more—your mamma might be angry," I said, hastening them with an impatient gesture.

No one took any notice, except Sir Willoughby, who, supposing I was occupied and did not hear him, struck upon Mrs. Herbert's bench with his fist, making his nervous sister start, and put her hand to her heart.

“Be hanged if I can stand self-sacrifices!” cried Sir Willoughby; “dooced humbugs, nothing more! It's all the way with you women, now-a-days; but none o' your Iphigenias for me!”

“Sir Willoughby!” cried Miss Polly, in a meek tone of complaint, as she panted and held her hand to her heart; “if you only knew how my heart beats, you would not make such noises. Dear, dear! Will you send for a glass of water, Clare?”

I went for it, glad enough of the errand. I was very angry; but what is the use of speaking of it, of thinking of it? Pride alone, if nothing else, would keep me from noticing Sir Willoughby's ebullition; but it was galling to have it said in presence of Mrs. Herbert.

I subdued myself as I came in through the open drawing-room window for Miss Polly's glass of water. As I returned again with that in my hand, Miss Polly herself met me, coming into the house, while Sir Willoughby remained by Mrs. Herbert's bench, amusing that lady extremely, to judge by her smiles and little bursts of laughter. Miss Polly stopped to take the water, and then we both stood looking at the two figures on the lawn. I still a little heated, irritated, and indignant; Miss Polly very grave and disapproving; big Sir Willoughby, careless, large, and somewhat slovenly, both in speech and person, now leaning upon the bench, now striding about the green turf, paying his court after his fashion; and dainty little Mrs. Herbert, suspending her knitting to listen, and laugh, and applaud, and "draw him out." We two looked on, with an involuntary suspicion. They say it is natural to women, from such a chance combination of persons, to jump at a far-off

and problematical result. I don't know how this may be; but I know Miss Polly and I, without saying a word to each other, felt a joint and unanimous distrust—whether of Sir Willoughby or Mrs. Herbert, I really cannot tell.

Miss Polly had a certain kind of gentle, timid wisdom about her—the “least said, soonest mended,” principle. She did not make the slightest allusion to what had passed, nor to the group which we were contemplating. She took out her vinaigrette from her pocket, and solaced herself with that gentle stimulant.

“My nerves trouble me so, Clare,” she said; “I can't help it, though it is foolish; and Sir Willoughby, who knows nothing of nerves, can't conceive how a noise should make me tremble all over. I have always noticed it so, in those strong, big men that are never ill; they think everybody foolish who is not as strong as they are. And poor

Dr. Harley, my dear!—such an example!—
as strong a man as my brother to look at.
Mrs. Harley was telling me how kind you had
been about the children. They're a responsi-
bility, but they're a great pleasure; I told her
I was sure you would find them so."

"Thank you, Miss Polly," said I, heartily,
"thank you! Everybody makes so much of
the kindness, and so little of the pleasure."

"Ah!" said Miss Polly, glancing quickly
towards Mrs. Herbert, and evidently individual-
izing the "everybody" without hesitation;
"my dear, one must make up one's mind to a
deal of bother if one wants to do one's duty.
You're fatherless yourself, and your heart
warms to the fatherless children. That's but
natural; and you'd rather be good for some-
thing than a cumberer of the ground. But
people won't understand you; they'll think
you're setting up for a philanthropist, and a
Hannah More, and all that sort of thing.
They said so of me when I was young, and I

never was so clever as you. **But Sir Willoughby's** very good, Clare; he doesn't sympathise with one, but still he doesn't say those sort of things."

"It is rather hard, though, about the living," said I. "I wanted him to tell me whether he thought Edward Nugent had a real claim to it, and his advice was:—'Give it to him, if you like him—and if you don't like him, don't let him have it.' I am rather more puzzled now, if possible, than I was before."

"I don't wonder, my dear. It is a great responsibility for you, who are so young," said Miss Polly. "Don't give it him, Clare, unless he is a godly man; don't, or you will repent it all your life. Now there is Sir Willoughby calling for the horses, just as we were getting into a nice, comfortable conversation. I should like to see you oftener, Clare, because you're of my mind. Don't stay in the house and mope. Do any good

thing that comes to your hand, and never mind what any one (with a glance at Mrs. Herbert) says; and whatever you do, my dear, don't let these children play on the damp lawn or get their feet wet. Good-bye, dear! I'll see you soon again."

"We'll have a pic-nic yet, late as it is, and you shall see it," said the gallant Sir Willoughby, as he approached, Mrs. Herbert accompanying him, to bid me good-bye. "What ha' you been thinking of, Clare Nugent? Castle Craven only ten miles off, and my lady, here, never seen it; nor Fenosier Hall either, for that matter. Polly, you'll have to look out your old hampers, and bespeak a sunny day, before the month's out. I'm bespoke for a party to Craven Woods."

"Very well, Sir Willoughby," said his sister, curtsying with extreme and ceremonious politeness to Mrs. Herbert, over whose hand the baronet bowed.

We stood looking after them as they rode

away; and, till they were out of sight, Mrs. Herbert watched with a smile the repeated farewells of Sir Willoughby; while I could not help being half amused at the suspicious glances which Miss Polly threw over her shoulder. When they were quite gone, Mrs. Herbert tripped along the path to the open window, still smiling.

“That ridiculous old woman!” she exclaimed, after some little time, with a little burst of laughter; “I do believe she was jealous of me, Clara.” And the “pooty little woman” seemed to think it very good fun.

CHAPTER X.

It was a great relief to me just then—I cannot tell how *very* great a relief—to hear that Edward Nugent had got some secondary diplomatic appointment, and no longer thought of taking orders. I had been so much disturbed by the idea which Mrs. Herbert constantly pressed upon me, that the family living was a kind of provision for the younger branches of the family, and that he had a certain right to it, that I cannot express the relief and satisfaction with which I found that he no longer desired to obtain it. The winter came on, rather a “gay” winter at Estcourt; for Sir Willoughby’s pic-nic succeeded to admiration, and

we were bound, Mrs. Herbert said, to make some return of courtesy for the solemn dinner parties to which we were now and then invited.

This was not very much in my way, and there were various circumstances, things which made me feel that I would very much rather not be found in general society for a little while longer. For instance, Kate Crofton and her family had come down to Crofton Manor. That was not of very much consequence; but still, one could not forget what had been; nor think, at least talk, with much pleasure, on what was about to be. However, I kept on as close as I could, thinking it my duty; though how any one's duty can be urgent on the score of going out to dinner, it seems rather hard to see.

And I had been looking anxiously for a governess for Alice and Clara. We made two or three failures at first, through introductions and advertisements which did not

answer; when at last one came with a letter from Matilda Nugent. Miss Nugent introduced her rather mysteriously, but I can best explain how by giving her note.

“I take the liberty, dearest cousin Clare, of introducing to you a young person who wishes a situation as a governess; though to say a young person, of course, is rather ridiculous at *her* age. She is a very strange creature, I must tell you—the sister, (though I should not like this mentioned) of a very good sort of person, a Mrs. Austin, whom we have taken a good deal of notice of, and whom perhaps you may remember at Hastings. I should say a sister-in-law, for she is sister to Mr. Austin, who is a very odd blunt sort of person in business, and quite different from his wife. They would have kept Miss Austin quite independently; but she prefers, *most strangely*, (though I daresay she did not get on very well with Mrs. Austin) to go out for a governess, which the strange

creature calls working for her own bread. She has had a good education, I suppose, (*he* is of quite humble origin—no doubt she was brought up for a governess); and as you only want her for the children you have so charitably taken, you will not require to see much of her yourself, so you need not mind her odd manners. If you were to give her a trial *for our sakes*, I am sure Sophy and I should feel so obliged and gratified.

“With warmest love and remembrances, in which dear Sophy joins,

“Believe me,

“My very dear cousin,

“Most affectionately yours,

“MATILDA NUGENT.

“P.S.—Love to Eleanor.”

I went into the little morning parlour immediately to see Miss Austin. She was a tall woman of forty, dark complexioned, colourless,

with braids of iron-gray hair, and rather a stern aspect. I confess for myself when I saw the perpendicular figure, seated stiffly at the table, my courage sank. She seemed able enough to be school-mistress to us all. She had drawn off one glove, and held it in her hand; as she rose on my entrance I perceived it tremble a little. It might possibly be natural nervousness, but it went to my heart, looking at her harsh middle-aged figure, to suppose that this tremble was lest she should not please me.

I was so much confused and embarrassed by the idea, that she was the first to speak. *She* was not embarrassed; she addressed herself to the subject with a dry matter-of-fact persistent quietness, as if pain or pleasure had nothing to do with it.

“I have brought no testimonials,” she said, “because Miss Nugent was uncertain whether you were supplied, and I thought it the shortest and surest way to come my-

self, as I had to be not very far from this neighbourhood, at any rate. I have been very successful with some of my pupils—but I must tell you that it is some time since I had an engagement. I have been able to dispense with going out for some years.”

I thought to myself she had quarrelled with her sister-in-law; but I only *said*—“There are two little girls, sweet intelligent children. I wish them to have the education of gentlewomen. What can you teach them?”

“That is another matter which I thought it best to settle by coming myself,” said Miss Austin; “I heard they were orphan children whom you had taken in charity. Do you require accomplishments, or are they to be brought up as governesses? I should know better what to say about terms, if you kindly made me aware of that. I think I may say I am competent up to a certain point, to prepare them for teaching others, should that

be your intention, as I am led to suppose it is?"

"No—certainly not—by no means!" cried I, with some agitation. It was so strange to me to take up a question which was entirely one of the affections, in this matter-of-fact way. Yet, when I thought of it, it seemed very just. I had no intentions at all, only kindness to my two little guests; but what then? Was that right or really kind to them? My first feeling was indignation, as at an unwarrantable interference; my second embarrassment and perplexity—for to treat of a matter like this in a manner so entirely reasonable and actual, setting feeling aside, let in a very strange new light upon the subject, and made me less comfortable about it than I had been until now.

"They are the daughters of a gentleman," said I, "their father is dead, and partly for my own sake, partly because there is a large family and their mother is much occupied,

they have come to me—but charity has nothing to do with it. I wish them to have simply the education of gentlewomen, and I take charge of them only as their aunt or near relative might do.”

My visitor looked at me for a moment with a half wistful look, full of meaning, to which I had no clue, and then glanced out at the window, from which we could see the garden where a man was working, and through which John was coming with a basket of fruit and flowers; for we were rather famous at Est-court for our conservatories. She glanced out, and then her eyes returned to give me a lingering significant look. Was it a comparison? I had no guide whatever to her circumstances or her thoughts, and could not tell. But finally we arranged that she was to come; she was very particular in settling the amount of her salary; it was to be seventy pounds; she could not consent to take less, she said, with a little peremptoriness of tone;

and I had no wish she should. Then I brought the children to see her. But though I had got over my first impressions by this time, Alice and Clara received the full shock of theirs; and, I am afraid, were not at all grateful to me for their governess. Perhaps she observed the look of dismay exchanged between them; at all events, she deepened the impression, by a perceptible harshness of voice as she spoke to them. She had been living for some days, she told us, at Rutford, twenty miles off, from which place there was a coach to Estbury. She had to leave again, by the coach, at four o'clock; so I asked her to take luncheon with us, before going. At lunch, she came under the scrutiny of Mrs. Herbert. This was a member of the household for whom, it appeared, Miss Austin was not prepared; when I introduced them to each other, Mrs. Herbert said "oh!" and returned the courtsey of the governess rather haughtily; while, on the other side, Miss

Austin regarded her with a close and steady observation. They were sworn antagonists I could see from the moment.

“I am charmed to find you have succeeded at last, Clara,” said Mrs. Herbert; “did you consult Sir Willoughby? I am always so glad to know, for certain, when you have made up your mind.”

I gave her Miss Nugent's letter in answer.

As it happened, I had been obliged to make up my mind on two or three points, lately, without consulting Mrs. Herbert—and though she took it very quietly on the whole, and showed a great deal of that comfortable and commendable selfishness, which is not disposed to risk its own comfort for the sake of disturbing another's, still she was not above a quiet little bit of ladylike malice on an occasion. She read Miss Nugent's letter slowly, as she made her meal. Our table was more dainty now than it used to be, for Mrs. Herbert appreciated cookery; and I, for my

part, loved to prolong into winter, the fruits and flowers which reminded us of summer days. As Miss Austin made her slight meal, I saw her once more look round upon the table, with a look which I began to comprehend. It was an involuntary contrast and comparison, not envious, but full of that strange, wistful, half-wonder at the distinctions of Providence, with which people who are poor so often look at the superfluities of the rich. She did not envy me my superfluities, but I could suppose that with a heart sore from the pinching cares of poverty, she looked at all this with an involuntary question and wonder—Why was it?—How could such things be?

“Matilda is so kind,” said Mrs. Herbert, handing me back the letter; “it is quite a piece of good fortune to have such a patroness. And is Miss Austin really related to those people we saw at Hastings?—Dear me!

I understood Mr. Austin was quite a prosperous man."

"So he is, ma'am," said the governess, very quietly.

"Well then, it is very unnatural of them, especially as I know they have children," said Mrs. Herbert. "She is an odd silly sort of person, is she not? I presume you did not agree with her."

Miss Austin made no answer, whatever; she was not young, nor, in the least, pretty. She had not even the artillery of bright eyes and indignant glances to meet her adversary; she met her only with silence. After a little time Mrs. Herbert proceeded:—

"I suppose she might once have been pretty; I remember wondering how her husband, who seemed a sensible sort of person in his way, could ever have married her; and she hung on to Matilda and Sophy, just as these under-bred people generally do, thinking

they were a little more in society than she; but I wonder much she did not keep you to teach her own children; that would seem so natural."

Still, Miss Austin made no answer; but, after a little pause, she turned to me, though with an air of restraint and reluctance.

"Should you like to know exactly, why I left my brother's house?"

"Certainly not; unless you wish to tell me," cried I, hastily.

"Oh yes, surely; it is always well to know who you are employing," said Mrs. Herbert.

My new governess took not the smallest notice of my companion. She made me a little bow, and said, "Thank you, I'd rather not enter into it." Then she tied the strings of her bonnet in a broad bow, and took up her gloves, which had been lying, carefully folded down and flattened,

upon the table, and finally she rose to go away.

“I have an old acquaintance to call upon, in Estbury,” said Miss Austin, “and with your leave, I’ll say good morning to my future pupils, and go. I understand that you mean me to come this day fortnight. I trust we shall none of us regret our connection. Good bye dears, you’ll like me better, bye and bye. Good morning, Miss Nugent—and, madam, I have the honour of bidding you good day!”

So saying, she left us.

Mrs. Herbert was extremely offended and very “high;” she felt that she had come off second best, and that it was impossible to humiliate so silent and plain-spoken a woman. Consequently, she was more *hurt*, more discomposed, than I could have imagined her capable of being. She felt herself quite worsted, and placed in an inferior position;

and, certainly, her temper was not improving; though she made no further mention of the governess, she was quite inclined to vent her ill-humour upon the children and on me.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS AUSTIN was to come just before Christmas. I wished her to do so, in spite of the holiday season, because Alice and Clara had been now for some time without lessons, and were just at the age when children forget most easily. I had a good deal of thought about them before their governess came. How was I to educate these children? What place were they to hold with me? I was not young, it is true; but I was not old enough either to adopt children, and make for myself arbitrarily the family connections which God had not given to me. Mrs. Harley, who had been rich, was now poor; she was not a relative, scarcely even an intimate friend; if I educated

the children, as my own little sisters might have been educated, and did not provide for them afterwards, that would be cruel; yet, was it right, or was I prepared to take them really into my heart as my children, and settle my life and all that I had within the limit of this little circle? I could not tell; it was a question full of perplexity, and in the meantime I closed my own mouth by saying, that at present, at least, it would do no harm to go on with their education, which would always be of advantage to them, whatever might befall.

Miss Austin came accordingly—and shortly after her came for a week all the little Harley's, whom I had asked to spend the Christmas here. Our party was a large one; for it was increased further by the Misses Nugent, by Mrs. Herbert's nephew, Bertie, and by an old gentleman, another of the solitaries of our family, whose mother had been a Nugent, and who was as near to me in cousinship, and cared as much for "the family," as any

who bore its name. The Misses Nugent had put away their muslin flounces and straw hats; but though they had now big cloaks and little bonnets, and muffs, made of black velvet, with a scanty edge of fur, themselves were quite unchanged. As for Mr. Hyde, the only gentleman of our party, he was as unlike these ladies as it is possible to fancy; he was little, fastidious, refined; a man very dainty and particular about his person, about his eating, a "martyr" to his own good taste. I do not know what his income was; but it was "limited," like the rest, and it was not difficult to perceive the scrupulous economy, which made himself so faultless in appearance, and kept the handy smart little valet who accompanied him to Estcourt. He did not talk much; but what he said generally had the luck to discompose some one; he professed great politeness, and the gallant bearing of the old school; yet, as soon as he found out the real good nature which lay under all the little

pretences of Sophy and Matilda, he ruled these unfortunate elderly young ladies with a rod of iron.

Mrs. Herbert and he were natural enemies and allies; they understood at once, and were respectful of each other; but Mr. Hyde made no concealment of his dislike to Bertie and the other children who surrounded him. Not so much as a sugar-plum ever entered the heart or pocket of this old gentleman to hail the common holiday, when Matilda and Sophy made pincushions, and even Mrs. Herbert sent an order to the little jeweller's and toyshop in Estbury. Mr. Hyde buttoned his pocket and announced loftily that he never gave presents. This lonely scion of our house, like the others, spent all his time, and thoughts, and means, solely and entirely upon himself.

I do not know what he had been; I heard once that he had been married long ago, and lost his wife early. He was now one of those lay figures of society, whom people ask to

their houses to fill a vacant corner ; whom nobody loves, who loves nobody, does nothing, but spends day after day, and year after year, in ceaseless devotion to one single self.

This was not a very pleasant society ; and I dare say it was quite a fantastic and almost presumptuous idea of mine, that it was a kind of " duty " to accumulate these solitary individuals in the family house, on the great day of family reunion. Nothing in the world could have made a family, or the least semblance of it, out of such materials as these.

The first day we were alone, six of us at table, for Bertie was seventeen, old enough to dine with the grown-up people. The Misses Nugent wore copper-coloured silk dresses, very low on the shoulders and short in the sleeves, showing their thin necks and red elbows to perfection ; and Mr. Hyde, after dinner, when he had time to look about him, looked only at the Misses Nugent. These looks of his were so curiously and significantly critical, that even

I felt myself compelled to look also ; and the attraction grew so strong at last that it struck Bertie, who electrified us all by a sudden burst.

“ I say, cousin Clare, why don't you make yourself look pretty, in blue and yellow ; there's aunt Nell and you as black as ghosts ; why don't you wear colored dresses too ? ”

“ Really, quite a singular shade,” said Mrs. Herbert, taking advantage of this abrupt introduction to continue the subject so felicitously started, and turning aside to look closely at Miss Sophy's dress.

“ We do so like anything bright,” apologised Miss Nugent ; “ though perhaps Clare, dear, as you were in mourning—but, if *you* dont mind, of course no one else has any right ; and this colour does become Sophy so sweetly ; oh, no, my love, I did not forget Mr. Hyde ; gentlemen don't like to hear ladies talk of dress ; but I know Mr. Hyde is such a critic—oh, frightful ! I thought of him the moment I saw

these pretty silks ; I assure you I did, indeed ; he has such taste in ladies dress."

"Have you *such* taste?" said Mrs. Herbert, with her malicious little smile.

"Hush, softly—let me hand you grapes, instead of oranges," said Mr. Hyde. "My dear madam, don't set the room on fire. I shall want some ice presently."

"Ice at Christmas! if it's your gown cousin, I'll wrap the rug round you," said Bertie. "Aunt Nell, put your black shawl over Sophy, or Mr. Hyde will faint."

"When I was a boy I dined at two o'clock," said Mr. Hyde, "and said my prayers at nine. My dear Miss Sophy, let me give you some claret—don't take that hot sherry ; pray, Miss Clare, may I ask if you regulate the temperature of this room?"

"Do you think it is so very warm Dear? I think a room cannot be too warm at Christmas!" said the innocent Miss Sophy. "Clare, dear, perhaps Mr. Hyde would like the screen."

“Ladies are fortunate; not to say that *we* are fortunate, who have the privilege of beholding,” said the old beau; “yet it is wonderful, my dear madam, how even with bare arms and shoulders, the room should be otherwise than hot to *you*. For me, my sensations come through my eyesight—I am a martyr to my eye. Excuse me, Miss Clare, but I think the lamp might be moved a little this way, the shade so. Ah, that improves the composition of the room.”

It threw poor Sophy quite into the shade, at least, from which pleasing obscurity her voice rose again; for Sophy liked to “converse” with Mr. Hyde, who, being the only gentleman present, with the exception of poor Bertie, was the only person with whom she could show her pretty and girlish playfulness.

“Really now, it would be quite nice to let us know all your opinions on these subjects,” said Miss Sophy. “I am sure, as long as we are here, I shall always run to you, to ask

what I should put on. Shouldn't you like, Eleanor, to hear what Mr. Hyde thinks about everything? but pray don't side with Matilda, whatever you do; *she* likes black, and brown, and grey, and all sorts of no colours; oh, pray tell us just what you think; but don't side with Matilda."

"You know I always yield to your taste; you *do* become colours, Sophy," said Miss Nugent; "but as for me, Clare, dear, I like nothing so much as black; it is *so* becoming; there is Kate Crofton now—you really must take us to call there to-morrow. She is such a little coquette; some distant relative of theirs died, and Kate insisted on going into mourning; oh, for no reason in the world, but because mourning is made so pretty now. And now I think of it, Miss Austin, your sister has really got the prettiest bonnet; crape, trimmed with flowers and bugles. I pleased her so much, telling her I must have one like it; only we are such a dreadfully healthy family;

we never have any old rich aunts, or delicate distant cousins. We never are in mourning, year after year."

"Aint it a pity?" said Bertie, whispering across the table. Miss Austin lifted her eyes upon him, with an unspoken reprimand; she was a very good woman; but she could not forget she was a schoolmistress.

"The Croftons are all at the Manor now, are they not?" said Mrs. Herbert, in a careless way. "I heard Sir Willoughby speak of new arrivals. Did you hear, Clara, who had come?"

"Oh, Sir Willoughby! the most charming old beau!" cried Sophy, "as old as Mr. Hyde; but the most delightful old gentleman, and Clare's guardian, too; Clare, dearest, have him here before we go!"

"He is coming to-morrow," said I; very glad for once of Sophy's interruption.

"Sir Willoughby is a man in the prime of life," said Mrs. Herbert, colouring a little;

“not a great deal older than yourself, my dear Matilda; though, of course, a gay young creature like Sophy, cannot be expected to discriminate; his sister, indeed, you might call old, poor dear Miss Polly! but Sir Willoughby is quite a handsome man.”

“I remember,” said Mr. Hyde, “when I was a lad at school, and spent my holidays at Estcourt, before your father married, Miss Clare—I remember a big sort of a country fellow, who had just come of age; one of those noisy old-fashioned men, whom people call good-hearted; yes, I remember Willoughby Greenfield. I don’t inquire about Miss Matilda’s age; but without meddling with so delicate a question, young Greenfield came of age when I was at Harrow, which is some time since. I’ve seen him since at my club, calling on some of the men there; a fox-hunting baronet? just so, with top boots and a riding whip. By the bye, now I think of it, it was Crofton he called to see. Crofton, you know

him; Dick Crofton's son; not he of the Manor, but the other, who got his mother's fortune; a quiet young fellow, not good for much. I dare say, if he had a profession he'd make some way in the world."

"I say, cousin Clare, you look heated; is it Sophy's gown?" whispered Bertie. "I'll cover her all up in a twinkling, if she bothers you."

"Hush!" said I; how foolish, how ridiculous, how inexcusable it was.

"That is the cousin that Kate is to marry," cried Miss Nugent, "he has the most frightful temper; he was engaged to be married before, but quarrelled with the lady just on the eve of the wedding. No! did you say no, cousin Clare? I assure you I have always heard it for true."

"But Clara knows it is not true," said Mrs. Herbert, with her smooth significant smile, directing all eyes to me. I was glad then

that Mr. Hyde had altered the lamp; but I found an unlooked-for defender.

“Look here, aunt Nell,” cried Bertie, “if cousin Clare says it’s not true, it aint true. Some men I wouldn’t believe on their oath, not a bit; some men I’d believe, though you proved against them; and I’d like to lick any fellow in England, that said a thing wasn’t true, when cousin Clare said it was!”

“Thank you, Bertie,” said I; “but you need not be so warm. Mrs. Herbert is quite right. I heard you once say the same thing before, cousin Matilda; but I do know, it is quite a mistake. Derwent Crofton did not quarrel on the eve of his wedding. I knew him very well once. I know that no one had any right to complain of him.”

“Oh! I am sure I had no idea!”—said Miss Nugent, in a subdued tone. They all paused over this to make the most of it; perhaps, too, with a little real embarrassment; when sud-

denly, to my surprise, Miss Austin, who was the last person I should have looked to for help, interposed, in her matter-of-fact way.

“I think I understood you, Miss Nugent, that the children were to come down after dinner.”

“The children!” echoed Mr. Hyde, “more little boys!” and the old gentleman shrugged his shoulders and looked at Bertie, who bit his lip, and turned his eyes steadily on me to fortify himself. Mrs. Herbert tossed her head with the slightest pretty motion of disdain.

“Oh, certainly, and girls too; Clara is a philanthropist,” said Mrs. Herbert, “and I warn you all, good people, not to be surprised, if the next time you come here, you find our cousin the matron of an orphan asylum, and poor old Estcourt full of a set of little chicks who have lost their papas. Oh, don’t frown, dear; you know that what I have said is quite true.”

“So good of you, dearest Clare!” said

Sophy, laying her hand on my arm, "but you must not forget your duties to society. The world expects something from you; though I am sure it is so sweet and so kind, isn't it Matilda?"

"My dear cousin, a congenial spirit!" cried Miss Matilda, on the other hand. "We are *so* much interested in the Orphan Asylum—I have got quite a host of reports with me; for we have a case in hand, a most interesting case. Sophy, how delightful! Clare shall subscribe, and give us her vote."

"Come, Miss Austin, we shall see the children in the drawing-room," I said, rising hastily; it was no place to bring them here, and I could not have the poor little fatherless creatures hear lectures about orphan asylums. It was not even very easy for me to bear it myself.

CHAPTER XII.

THE next morning, I thought it all over painfully in my own mind. I had no reason to suppose that any one, except the family, was at Crofton Manor. I did not suppose that Mary could have come home without letting me know, and my coming or going there could make very little difference to those arrangements which were already made; and in which I certainly had, and could have, no share. I ought to have called before; the only question was a little pain, more and less; and I concluded it was best after all, to keep up the natural courtesies of neighbourhood, and to please the Nugents by driving them over there. After

they were married, I think, I should feel glad if they did not settle down near the Manor. Yet, suppose they should—in Craven-wood perhaps, where we once thought—Well, that would be terribly hard ; but still, never mind ; it is all in the day's work, as Miss Polly says, and the day comes to an end, whether it is storm or shine.

So I told them we should drive over immediately after lunch and call on the Croftons. Matilda and Sophy were quite in a flutter of pleasure ; though they lived for nothing better (so far as outward appearance went), they had not very much pleasure, in that straitened and unlovely life of theirs—and though it was no very exalted enjoyment, but only what a moralist would call vanity and love of display, which made them pleased with the Estcourt carriage, the two sleek horses, and John in his best coat ; still, I was glad to please them. Mrs. Herbert lay back in her corner among her furs, regarding them with amusement. I

was not ill-natured enough to suggest to her, that she, not very long before, had been as unused to her present life as they were, though I could not help thinking of it myself. But Sophy and Matilda, in the big thin cloaks, which fortunately permitted the addition of an old shawl to make them comfortable below, and with their little muffs of black velvet, took no thought of their loving cousin's smiles of amusement; for one half hour at least of their lives I think they were really happy.

My heart failed me a little when we came to the gate; for a riding party, several ladies and several gentlemen had entered before us, and I could not help a sick apprehension at my heart of the possibility—the likelihood of a sudden meeting. We reached the door just as they were dismounting; I looked round hastily and sharply, and then drew breath. There was no one there I feared to meet. Then, as we alighted, Kate Crofton, in her riding-habit, came bounding up to meet us,

throwing herself upon me and kissing me before I was aware. She was only nineteen, ten years younger than I, as fresh and as gay, and as pretty as a May morning, with brown hair full of natural curls, brown eyes, bright with laughter, a soft sweet rosebud complexion, and a pretty little figure, tiny and light like a fairy. I, who felt young beside Sophy Nugent, grew, to my own perception, middle-aged and cloudy beside Kate Crofton. I could not help sighing at it involuntarily; but no one noticed my sigh as we went up stairs.

Lady Crofton was a woman of extreme good breeding; every body said so; she never troubled any one with undue attention, fuss or sympathy. She shook hands with me just as if she had seen me yesterday, and nothing had happened between, which was a great relief to me; and she received my guests very kindly, which increased my satisfaction; they knew a great many people in common, and had a little newspaper business to do first in the way of

recording who had gone to Scotland, and who to Germany, and who were in the country; and at last the talk became more general.

“But you, Clare, you never are in town,” said Kate. “Estcourt can be no pleasure to you, for you never leave it. I should hate the Manor if we were always here; I should, I know, however improper it may be; but after a whole delicious season, when one is tired out, then it’s something to come home. Do, there’s a darling, come next May, will you? and,” in a whisper, “if you don’t like mamma, you can come to me!”

She meant to tell me of it, so! looking into my face, and then away from me, in her pretty sweet maidenly flutter; my head swam a little—it seemed very strange.

“I have heard,” said I, “and God bless you, Kate, I hope you will be very happy.”

She came closer, whispering, with her cheek at mine, “Won’t you kiss me, Clare? it sounds cold to say so, and not kiss me.”

I did ; but somehow I could have cried ; so could she, that bright, sunshiny, fearless little girl ; but her tears would have been different from mine.

“ And to think, oh, you dear old Clare ! to think I should go first and take care of you,” cried Kate, still in a whisper, with her merry laugh. “ I, who used to be your little Kate ! but, remember I shall expect you to come to me, and see how I behave myself. Mary is coming home, do you know ? ”

“ I heard so ; but when ? ” said I.

“ In time for *it*, I believe,” said Kate, hanging her head ; “ and it is to be some time, I suppose, in spring. Mary is quite an old lady now with two babies. We saw her in Baden two months ago ; she said she had not heard from you for such a long time.”

“ No.”

“ No ! I declare I do not know you, you speak so short, and so quiet,” cried Kate. “ Clare, don’t look so sad. I dare say it brings

everything back, coming here, and seeing mamma, and knowing there is no one at home."

"Yes; it makes a great difference," said I. We both paused after that; I, because I was nearly choking with feelings that must be suppressed; she, because the girl was very sorry for me, wistful and anxious to give me some comfort, out of her own happy young heart.

"She will be a very young housekeeper; yes, it is almost too soon, as you say," said Lady Crofton, looking at Kate fondly; "but for one thing I shall have her near me. There is no good house on the estate; so they think of taking Craven Lodge."

This was just the touch too much for me, I could not bear it; I got up hurriedly, and went to look at some pretty things, which I knew Kate longed to show me, bridal presents. I, too, should have to add to them presently—and I cannot say, but that it seemed rather

desolate and hard to me, to think of making a friend's present to *his* bride.

Folly! anybody's bride! it was Kate I looked at, Kate only; what was the husband to me?

We left, however, almost immediately; yet, not before I had unwillingly accepted an invitation to dinner for all our party. Lady Crofton was very gracious, evidently disposed to be friendly and kind to all the world; pleased with her daughter's prospects, and feeling a little added importance in her own person; strange, to think with such good pleasure of losing Kate!

I think I was even so mean and foolish as to be censorious and judge them harshly; for though years had passed and everything was so changed, still I was no heroine, and could not help remembering what had been. As we drove home, it suddenly occurred to Mrs. Herbert, to show the ruins of Castle Craven to our guests. I was very glad of the excuse,

I made them set me down at the wood, near Martha Brinley's cottage. I said I wanted to see the old woman, and they were to call for me there as they came back. As soon as they had driven off, I ran along the narrow path through the wintry trees towards Craven Lodge. It was in the midst of the wood; a strange, retired, picturesque house, with a little clear enclosure of garden ground and lawn round it; the Est river within hearing, and all around the Craven woods; over the narrow wood path, carpeted with fallen leaves, the dry spikes of the fir trees, and crisp boughs which crackled under my feet, I hastened to look at the house. Everything around it was very still, with the frosty and sharp stillness of winter. The streams trickled out of sight, the leafless branches swayed with a harsher motion than if all their leaves upon them had been dancing to the breeze. In the corners of the lawn, white hoar frost lay upon the grass; the evergreens with their leaves benumbed, and

one wan sickly monthly rose upon the trellis, made the wintry aspect of everything look more wintry still. A single tiny curl of smoke, made it just apparent that somebody lived there; as did also the well-worn passage to a back entrance, and some linen hanging upon a hedge, stiff and dry with frost; but the windows were all closed, and I think it soothed me to see what an uninhabited dreary look had fallen upon the house. This was once to have been my house—and now *they* were coming here.

I went back softly, trying to realise it, wondering whether that was a dream or this, and when we should all wake and know the truth. When I came to old Martha's cottage, I found that even she knew that Miss Kate was going to be married, and was to live at Craven Lodge; and when the carriage came to take me up again, I had to answer Matilda Nugent's inquiries all about it. Well!—I took Miss Polly's philosophy to my heart. “It is all in

the day's work," I said to myself—and surely I had lost too much time already, comparing and remembering; this was not *living*, which was the real thing I had to do, a woman at my years.

CHAPTER XIII.

ABOUT a week after this, I discovered, one day, on entering the drawing-room, that the Miss Nugents had a visitor; Miss Austin was also present, which I was surprised how to account for, until I saw that the lady in crape, tucks, and bugles, was her sister-in-law.

She was recalled to my remembrance instantly, by a new introduction. She was a pretty-faced woman, pink and white, with those insignificant features which look very well in a girl's bloom, but become silly, weak, and trifling, as they grow old.

She was a little embarrassed at first, and began to make elaborate explanations of the

reason why, "accidentally," she had come to this neighbourhood, and thought it was her duty to pay her respects at Estcourt. I thought it rather strange myself, that she should have come, accidentally, to Estbury, at such a time of the year—especially as the Misses Nugent looked slightly embarrassed, too.

Bye-and-bye, however, she produced out of her bag, some folded pamphlets, as I thought, and circulars. She wanted to know, with a blush, whether I was "interested" in any of the Orphan Institutions—she had heard I gave a great deal of thought to that subject, and was very benevolent—and she thought she might venture to speak to me of a case——

"Oh yes," interrupted Matilda Nugent, "the case I spoke of, Clare—a dear boy, ten years old, without father or mother—and Mrs. Austin is benevolently anxious to get him into one of those excellent institutions——

delightful places!—where the children are taken *such* care of. You must go to see them, dear, next time you are in town.”

“The education is so good, and the advantages are so great,” said Mrs. Austin, looking stealthily at her sister-in-law, who, I think, for the first time since coming to Estcourt, was reading.—“The boy is related to us, Miss Nugent, and you may think it strange, after what Harriet does, that we should not keep him; but you see we have boys of our own, and, as he has no expectations, poor lad, it would not be a kindness to bring him up in such a different rank of life. My husband said to me, he would buy him into the St. Ann’s; for Mr. Austin is a kind-hearted man, and does not think much of a hundred pounds; but I said he could always do that at the last if we did not succeed otherwise; and, in the meantime, I and my friends could try. Miss Nugent and Miss Sophy have been so kind as to distribute

about fifty voting papers for me, and have got quite a number of proxies; and I thought if you had any interest in the society, perhaps you would kindly assist me—for, I am sure, you will find it a very deserving case.”

I took the paper, in which it was set forth at full length, that the candidate was James Tancred, ten years of age; father and mother dead; two little sisters dependant upon an aunt of very limited means; on whose behalf the votes of subscribers were solicited. I did not quite understand the thing, nor why Miss Austin occupied herself so sedulously with her book, never looking up, though it was not difficult to perceive that she heard every word, and saw every gesture.

I did not understand, either, Mrs. Austin's allusion to “what Harriet does,” yet, somehow, could not help connecting it with the two little sisters dependant on an aunt. I told her I should be very well pleased to subscribe, and to give her what assistance I

could, though I was very ignorant of the system, and knew nothing of proxies or voting papers; upon which, Sophy Nugent hastened to explain.

“If you have any other votes for any other society, Clare, dear, give them to Mrs. Austin, and she can exchange them,” said Sophy. “Oh, you have no idea what a capital system it is. You want a child to be got into the Infant Orphan, next year, and I want a child into the St. Ann’s, now; so all that you have to do, is to give me your Infant Orphan votes, and let me exchange them for St. Ann’s votes, and, next year, you shall have my St. Ann’s, and exchange them for Infant Orphan’s.—Do you understand?—Oh, I’m sure, some people make quite a business of it.”

“No, Sophy, Clare does not understand—you don’t explain it properly,” said Matilda. “You perceive, Clare, love, we take votes for anything we can get—there is always someone wanting them—and then we go to the

election room, or among our friends, and say, 'any votes to exchange,' and so we get on till we have enough for our election. The election is quite a pretty sight; you positively must come up to town and see it.—So exciting!—and then to think it is all for benevolence—that is what delights me.”

I was a little puzzled—it was new to me. I did not quite make it out, though, of course, charity on such a very great scale, must have system, and form, and business, to accomplish itself at all. I laid down the paper on my table, and promised to subscribe and give my vote to this “deserving case.” A few minutes after, I noticed that Miss Austin left the room, and that my paper had disappeared. Her sister-in-law seemed to breathe more freely after she was gone.

“I ought to apologize for intruding upon you, Miss Nugent, on so slight an acquaintance,” she said, “but we came down to Estbury, to spend a few days with some clients of

Mr. Austin's—very respectable people—and I thought you would feel it rude, and a neglect, if I did not call. What a pretty place you have got here!—I often say to Mr. Austin, I would give anything for a place in the country. So delightful it must be to grow one's own fruit and vegetables; and cream and eggs, which cost a fortune in London, are next to nothing in the country. I have heard so much of Estcourt!—and when I knew that Miss Nugent and Miss Sophy were coming, I was quite impatient to come to this neighbourhood, to have a peep at your beautiful place.”

As I did not feel disposed to say I was glad to see her, I only bowed in reply.

“We shall be here till Saturday,” continued our visitor; “to-morrow we have an engagement, but we are quite free all the rest of the week.” She paused after this, expecting an invitation, I suppose; but, as none came, proceeded rather more tartly—“So we

shall have quite time to look about us, and see all the beauties of the neighbourhood ; though the season is more suitable for in-doors than out-of-doors, and people are so hospitable in the country."

As she said this, she looked not very kindly at Matilda and Sophy, who, I should suppose, must have been indebted to her ; and must have flattered her with the foolish idea of being well received at Estcourt. I was sorry for the fluttered look of the sisters. Matilda glanced at me with something like an appeal, and Sophy, deprecatingly, began to inquire after "the dear children."

It was easy enough to read the story ; the two poor sisters bolstering up their gentility by the far off glories of Estcourt ; and the vulgar patroness, determined to make use of them for her own advancement in society. Perhaps I did wrong to encourage such feelings at all, but they were Nugents, and

they were very harmless ; they had not many triumphs in their life—I resolved, if I could, to give them one to-day.

“ Did not you speak of going to Estbury, to-day, cousin ? ” I said ; “ if so, perhaps you would like to drive your friend in, if you can persuade her to stay lunch with us . ”

“ Oh thank you, Clare ! ” cried both the sisters—they spoke in the same breath with quite an effusion of gratitude—“ thank you, you are always so considerate.—Dear Mrs. Austin, you will stay ? ”

Dear Mrs. Austin pouted, and was not pleased, but thought better of it ; then I proposed that they should show her the house, which they set off to do with great pride. I went up myself to the school-room, expecting to find Miss Austin ; she was there and alone ; but she was not seated primly by the table with her work or her desk, as was usual ; she was walking up and down the

room, in great agitation, with the printed paper which her sister-in-law had brought, in her hand.

She endeavoured to put it away, and to subdue herself when I entered; but, failing in both, waited for my approach with a nervous self-constraint, painful to see. I said, "I will go away, if you are engaged," but she did not wish me to go away.

"Has she gone?" she asked, breathlessly. "I don't mind for her, she's a stranger and heartless—but James, my brother!—to put away Amy's child—Amy's son—named after himself; he's James Austin Tancred—he is, Miss Nugent!—it's enough to break any one's heart."

"Is he a near relative?" said I.

"Near!—his own sister's son—Dear Amy's eldest orphan," said the harsh big woman, in all that tremor and excitement of suffering, which affected so hardly a stiff frame and homely face like hers. "I humbly hope I'm

a Christian woman, but I can't see her again and keep my patience. And yet it's not her—she's a stranger—it's James—to think of James!”

As it happened, just at this moment, Mrs. Austin with her conductors was passing the schoolroom door; she heard the voice, and, with the impulse of giving an answer, which foolish people like her never can resist, entered: though I felt it an extreme and impertinent intrusion, she was my guest for the moment, and I could not say so; but the poor Misses Nugent, waiting outside the door, looked at each other with pathetic looks of dismay. Mrs. Austin entered at once, and eagerly, upon her defence.

“I am sure, Harriet, you must see that what I am doing is for the best,” she said, hurriedly, and with an evident awe for her sister-in-law's opinion. “Little Tancred could not be brought up with our boys—it is quite impossible—and I am only trying to save my

husband expense as a good wife should. He'll be very well indeed at the St. Ann's Society—a great deal better than we could do for him, and quite respectable; and a place that anybody might be pleased to have their sons in. I assure you, Miss Nugent, I do think it quite unreasonable of Harriet," she continued, turning to me; "she would insist upon leaving her good comfortable home with us, where she had nothing to do but teach my daughter, and mind me a little, to go and take a situation; bringing a reproach upon us, as if Mr. Austin could not afford to keep his sister—all for these two little girls. That was all her own wilful fancy; I'm sure nobody ever wished her to do it, and she has only herself to look to, and no ties—which is a very different thing from us. But I can't go and wrong my own children for other people's. I'm not like you, Harriet, able to do just as I like, and live where I like, and

with nobody minding me; and I won't wrong my own boys for your sister's, and James shan't either, if I can help it; so I tell you plainly, whatever you may choose to say."

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Austin," said I, feeling angry, "but this is not one of the apartments which are generally shown to strangers; you have mistaken I think, or Miss Nugent has taken the wrong turn—let me show you the way."

The foolish petulant woman turned red and turned white, as I spoke; she stared at me, seeming quite confounded and unable to answer, and followed me out, quite silenced. I led her to the corridor, without the slightest allusion to what she had been saying, and pointed out the doors of the picture gallery, and of our chamber of state. Then when the three passed me, very quiet, rather ashamed, and having nothing to say for themselves, I

turned back to the schoolroom. Miss Austin was tearing the paper into little pieces, and scattering the fragments in the fire.

“I should like you to tell me this story, if you have sufficient confidence in me,” said I. “I am like you—I have no *ties*—I can do what I please; tell me what this story is?”

She told me—it was not a very unusual tale. The mother of the children was her only sister; the father, a poor surgeon who never prospered. He had gone out to Australia at last, and died there, and his wife, on hearing of his death, had died too, of a broken heart; leaving three children friendless and desolate. Miss Austin had taken upon herself, at once, the charge of the two girls, and was, at present, maintaining the poor little orphans at school.

The boy, she had believed and trusted, her brother would provide for; and the idea of her sister's child depending on charity, struck with a pang of positive anguish, upon this

solitary woman's forlorn, independent, self-sustaining spirit.

“Yet I know I must submit to it. What can I do?” she said, shaking the torn fragments of paper from her hands, with that dogged and painful submission with which people who are poor, and who know of no escape, yield to the hard circumstances, which they would struggle against to the death, if they could.

She was too old for chimerical fancies of doing more than was possible; she knew the hard impassible limit of her own capabilities. She shook the paper from her hands with an air of obstinate endurance, and went to take up her needlework again. She could *do* nothing; but only suffer in silence.

“I have no *ties*—I am like you—yet I want to be of some use in the world,” said I. “I can't work for the helpless as you do, because God has not even seen fit to give me a single dependent upon my cheerless wealth;.

but your boy shall not be dependent upon charity. Arrange with your sister-in-law to send for him; let him come here; and then he can go to school."

She started a little when I spoke; started with a momentary flash of triumph in her gray eyes—perhaps a human consciousness of victory over her sister-in-law; then she sat down again firmly.—“No; that also is charity—you are very kind—but let him go, it is all the same,” and, at that moment, I could not move her further.

CHAPTER XIV.

DIED of a broken heart.

When I was as young as Kate Crofton, I thought these words the most pathetic in the world; ten years later I am doubtful. Dr. Harley died of a broken heart, for the loss of his fortune; leaving his wife and children without it, and without him, to toil through life and the world as they best could. Miss Austin's sister lost her husband; that might be worth dying for; but, if it was hard for her to live without him, it was harder for the little desolate children, to whom she left no natural protector. Somehow, I think, only such a one as myself could afford this luxury; some one who was nobody's shield, nobody's

comforter ; childless, parentless, alone ; but I do not know how the fathers and mothers could dare venture to die, though their hearts broke a hundred times. Hearts will break in this life—it is the nature of them ; but if God wills, and it is possible, it is honest, braver, nobler to live than to die.

I thought so, as I thought over this common domestic tragedy. I had a woman's yearning towards the little children ; I supposed almost, that to take care of them, to work for them, to protect them, one could triumph over even death. I knew what *love* was, too, as people speak ; I had found it bitter enough, in such experience as Providence sent to me, and *I* might have died, without anybody being a loser ; but to die for one thing in a life, however great that is, seems somehow unworthy—as to speak of it so much is certainly—and so it is I who am in the wrong at last.

At lunch, Mr. Hyde and Bertie, and the

two little girls joined us. Mrs. Austin looked very curiously at Alice and Clara. She called them little dears, and was quite condescending to the children; while still more curiously Mr. Hyde looked at her, contemplating with an air of profound observation the bugles which quivered on her bonnet, and drooped down in shiny sharp pendants round her face. He had been telling me very graciously of something that happened at his club, when the Misses Nugent brought in their visitor and took their places at the table. Mr. Hyde drew back with well-bred horror. I don't know why; for there was nothing particular about the appearance of our new guest.

“When does your fox-hunter come again, Miss Clare?” he said; “I shall run up to town for that day, if you will let me know; and when I return, I had better bring Sir Briareus Williams with me; he is quite the man for Estcourt, now-a-days.”

“Oh, dear Mr. Hyde, why that is the de-

lightful scientific man, president of half the societies. I wonder if he would give us tickets for one of his soirees?" cried Miss Sophy; "but you are really such a quiz; do tell me why he is the man for Estcourt?"

"A student of natural history, Miss Sophy," said Mr. Hyde, "he can make you out the correct portrait of an extinct animal, five minutes after you have shown him a bit of its tooth; a megatherium, scales and all, as natural as life, out of that little bit of dental surgery; and I should not be surprised to find that he could make out a fine lady, jewels and everything, out of a single black beetle. Is not that a wonderful gift?"

"A black beetle," cried the amazed Sophy, "the hideous frightful creature! what in the world has that to do with a lady? Why I should faint if I only saw one. Oh, do Mr. Hyde, tell us what you mean."

"Hush, Sophy, dear; ladies' company is not good for the wit of gentlemen," said Mrs.

Herbert, who for some cause or other was really spiteful. "I never saw a man yet who did not get as stupid as possible, when he had two or three good creatures, like Matilda and you, to look for all his clever things and applaud them. Men are very vain. When a witty man gets a wife who admires him and laughs at all his jokes, he grows silly directly; very sad, isn't it? it must be all because they're so vain."

"Or, because of the inspiring influence," said Mr. Hyde, gallantly. "According to the nature of the Divinity, my dear madam, so is the worshipper. There is an assimilating influence in the very act of adoration, and so long as your beautiful sex remain what they are, who can wonder at the follies of man."

"Oh dear, Mr. Hyde, how pretty!" cried Matilda Nugent, in all innocence. Mrs. Herbert coloured, and drew her little figure up; while Mr. Hyde went on in the suavest, most

gentlemanly manner, addressing himself this time to me.

“Your fox-hunter is a susceptible man, Miss Clare; don't you find him so? Ladies' society is a dangerous delight to poor Greenfield. Ah, Miss Sophy, people of such attractions should beware!”

“Oh, Mr. Hyde! do you mean that dear old Sir Willoughby? such a delightful old quiz!” cried Miss Sophy, with a giggle, and in a little flutter of delight. Poor Sophy knew very well that her “attractions” were nothing to Sir Willoughby; but it pleased her poor little vanity to have Mrs. Austin hear that a real baronet had come within their influence; and, indeed, I was myself so improper as to enjoy the look of added respect with which Mrs. Austin turned towards my poor elderly cousin, as she whispered eagerly, “Is that Sir Willoughby Greenfield? I hear the people in Estbury talk of him; he is a man of large property; does he visit here?”

“Yes,” said Sophy, quite carelessly; “oh yes, we see a great deal of him—I think him a delicious old beau; but I dare say other people don’t quite agree with me,” added Sophy, briskly, glancing over to Mrs. Herbert, and doing a little malice of her own.

“Aunt Nell,” said Bertie, *sotto voce*, at the other end of the table, “don’t look so spiteful; who’s been doing anything wrong?”

This unguarded question of Bertie’s gained him an annihilating look from his aunt, and woke a slight rustle of delight in Sophy and Matilda, which Mr. Hyde did not disdain to share. Mrs. Austin, however, impatient to be kept so long in the background, came in triumphantly to cover the situation.

“When you come to town, Miss Nugent,” she said, “Mr. Austin and I will be delighted to do what we can to make London agreeable to you, and I hope you will not hesitate to ask for any service we can render you. We live in a very nice place; Miss Nugent will

show you where it is—and I am sure we should be delighted. We see a *great deal* of your cousins when we are at home.”

They both blushed a little; for their patroness spoke with emphasis. “Oh, yes,” said Matilda; “indeed, I don’t know what we should do sometimes without dear Mrs. Austin, especially when people are all out of town, as they are during the winter; for we, who have no country house, of course, must stay at home nearly all the year round.”

“It is,” said Mr. Hyde, entering willingly into the congenial occupation of disconcerting some one, “the greatest comfort possible to know some people who are always in London. I survived one winter in town myself; but I could not have got through it but for my attorney, who does the thing regularly, as people of his condition must, and with whom I actually took what the good man called a family dinner twice a-week or so. A terrible experiment; yet I survived it.”

Mrs. Austin paused a moment, red and flurried, divided between an impulse of awe and an impulse of wrath; but as she looked at the dainty old gentleman, severe and immovable, her courage fell; she submitted and was crestfallen; of course it was only a reprisal, for she was by no means delicate in her inference, that the Nugents were indebted to her, yet I was sorry for the poor woman. I volunteered to call on her in London, which I should not have done in any other circumstances, and she brightened immediately under this salve to her wounded pride. If it had not been for her mortified looks, stranger and intruder though she was, I should have been amused at the "family" conversation, about people and things quite out of her ken, which Matilda and Sophy managed to get up immediately to dazzle their friend withal. They brought in even Bertie, with his reminiscences of Indian splendour, and his Rugby experiences; they persuaded Mr. Hyde into an

anecdote of something that happened at his club; they made free use of Crofton Manor and Fen-Osiers, and the Sir Johns and Sir Willoughbies of the county. They were quite occupied and absorbed with their conversation; little incidents were related by one, to which the other responded by clapping her hands and crying, "So like Lady Crofton!"—"Just what one might have expected from Lord Craven!" In short, it was not at all unlike the talk of Lady Blarney and Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Skeggs, and had an equally imposing effect upon the subject of it, who sat listening with all her ears, asking a question when she could, and quite oblivious of my humble attempts to entertain her, in her interest in this animated conversation. I was glad at last, when John came in to say the carriage was waiting for them; for the triumph of the Misses Nugent, perhaps, was going rather too far.

"Who is the woman in the black beetles?"

said Mr. Hyde, before they were out of hearing; I was even afraid that I could see Mrs. Austin glance back at him with a most vengeful frown.

“Oh, one of Clara’s *protegeés*; some one who has orphans to dispose of, I presume,” said Mrs. Herbert. “We shall all have to get ready presently for the Orphan Asylum.”

This time the words hit their mark. Little Alice Harley, who was a very thoughtful and sensible child, looked up suddenly with her big surprised eyes in my face. The child did not say anything; but the pained wondering look which went from me to Mrs. Herbert, and the tears which were ready to overflow at the very name of orphan, but which she kept unshed, dilating her serious eyes, showed me that this chance arrow had its full effect, and that Alice already was old enough to feel the force of injurious words. I led them away to the schoolroom, where Miss Austin had remained by herself till her sister-in-law went

away. *She* was seated at her table, working with great and agitating haste; her needle flying along the work as I never saw a needle move before; her thoughts were too fast for anything short of a headlong pace. But she laid aside her needlework when we entered, and began to prepare for the children in that quiet matter-of-fact way, which always impressed me so much; the manner of one who, either had never permitted herself, or had never been permitted by Providence to consider, whether she was ready for her common work or no; but who had always done it, and always would do it, though the earth was rending.

I, with my luxurious bringing up, and my habit of thinking sometimes, that "I was not able," that "my mind was not in a condition" for one thing or another, could not but look on at this other habit with respect and veneration. But I bethought me of a good expedient for clearing away the tears from the

pretty eyes of Alice, and giving her governess a little leisure. I begged a half holiday for them, and called Bertie, who was passing, to take them out for a ramble in the park. Their own little brothers and sisters had returned home some time since; but Bertie, whom I was by no means disposed to like when he came—who was Mrs. Herbert's nephew, the son of a father in India—Bertie had taken my heart by storm. He was one of those manly, handsome English boys, whom one's heart warms to see; not a false thought in him—open, true, candid, full of the delightful blunders and tricks, courage, and modesty, and rudeness of his years. He took the children by the hand and ran off with them, with the echoing boyish step, which I knew would not go a bit too fast for these tenderer feet which chimed with it. I could not help looking after him with admiration, wishing him my own boy brother, thinking what a noble heir he would make for the old house. I had come

thus far in three weeks, being predisposed against him ; so you may suppose what a dear fellow Bertie was.

I came in then and sat down by Miss Austin, and repeated what I had said about her nephew ; she heard me out in silence, subduing a little the pace of her needle ; then she laid down her work on her knees.

“ I have been thinking it over, Miss Nugent ; I dont deny it was like a triumph at first ; a victory over James’s wife ; but I can’t see it now. No ; thank you all the same ; thank you for the kindness of the thought ; but whether you support him or an— an institution—supports him, still it’s charity. When once I get over that, I don’t mind how it is. No ; I am not humbled as I ought to be ; I won’t interfere, Miss Nugent ; they’ll not hurt him, except in his feelings, and people in our circumstances must learn to have their feelings hurt betimes ; I dare say he’ll be very happy in the school, poor child.

It's just a school after all ; no, Miss Nugent ; thank you, I'll not interfere."

"Then I shall insist upon you having your little nieces here at the holidays," said I ; "if you will not interfere for the boy, you must at least see them."

"Thank you, I'd like that," said Miss Austin ; "but bless you, they don't love me ; they know very little about me ; do what one likes, one can't buy love."

"It will come, when they are old enough to know," said I.

Miss Austin shook her head. "Amy did not mind ; Amy left me comfortless till she was on her death-bed," said the governess, dropping some tears ; "then she left the girls to me ; poor things, it is nature ; they will just do the same."

CHAPTER XV.

WE were going to have a party to dinner.

Consequent upon this great event, there was some excitement in the house. Matilda and Sophy Nugent had been shut up in their rooms all day, making only a hasty appearance at luncheon, in a very excited condition, like people at the crisis of a great work; and even Mrs. Herbert went up stairs earlier than usual to dress. Though Sir Willoughby was coming, Mr. Hyde had not "made a run up to town;" and our party was further increased by the sudden and unlooked-for arrival of Edward Nugent, who came, as he said, "to have an hour's chat with Eleanor, and pay his respects to the head of the family." The

head of the family did not particularly relish this addition to her household; however, he was Mrs. Herbert's brother, and there was nothing further to be said.

When we assembled in the drawing-room, we were certainly a very respectable family party, in point of numbers. Mr. Hyde lounged leisurely in an easy chair, surveying everybody. Sophy and Matilda entered in a flutter, full of the consciousness of sleeves and *berthés* of home manufacture, produced by the delightful labours of this exciting day, and with pink dresses on, and as exactly alike in their beautiful simplicity of sisterhood as little Alice and Clara. Then Mrs. Herbert dropped softly into a corner of a sofa, looking very pretty in her pale coloured dress ("only half mourning," as the Misses Nugent said), covered with black lace. For myself, I still wore black, though not mourning; having really, if truth were told, no particular impulse at my heart, to move me to the trouble

of change. Bertie, rather excited at the thought of his first dinner-party, and pleased with Uncle Ned, who was a very pleasant companion, whatever else he might be, kept following that interesting personage about the room, lighting it up with that candid young face of his, and his bloom of daylight youth; Edward Nugent, too, looked very young, *for his age*; but nothing could have been a more emphatic comment on that significant condition, than the contrast of *his* youth carefully preserved, and made the most of, with Bertie's.

To-night, Mrs. Herbert looked, as she was, younger than her brother; she had a little flush upon her cheeks; a certain degree of excitement and expectation, prettily subdued in her manner; her mind was pre-occupied and bent upon something. This, we, all the women of the party, perceived in a moment, and set ourselves (I confess even for myself, *I* did,) to find out the cause. Mrs. Herbert

moved her pretty foot, played with her fan, smiled, but made no reply when her brother spoke to her. Sophy and Matilda looked at each other, and a very slight nod passed between them; they meant to watch and find her out.

The Croftons came first, a large party—the father and mother, Kate, Everard, and William, with a Mr. Somebody and a Miss Somebody, brother and sister, who were their guests; then came Sir Willoughby and Miss Polly, and then a collection of country people, squires, rectors, and baronets, unnecessary to this story. Sir Willoughby was in grand toilette, with an immense diamond brooch in his frilled shirt, and the most magnificent of waistcoats; his great person and resplendent apparel, made quite a show among all the gentlemen in black. He went up to Mrs. Herbert at once, with a bow which astonished the young men. He deposited Miss Polly, in her old crimson satin gown, as a sort of

pledge, in one end of the sofa, and took up a position before the pretty widow, with the air of a man who meant to hold his place against all comers.

The Misses Nugent and I—I believe even Lady Crofton, Kate, and the Miss Somebody—perceived at once that the colour deepened upon Mrs. Herbert's cheek, half in shame for the over-demonstration, half in pleasure at her unequivocal triumph. This then, was the occasion of her little tremor and preoccupation. Once more the Misses Nugent exchanged looks, while Lady Crofton eyed Mrs. Herbert quite seriously and thoughtfully, like a person who measures the inches of a future rival and competitor. Miss Polly alone, of all the ladies present, kept her eyes away from the widow; probably, Miss Polly had seen quite enough of her already; she sat drawing back the soft limp skirts of her crimson satin gown, from any chance of contact with the flowing drapery of Mrs. Herbert; she looked

quite away from her brother, and the lady of his love, withdrawn into the furthest corner of the sofa. Miss Polly's old-womanly timid manner, her nervousness, her tender pale old face, did not look so oddly self-contradictory with the crimson satin as with the riding dress; but she was not herself to-night.

I cannot say how thankful I felt, that Mr. Hyde was there to take the foot of the table, and Lady Crofton in to dinner; for Sir Willoughby devoted himself entirely to Mrs. Herbert, and had not a moment to spare for anybody else. Though it was rather a difficult business when every one knew his and her claims of precedence so thoroughly, we managed to get seated at dinner without much trouble, and I humbly trust without offence; and then, I confess, that in my terrible position as hostess, worse than all as unmarried hostess, of a great many couples come to the age when people like good cooking, my thoughts were too fully occupied to

pay much regard to the conversation. It was not in the least witty or remarkable, being indeed a succession of scanty *tete-a-tete* talks, between the intervals of more serious business; the one sole thing which I remember as a special annoyance being, that Edward Nugent had contrived to place himself near me, I cannot tell how, and chose to offer me his services, and to address me in a tone of intimacy and regard, which displeased me highly; and drew upon me several times a surprised glance from Sir John Crofton, who heard and saw it all. In the grateful relief of dessert, when my mind rested in the delightful assurance that *now*, at least, nothing could go wrong, I became a little more able to attend to what passed among my guests.

Matilda and Sophy were "making themselves at home" with great zeal and fervour, protesting that there were no such flowers as "*our* flowers," and begging to recommend the fruit, for which "we" were famed, to all their

neighbours. Miss Polly sat by herself—for Sophy Nugent, who was on one side, was busied with more congenial society, and Miss Polly's own cavalier and attendant on the other, had deserted, and was humbly waiting for a smile from Kate Crofton—watching the flirtation between Sir Willoughby and Mrs. Herbert. Mr. Hyde, with the easy air of a man who presided at his own table, did a little fashionable gossip with Lady Crofton. Bertie was most agreeably employed with a pretty girl a little older than himself; while Edward Nugent, with the most provoking perseverance, addressed his whole artillery of glances, compliments, and small services to me.

In the midst of this, I was startled by Mrs. Herbert's voice from the middle of the table. "Clara, dear, are we not to have the children down to dessert?"

"The children; *your* children, Ma'am? pooty little cherubs!" cried Sir Willoughby; "let's have 'em Clare, by all means; home

from school, eh? I don't believe it; I don't believe a word of it! a pooty make-believe with little brothers and sisters, that's all; just like you mischievous little women—as if you wasn't dangerous enough, o' nature, without art."

"Art! dear Sir Willoughby! how wicked you are," said Mrs. Herbert, softly. "I am a poor solitary creature, as you know; I have not even a child to love me; but I may still love the little things, though they are not mine."

"Don't speak nonsense, Sir Willoughby," said Miss Polly rather sharply, from the other side of the table. "They are the poor dear little Harleys, as you know very well; and Clare, my love," continued the good old lady, bending across the table to look up to me, and speaking across half a dozen people in a whisper; "if I were you I'd not have them down—too many people—people who knew

their father—you understand me; if I were you, my dear, I'd not bring them down."

"Is it true, that you are taking orphans, Miss Nugent? I should so like to tell you of one," said another lady.

"Little girls, pretty little things; I saw them in the Hall with an old Gorgon of a governess," said Edward Nugent; "query, why do ladies like to have an ugly woman about them? who can answer?"

"Sets the pooty creatures off," cried Sir Willoughby, with his big laugh; "makes them look aggravating, eh, Madam? Bless their sweet faces; d'ye think a pooty woman shouldn't know it; and if she knows it, shouldn't she take care of it? That's my doctrine; 'look as pooty as you can, my dear,' says I, 'and don't be ashamed of it;' and I never knew a woman yet as didn't take my advice; ha, ha! Take my word there's a use for the Gorgon; why, aint she here?"

“Yes,” said Mr. Hyde, letting his eye travel leisurely up a line, which included Lady Crofton’s matronly comeliness, Kate, and two very young country beauties, and was shaded by the smiling Sophy, in her pink dress, and pale old Miss Polly, in her crimson satin. “Yes,” said Mr. Hyde; “there is good art in a foil, little as most persons know about it—and we do not need to go to the nursery for beauty, or perhaps for —”

“Not for ugliness—the old fellows do that,” said Bertie, in a loud whisper to his companion, who became speechless immediately, with soft titters of laughter. “I say, who’s that old Guy in the waistcoat, whispering to Aunt Nell? Is that Sir Willoughby? *isn’t* he grand!”

Oblivious of the latter part of Bertie’s private communication, Sir Willoughby chorussed it with his “ha, ha!” “Right, my boy,” said the baronet; “all right for the old fellows; can’t do better for us than set us among

the ladies, Mr, Hyde; do their pretty faces good, eh, with our old uns? Master Nephew, here's to your bon fortune!"

At the name Miss Polly looked across the table keenly at Bertie. The old lady's ears were sharp and eager with personal feeling; she glanced from one to another of the party, in which she was most particularly interested, oblivious to everything else that passed at table, and leaving her own plate quite unnoticed. Her solitary old-maidenly glass of port stood by her untouched; she minded nothing but the couple across the table—the big baronet, in his diamond brooch, smothering the little widow with his big rude attentions; and she half ashamed, half triumphant, unconsciously modifying the quiet, good-breeding of her own tone and manner, to cover a little the loud *brusquerie* of his. They were in some degree, the point of general observation; but they absorbed all the regards of Miss Polly.

“How about Will Haines, Sir Willough-

by?" inquired his brother baronet, at my right hand.

"Infamous rascal! we'll have it out of him," said the fox-hunter. "I can stand a deal in a neighbourly way. I don't mind the gypsies, mum, though they break Polly's heart, marauding among her Cochin Chinas—and 'pon my honour I'd scorn to do more than frighten the old women, though they pull down my fences, the old witches, for their bundles of firewood; but a poacher's an unnatural beast. 'If you meet him, pitch into him,' that's my doctrine; and if you can't take it out of his bones in the natural way, have him up and get your satisfaction; he shall kick his heels in jail, I can tell you. None o' your milk-and-water benevolence for me; crime's crime, Sir, and I aint the man to wink at it on my estate."

"But, dear Sir Willoughby, how can it be unnatural?" said Mrs. Herbert, with her sweetest smile; "the poor fellow only copies

you ; dear, now, only imagine—Miss Polly's a poacher! for I don't suppose she has got a game licence, or whatever you call it, and I am sure you told me that she went shooting with you."

A general laugh went round the table; Miss Polly did not blush; but that pale old lady's face of hers contracted and grew paler, looking so strange a contrast, in its timid age and quietness, with this sportive suggestion, that I think almost everybody was ashamed after they had laughed. Sir Willoughby, however, laughed his big guttural "ha, ha!" into Mrs. Herbert's face, with quite an outbreak of merriment. "Hey, Polly, when did you begin to shoot?" said the baronet. "If you go along like that, poaching on my grounds, I'll set the keepers after you. I tell you what though, Madam," continued the gallant wooer, turning to Mrs. Herbert, and lowering his voice; "if you're tender of poachers—though I hope it won't continue—say but the word and Will Haines is free "

Mrs. Herbert laid her pretty hand appealingly, on Sir Willoughby's arm ; I don't know what the baronet might have done in his enthusiasm and delight ; but I know I thought it best to look at Lady Crofton, who responded with readiness, and to rise rather precipitately from the table. The heroine of the evening was a little flushed with gratification and triumph ; but we all rather avoided her. Kate Crofton, who, being "in love" herself, might be supposed a champion of the same, came to me quite disgusted, with an angry glow upon her cheeks. "Are old people always so disagreeable," said Kate, in a whisper, "making love ! horrid ! it is enough to make one never endure—"

I suppose Kate's blush meant never endure the making of her own love, which was more beautiful than this ; but Kate's love made my heart rather sick ; so I answered her blush with but a poor smile.

CHAPTER XVI.

NEXT morning, I was startled by a rather early visit from Mrs. Harley. She had established herself about ten miles off, in a pretty cottage, near the road where the coach passed, and had come by that, on purpose to see me. She looked agitated, embarrassed, full of distress, as if she had something not only painful, but *disagreeable* to say, and did not know how to begin it.

After she had seen Alice and Clara, she kissed them, bade the children return to their lessons, and when she and I were left alone, turned towards me to begin her statement, whatever it was. She looked so painfully embarrassed, so distressed, that I was grieved

for her, especially as she did not seem able to make a beginning of what she had to say.

“Has anything happened, Mrs. Harley?” said I.

“Miss Nugent, I can’t tell what you’ll think of me—you’ll think it very ungrateful, as indeed it seems, but I am not ungrateful, I assure you; I feel and shall always feel your great kindness—I don’t know what you’ll think of me—I don’t know how to say it”—

“What is the matter?” I exclaimed, in alarm.

Mrs. Harley made an agitated pause, and put her handkerchief to her eyes. In her widow’s cap and bonnet, with those sombre draperies, she looked so unlike the genial mistress of the Rectory, the rich Rector’s wife of Estborne; and either her heavy mourning, or her agitation, or the unaccustomed cares of her comparative poverty, had pinched the full lines of the widow’s face.

She moved those hands, with the handkerchief in them, with a nervous restlessness, and looked so uneasy and troubled, that I repeated my question, in real anxiety for her.

“I am a mother, Miss Nugent, and I must do my duty to my children,” said Mrs. Harley, “though I know it’s all kindness on your part, I cannot have it said—I can’t indeed—oh forgive me, Clare! that *his* daughters were brought up by charity. Perhaps I ought to have seen this before, but I did not at the time. I thought only how kind you were, and what an advantage it would be to the children; but now, though I thank you very much, I must be firm, Miss Nugent. Alice and Clara must go home with me; better a poor education in their own mother’s house, than a good one, in an orphan institution. I know it’s all your good heart, your benevolence—Clare, forgive me!—but my husband’s daughters are not charity children; they never shall be—I would die first!”

I looked at her, in utter amazement; her real and overpowering agitation, which, now that the ice was broken, reached the length of a distressing excitement, was quite beyond my comprehension. Perhaps my amazed, bewildered look, had a more soothing effect upon her than anything else could have had. She paused, and became gradually calmer, as if struck by a little doubt; then she faltered, coloured, looked up at me, almost timidly—“Clare, I beg your pardon—perhaps I have been wrong.”

“I cannot tell,” said I, feeling a little offended, even though I was sorry for her. “I cannot guess what it is which has moved you so. If you will tell me, then I can judge whether you are right or wrong.”

She coloured still more, with a consciousness that I was displeased. “I beg your pardon; I may have been precipitate—but it is rather hard to fall from wealth to poverty, Miss Nugent,” said Mrs. Harley, “and harder still,

when one has given one's fatherless children to the kindness of a friend, to hear that they are to form part of an orphan institution, supported by charity—no; I respect you and your motives—but this I cannot bear.”

“Who told you this?” said I.

“No one told *me*—but your cousin, Mrs. Herbert Nugent, speaks of it commonly; I have heard it from different people; it is quite well known in the county—and so you will please let Clara and Alice get ready for home.”

I was much hurt and wounded; the tears came to my eyes in spite of myself; I had very nearly risen up, in the indignation of rejected kindness, and said “as you please,”—but I never saw any good come of these dumb-shows of injured feeling, and I had no idea of being thwarted by Mrs. Herbert; *her* “prospects” were now so evident and well established, that I felt no longer that delicacy in speaking of her which I had felt while she was entirely dependent upon me.

“If you had trusted your children to Mrs. Herbert,” I said, “I could have understood this—but I think, if I am not greatly deceived, that you trusted them to *me*.”

“Yes, surely, Clare,” said Mrs. Harley, melting into tears once more.

“And *I* have not said anything about an orphan institution,” said I, warming unconsciously. “I am not responsible for everything that foolish people or wicked people may choose to say—I have never spoken, never thought of an orphan institution. I may be, possibly, disposed to help other little ones who have no father—I cannot tell; I will not limit what I may do hereafter. Alice and Clara are, of course, your children; you must do what you think best for them; but I should be sorry to think that you made a change so sudden, for the sake of anything that Mrs. Herbert has said.”

Mrs. Harley, all this time, kept looking pitifully in my face. When I had ended, she

still gazed at me, in that trembling, doubtful, painful state of uncertainty, with which people who have never made decisions for themselves, contemplate a question which they must decide. I saw she was quite confused and did not know what to do. I went up to her, and held out my hand. "Can you not trust me?" I said. She burst into tears immediately, and clasped my hand—

"Oh Clare—I am so foolish—so lonely!—I never did anything by myself—you don't know what it is to lose the one in all the world whom you always trusted to!—I never did anything without him. I never made up my mind for myself, as some people do. I leaned upon him for everything—and to think of his daughters reproached by charity—oh Clare!"

Poor Mrs. Harley! I could only soothe her, as I best could, taking her up, by-and-by to the schoolroom, where Alice and Clara with Miss Austin, did not certainly look very much

like "charity children." The poor mother was quite shaken and nervous; I persuaded her to stay till evening, and sent her home in the carriage, considerably soothed and quieted by that time; but still I could perceive she was jealous for her children—jealous of me for saying that I would not limit myself, and might help others—disturbed and unhappy in her mind. Mrs. Herbert had quite succeeded for one day, in bringing discomfort to the little Harleys and their mother—not to say to myself also, who, perhaps, felt it most.

In the evening we were all seated together before the gentlemen left the dining-room; Sophy was busy with some fancy-work; Matilda was gumming some botanical specimens into a book; Mrs. Herbert had the newspaper; and I sat doing nothing at all; thinking on the events of the morning, and looking at the scene before me.

The firelight was ruddy in our old-fashioned drawing-room, where all the curtains were

drawn, the easiest chairs wheeled near the fire, and the warm colours of the furniture, growing warmer still in the pleasant home atmosphere, which contrasted well with the blast of the wind without, and the rush of hail which sometimes came against the windows.

Alice Harley sat on her little stool at my feet, looking very serious, poor child, reading one of her little books, and, I trust, not thinking of her mother's visit, nor of what had caused it. Clara, who, though even a quieter child than Alice, was not nearly so thoughtful, sat upon the rug amusing herself (for Clara had no turn for literature) with the mysteries of *Cat's Cradle*. These children, their pretty little figures, their black frocks and white shoulders, were the prettiest part of the fireside scene. Nothing else here was pretty except Mrs. Herbert, whom I could not regard with any sort of affection.

Miss Austin occupied one corner with her knitting, and Sophy, with her little em-

broidery frame, edged near the lamp; and Matilda sat by the table, with *her* occupation.

As I looked at them, my old thoughts returned to me strongly; here were we four, and there were the two gentlemen in the dining-room; and the whole half-dozen of us were of no more use in the world than the dry willow-stumps in the park, which yielded neither shade nor beauty. I was slightly misanthropical in my turn of mind that night. I gave utterance to my thought—

“What a pity,” said I, from my easy chair, where I was doing nothing but look at the fire. “What a pity that we are not good for something; I see nobody but Miss Austin and the children who have anything to do in this life, where everybody is said to be so busy; I wonder what is the good of aimless lives like ours?”

“Cousin Clare!” cried Sophy and Matilda, in a breath, while Mrs. Herbert glanced up from her paper, smiled, and looked down

again. The Misses Nugent were actually horrified; "What *can* you mean?" cried the lively Sophy. "As for you, my dearest cousin, I cannot be sufficiently sorry for you, with all the cares of this house, and of hospitality on your head; and Eleanor, I am sure, is quite occupied—and as for dear Matilda and I, we find plenty to do."

"Possibly," said I, "but it's all for ourselves; we are all spending our time quite complacently, thinking ourselves very virtuous when we do a little piece of business for our own comfort; here are four of us—we all manage our own incomes, look after our own dresses, pay visits, take care of ourselves. People congratulate us on being restrained by nobody's will; we are free to go where we like; do what we like; no one is the better if no one is the worse. We are for ourselves and no other. For my own part, I should like to be good for something; this kind of life is rather irksome when one comes to think of it."

“Indeed, Clare, I think you are not at all polite,” said Matilda, colouring, while once more Mrs. Herbert looked over the edge of her paper and smiled; “what do ladies ever do? Fortunately, it is not the custom of our country to take ladies out of their proper sphere. A woman is always best seen at home.”

“Doing nothing!” said I; “I don’t speak of women. Some women do every kind of martyrdom under the sun; some women bring up children, make houses, are, so far as service goes, the busiest creatures under the sun. I spoke only of us, four of us, with nobody but ourselves to care for; I am rather worse than you, for I have no sister—I think it is very sad.”

“Oh fie, Clare!” cried Sophy, lifting her hands and dropping her face, and giving me a sidelong look, intended to be wicked, through her fingers; “to think *you* should give up the cause of your sex so shockingly! Why I

should quite have supposed you would stand up for us, I should indeed—and instead of that you think we cannot be good for anything unless we are married!”

“If I thought so, I should advise everybody to get married immediately,” said I.

“Oh, horrid!” cried Sophy, with a giggle. Miss Nugent drew herself up and looked stately, while Mrs. Herbert, quite unmoved by her share of the censure, looked over her newspaper enjoying the fun.

“I really do not see what else you can mean, cousin Clare,” said Matilda; “and, I daresay,” looking severely across at Mrs. Herbert, “*some people* may be quite disposed to follow your suggestion; but as for Sophy and I, we love each other; we are devoted to each other; we could not live separate—and, I flatter myself, we do a great many things for ourselves; more than most people do, I assure you.”

I looked at her while she spoke, with a

little dismay. Suppose, for instance, Matilda and Sophy were to take charge of some little forsaken orphan; would it be well to give them the bringing up of the little outcast?—or what *could* they be good for? I gave up the question in despair.

“Ah, yes, Matilda; Clare means that we do all for *ourselves*,” said Sophy; “it is quite true—and I am sure, Clare, dear, I’m quite ready to help, whenever you please, with the flannel—the gentlemen have not come in yet—petticoats. I’ll put away my embroidery as soon as you please.”

“Very well,” said I, laughing, in spite of myself, “but I did not precisely mean flannel petticoats; I meant something very foolish, I fear, and quite impracticable.”

“You meant—now confess it, Clare, darling!—you meant like those girls in ‘Shirley’ and all the other novels; you meant that everybody should be married.—Oh, shocking! I could not have supposed,” cried Sophy,

“that you would desert your sex, and give these horrid men such an advantage; for my part, I should think it quite improper even to hint at such a thing, though we *are* all by ourselves.”

“Well,” said I, “if I thought, as you seem to do, that an unmarried woman can be of no use, I should certainly say it was everybody’s duty to be married—good husband, or bad husband, love or no love; however, don’t be afraid—I shall not try to coërce your inclinations, for the case is not quite so bad as that.”

Sophy shrugged her shoulders. Matilda drew herself up. “I assure you, cousin Clare, I thoroughly disapprove of such sentiments—they show you to have a very poor opinion of your sex,” said Miss Nugent, with dignity.

I made no answer—for there was Miss Austin sitting by, taking no part in the discussion. Miss Austin, middle-aged, hard-featured, a schoolmistress born. I had not a very poor

opinion of my sex ; but I turned with dismay from this problem, which was quite desperate and unsolvable—how to get any good for the world or our fellow-creatures, from such solitary self-regarding individuals as we four Nugents.

CHAPTER XVII.

MY visitors prolonged their stay, all of them, to a considerably longer extent than their invitation; either they found me a highly attractive person, or Estcourt a very comfortable place. Edward Nugent, who had no invitation, stayed as perseveringly as the others; and what was worse, behaved himself towards me in a manner which I could not help resenting. He seemed to suppose, that it was possible I might have changed my mind, and that his attentions and services were likely to have a better effect upon me this time, than before. He shewed me what people call "the most delicate attentions;" which means, the most provoking, aggravat-

ing, intolerable system of annoyance it is possible to conceive. He picked up my handkerchief, found the book I wanted, opened the door for me, was instantly diverted from any occupation of his own by my merest movement; "followed me with his eyes," "anticipated my wishes," and did all and sundry of those sentimental things, which look so pretty to girls in novels; but which to a person of my age, aware of the motive, were more disagreeable and impertinent than common patience could bear.

This, all my guests, being sharp-sighted, noticed as well as I; and, I have no doubt, discussed among themselves Edward's chances, and how much they were worth. We were not a very amiable household. I am afraid, though it is sad to say it, that people when they come to middle age, especially people "who have no *ties*," are apt to have very little mutual sympathy, and to become terrible critics of each other; critics of an uncomfortable

kind, who always add a comparison to their criticism. However, the time came at last, when our loving party must separate. Mr. Hyde and the Misses Nugent were really quite sentimental about it. Mr. Hyde was just about going to another friend's house; "but I shall not forget Estcourt, Miss Clare. I shall remember, immensely to your credit for a young housekeeper, the very commendable household arrangements; as for society, that one rarely finds good in the country, especially—I beg your pardon, my dear Madam—in a lady's house. Next year, if you will permit me, I shall be happy to make some suggestions; thank you for some pleasant days as it is; good bye."

This valedictory address was listened to with great emotion by all the rest of the household, who indeed, to tell the truth, made rather spiteful curtseys to Mr. Hyde in consequence; and were scarcely disposed to restrain several complimentary remarks concerning him

till he had left the room. He was the first to leave of our party. The next was Bertie, whose holidays were over; he gave me his parting confidence after quite a different fashion. Just on the eve of Sandhurst, the boy confided to me his difficulties; that he "didn't mind" (which meant that he'd rather not,) going to India; that the governor had married a new wife, and had a lot of little children; that he liked the fellows better in the line, only the governor had got him a cadetship, and a good deal more to the same purpose. Bertie and I by this time were fast friends; he had told me all about his early friendships, and a good deal about his hopes and intentions; and oftener than I was aware the thought had entered my mind, that he was near enough in blood to be my just heir, and that Estcourt could not have a better master. I did not tell him this; but I told him that he must try what he could to change his father's intention, and that I would help

him with his commission, if "the governor" consented to transfer him from the Company's army to the Queen's. Bertie was much delighted, yet blushed and did not know whether it was right. "I had far rather do something for *you*, cousin Clare!" cried the boy, with the blush of shame and pleasure, which my words called forth; but when I added, "You must come to Estcourt whenever you can, Bertie, and think it home," my young champion fairly shouted out his satisfaction. "I say, cousin, you're a good fairy—that's exactly what I wanted!" he exclaimed; "I didn't like to ask, in case you should think me just like the rest; but I'd rather come here than anywhere else. Isn't there a difference! though to be sure Aunt Nell was very kind, too," he added with compunction; and my good Bertie left us rather troubled with the idea, that he had been unjust to Aunt Nell.

My next farewell was with Edward; having benevolently given me every opportunity of

intimating a change in my own mind, and finding that I did not avail myself of these, Edward considerably took the initiative, and once more offered himself to my acceptance. When I had answered him, which I did with some indignation and displeasure, my suitor then took a high tone. He reproached me with receiving him kindly, with "encouraging his attentions," as he called it. I was extremely angry; not to say that it was untrue, it was a very poor, shabby, ignoble piece of business; for I had done all I could in the first instance, to lighten the inevitable mortification which I supposed he must have felt; I left him abruptly and in anger, to make his arrangements for leaving Estcourt, and made my appearance as little as possible till he was gone.

Then came the affectionate farewell of Sophy and Matilda. These two loving creatures embraced me with the most sisterly fondness; their affection for their dearest

Clare, was quite inexpressible; they managed to cry a little each, with astonishing ease and facility, really as if they meant it, and advised me, "at any time when I might feel lonely, not to hesitate *a moment*, but to write at once and they would fly to cheer me, though it should be the height of the season." I was very much touched, as everybody will suppose, by this extent of volunteered self-sacrifice, and bade them good bye with a good deal of kindness; for in spite of some petty malice and morsels of superficial envy and uncharitableness, there was no harm in these two, though there was very little use. Then I knew I had been able to gratify them greatly, and make them some amends for that vain pretentious poverty of theirs; and it is natural to like people whom you think you have been kind to. When Sophy and Matilda went away, I could tolerate their velvet muffs, their ringlets, and their pursuit of millinery under difficulties. I don't believe they ever did any

real harm to any one, or, if they did, were unfeignedly sorry for it—and they were kind creatures, too, in their way.

I confess I found it rather embarrassing to be left, after, in *tête-a-tête* solitude with Mrs. Herbert. She and I had not “got on” together lately. She had offended me greatly by her talk about orphans, and I was not quite delighted by the love scenes with Sir Willoughby; while she, on her part, with all the amiable incentives to goodwill, arising from a consciousness that I did not approve of her, lost no opportunity of a well-bred sneer at myself and my proceedings. We were quite in a volcanic condition, waiting for an outbreak; and as Mrs. Herbert took all the means in her power to snub the children and be rude to Miss Austin, I had to exercise my self-control to keep *my* temper down; a precaution, however, which she did not always use with hers; for, at last, the explosion came.

“I have just heard from Edward,” she said to me one day when we were alone “and now I have mentioned his name, poor fellow, I must say, Clara, that I think you behaved very badly to Edward.”

“As how?” said I.

“As how? I really wonder how you can ask such a question,” cried Mrs. Herbert, colouring. “I assure you, *I* do not approve of anything of the kind. I think a man has a right to be candidly dealt with, at least, whatever else.”

“I am quite unaware of having dealt uncandidly with any one,” said I.

“Clara! I am amazed at you,” exclaimed Mrs. Herbert; “to speak to *me* so. You forget that I am acquainted with the whole business. Edward comes here, poor fellow, believing, as he had *every reason* to do, that your former answer to him was merely a caprice. He is received with distinction; you pay all the attention possible to him, and

draw him on in every way, and at last, when he is encouraged to repeat his offer, turn round upon him quite coolly, and tell him you never meant anything but civility! I assure you, if you are not ashamed of your conduct, I am. I think it the most cruel and unlady-like behaviour I ever knew."

I am not a heroine; I was very angry; I was as much disposed to raise my voice and fall upon her heartily, tooth and nail, as ever was woman of Billingsgate; but I reflected in time, that Mrs. Herbert was a much greater mistress of the art than I, and quite excelled in that unforgivable feminine sarcasm, which is one of the most intolerable weapons in the world; so I was prudent and paused, to the intense aggravation and disappointment of my adversary.

"It is true," said I, at last, "that I could have done, when he arrived, what I certainly should do another time—request John to show Mr. Edward Nugent down stairs; but failing

that, which certainly seems a mistake, I do not see what else I could do. I am not responsible for any man's vanity."

"Oh, don't make insinuations!" cried Mrs. Herbert, bitterly. "I understand from Sir Willoughby—who does not at all approve of your conduct, I assure you—that this is quite your way. Oh, yes! I have heard all about it—how you once treated the bridegroom who is about to come to Craven Lodge."

"You choose your time well," said I, with, I confess, an almost passionate sharpness, for I was very angry; "it is well for my temper that you are my guest, and say this under my own roof."

"Oh, yes; I have had the shelter of your roof; you have been my patroness," said Mrs. Herbert; "a very pretty story! but don't distress yourself about that, my dear, for it shall not continue. Sir Willoughby would have published it to all the world by this time if I had permitted him, and I must beg you,

Clara, to provide yourself with some other useful companion without delay ; for our marriage is fixed for the 20th of next month."

She said this with a look of triumph, apparently expecting me to be surprised. I was not at all surprised, of course, after proceedings so open as poor Sir Willoughby's. I bowed to her very gravely, and congratulated her on her good fortune. This—I will not venture to say quite involuntarily or unconsciously on my part—gave her increased offence.

"My good fortune, as you are pleased to call it, is fully shared, in his own opinion, by my future husband," said the bride-widow, who, I suppose by right of being a widow, was perfectly self-possessed about the business, and did not think it necessary to waste upon me the shadow of a blush ; "and as for your roof, though it is that of my ancestors, it has never been a kind shelter to me. Why, even these old creatures, Sophy and Matilda have been

more studied than I at Estcourt—and you will not be raised in the estimation of Sir Willoughby, or any family of rank in the county, by your treatment of me.”

“Sir Willoughby’s opinion is not a first consideration here,” said I, carelessly, turning away. There are certainly times, when the most angelic tempers in the world must be provoked out of patience. She had been *mistress* of Estcourt, of everything in it except myself. I have not the temper of an angel; I went to my own apartment, and I confess for an hour or two could do nothing but fume about, and meditate angrily upon the past scene; while my antagonist I presume, in the room close by, did, with more triumph, exactly the same thing.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It may be supposed that after this little episode, Mrs. Herbert and I were on still less affectionate terms than we had been before—but it was not her interest, as it turned out, to prolong hostilities.

She was a skilful little woman, mistress of all the artifices of social war and peace; I found out very soon that she did not mean to quarrel with me, that she had, indeed, some special reason for determining to reinstate herself in my good graces. This reason, by-and-by, became apparent enough.

She meant to be married at Estcourt; she had no inclination to return to her little lodgings in the genteel town, from whence

she had come, even to electrify that quiet retreat with her bridal splendours. I daresay she thought of big Sir Willoughby, with his diamond brooch, stumbling up the narrow stairs at the lodging house, and filling with his presence half the available space in that ancient little drawing-room; and, on the whole, did not like the idea—though I believe that Sir Willoughby, who had a heart, would only have rejoiced the more over his “pooty little woman,” in the tiny room which would have contrasted so strangely with the lordly apartments of Fenosiers; and been thoroughly glad, in his rough fashion, to transplant her to the more congenial place.

Mrs. Herbert, however, who was not in love, had no such confidence in Sir Willoughby; besides, she meant to do honour to her own nuptials by all the means and influences of Estcourt, to take a triumphant position at once among the county families, and to dazzle the eyes of her own kin

and kith, with the splendour of these espousals.

Accordingly, after a gradual and skilful process of conciliation, she took me into her confidence. Though she was a clever little woman, it did not require a very high degree of wisdom to see through her intentions and professions; but I was very willing that she should leave me in good will, and with, at least, all outward appearance of a gracious parting. I consented to be consulted about the white satin, the Brussels lace, and the orange blossoms; I undertook willingly, all the home arrangements of the wedding day; I listened to various descriptions of "our plans," after that interesting ceremony; I was, in short, a very good cousin, and behaved myself with the greatest propriety. The only thing, in the whole affair, which overcame my patience, was the love-making of Sir Willoughby, which now, I fear, when all was settled, was

rather a greater bore to Mrs. Herbert than it could possibly be to me.

The old Estcourt servants shook their heads over the whole business; they thought it would have been far more sensible, had Miss Clare herself been the subject of the approaching operation, and I could not avoid hearing, now and then, references in their plain words, (which, somehow, often throw a strange new light upon "delicate matters," which, by polite lips, are not spoken of at all, or are, at most, mentioned in "the most delicate manner,") which brought a twinge of old pain to my own heart. I think they did not scruple to blame me, either, nor to say it was all my fault. Very well—they were right enough—so it was.

The children were rather excited by the approaching event; they were to wear white frocks for that one day, and to go to church with the bridal party, besides sharing in all the

supposed and superficial jubilee of the house. Alice and Clara made up a little present for Mrs. Herbert, "out of their own heads," as they told me—being no other than a warm piece of knitting, their own work, to keep her feet warm in her new carriage.

"Mamma used to have one," said Alice, with tears in her eyes—poor child, perhaps she thought of the carriage and all the old luxuries of the Rectory; but I think her tender little heart only recollected these external losses, as shadows, faint and far off, of the great calamity which had swept them all away. And Mrs. Harley, jealous of losing her place among her former equals, sent *her* present too; a rich one as it happened, much above her means, being, I suppose, some of her own jewels which she had not parted with.

Mrs. Herbert had a very good display of bridal gifts, and enjoyed them; especially the set of coral ornaments sent her by Sophy and

Matilda Nugent, which she exhibited to everybody, held aloft on the tips of her fingers, with laughter which she had learned from her future bridegroom ; but she would not be persuaded to invite our affectionate cousins to the interesting ceremony.

The day came at last, and I was much rejoiced when it was over. Though there were no sentiment, no painful drawbacks, no mother or home to be left behind, I cannot say it was at all a comfortable wedding. Sir Willoughby was in high glee, and ardent as became a bridegroom ; but I should imagine that a bride, who is a highly sensible person, and not the least "in love," must have an extremely awkward consciousness of the ludicrous element in her position. Mrs. Herbert had no glamour whatever in her sharp eyes ; she knew just as well as I did, that Sir Willoughby looked rather foolish in his high spirits, and that the people present scrutinised herself with an amazed curiosity,

very different indeed from that kindly-sympathetic sentiment which always attends a young bride—and which even, when youth and romance are out of the question, gives respect to a marriage suitable and according to nature.

But the orange blossoms sat uneasily on Mrs. Herbert's experienced brow. I heard her give a sigh of relief when all was over, and she was not herself again till she had changed her bridal costume, and came down stairs quite self-possessed and comfortable, in her travelling dress—Mrs. Herbert no longer, but, “my lady.” She quite beamed upon John, when he gave her that loved and honourable title, and, I think, for the first time felt herself repaid, for the trial she had just gone through.

That evening, after all the guests were gone, Miss Polly remained with me; she was rather in low spirits, the good old lady. She began to tell us stories, as we sat round the fire—

stories having no reference to the present period, the latest of them some thirty years back, quite alien to the event of the day. This seemed a kind of comfort to her.

After the children were gone, however, Miss Polly fell into a long silence—then she suddenly roused up, drew her chair closer to the fire, took her knitting out of her pocket, and looked like herself once more.

“I should like another cup of tea, Clare, if you please, if it's not cold,” said Miss Polly; “and get some work, my dear child, and sit down just opposite, and I'll tell you what I'm going to do.”

I obeyed all her requirements immediately; her pale old face began to brighten—she laid down her knitting, sipped her tea, and, after a pause, broke forth into the following self-defence:—

“Do you think I'm vexed because Sir Willoughby's married?—no such thing, Clare!—Now look here, how comfortable this is—I

look at you, and I do my little knitting, and I talk. Don't you think I like it far better than sitting all by myself in our big drawing-room, with Sir Willoughby taking his nap down stairs?—To be sure!—but then I don't like *her*, Clare—I am very sorry—ashamed to say it. I'll try to make out differently when she comes home; but, my dear, it's no use making a pretence—I don't like her now."

"Sir Willoughby *does*," said I.

"Yes, that's true," said Miss Polly; "everything's right she does, at present, and I'm sure I trust with all my heart it will last—but, however, that is speaking of other people, and I said I would tell you of myself. Do you know I'm to have the jointure house, Clare?—that pretty little house, you know, that the village people call Willow Hall—I forget it's right name just now; and I've thought upon a very good plan to make it cheerful. You know our poor little niece that married and lost her husband in India. She's got two

children, babies, I may say, poor things. She's living with her mother now; and my sister, you know, has a large family, and not a great deal—not a very great deal, you know—to set out all her children upon. So I've written and asked Emy to come to me; I don't want any of her young sisters, for, of course, they will all get married, and that would be no good—but Emy, poor dear, was very fond of her husband, and she says she'll make her home with me.”

I said, and truly, how glad I was.

“Yes; it will be very nice,” said Miss Polly, with a sigh of satisfaction; “and then there will be Kate Crofton close by. Ah, Clare, my dear! I don't know what you're thinking; I don't ask; it never does good bringing back such things; but I wish it had turned out different; and so I shall wish—if it is not wrong to go, even so much, against God's providence—till my dying day.”

CHAPTER XIX.

ABOUT six weeks after Mrs. Herbert's marriage I went to London. Being alone, I asked and obtained permission to go to the house of Mr. Hyde's sister, an elderly widow as different from himself as possible. I suppose she, too, had "just enough;" but she was a fat old lady, of an easy mind, who "kept no company," except that of a few other old ladies like herself; and had an easy, quiet, plentiful, old household, in which the genteel economy of my other relatives either was not practised, or was most skilfully concealed. At the same time she was far from rich, and received me almost eagerly. She lived in a big old house in Harley-street, which was her

jointure house, and kept a man and a maid specially devoted to her personal service, in addition to the domestic subordinates down stairs. Once a-day she took a little airing in a "job" carriage, and I think lived the rest of her time on a green satin sofa, marvellously comfortable, amongst a profusion of little cushions, soft as down, with which all the crevices round her were regularly filled in by her maid. She was quiet, kind, and motherly to me; called me "my dear," and left me to amuse myself after my own fashion. She even volunteered to make an effort to go out with me when I required the protection of her society; but this would have been so great an effort that I made very few calls upon her. Her brother dined with her once a-week regularly. He was "quite at my service," but I did not choose to avail myself much of *his* kindness either.

It was the end of April, and already some of our country neighbours were in London—

the Croftons among the first, for Sir John was in Parliament. The time of Kate's marriage approached very closely now. I almost wished—almost expected that it might have taken place at Crofton Manor while I was in London; but, on the contrary, I understood now that it was to be in town. Though this event was nothing to me—could be nothing to me—still, notwithstanding, it urged me somehow to settle and arrange my own plans for the future. I felt as though it was needful for me, in my own consciousness, to set up some determinate act of mine in opposition to it. I set myself accordingly to arrange soberly, and of my own will, my own life.

I had thought a great deal about it first and last. I could come to no better conclusion now than my first natural impulse had led me to. It seemed to me, that so long as there were desolate little children in the world—solitary, unprotected, and without

homes, so long there must be work enough for solitary people like myself shut out from the common ties of nature. I did not mean by this the capricious and unmanageable theory of adoption. I had no intention of selecting one or two for my own particular pleasure, to be brought up like children of my own ; if that had been enough I had already Alice and Clara ; but I did not mean to adopt—I meant to bring up, maintain, and educate, either in my own house or elsewhere, as many as my means would allow me to undertake. When I say that I could find nothing better, I do not mean to imply that I thought of setting forth a plan for general use—general use, I fear, is not a possible thing in such a case. I only decided upon this as the best thing that *I* could do.

One hears a great deal spoken now of the want of work for women ; perhaps there is—perhaps it is hard that sewing, governessing, and novel-writing, should be the whole extent

of the occupations open to feminine efforts. Perhaps maiden ladies might be improved in mind and circumstances by being permitted to attempt surgery, to make watches, or to keep books. I cannot tell, and don't attempt to meddle with the subject; but I think it is the want of natural duties which makes women, perhaps ambitious—perhaps clever—possibly something higher than both—chafe at the narrow round in which they are supposed to be held. I confess I do not believe in that hypothetical woman which has no genius for children; and all the ingenious cravings of extreme civilisation cannot, when you think of them soberly, influence more than a tithe of those human creatures who answer, as a whole, to the impulses and instincts of nature, sooner than to any artificial motive under the sun. I think, for my own part, that to talk about extended means of working for women is a very poor begging of the question. I am not young: I daresay I thought otherwise

once; but now I confess it appears to me that it is only in the natural offices of life that solitary people like myself can find any comfort of this existence. Men somehow harden into habits of selfishness and loneliness (I beg their pardon; I have Mr. Hyde before my eyes), which are more difficult for women. But I think I had rather be Mary in the kitchen, who can do a great deal to keep a whole household in comfort if she chooses, than an individual of superior powers, working at the mechanical work, which has been usually men's work, and earning the dreary men's wages, to indemnify her for her own independence. Independence is a sad enough thing for anybody, but misery for a woman. The poor governess, perennially flused, does, even in novels, live under human shelter still, and have her place in nature, more so than her neighbour and unfortunate fellow labourer, the poor tutor; but so far as my poor wit goes, I see no place in nature

for the female mechanic. Hardship there may be—hardship, though it seems hard to say it, is involved in every circumstance of nature—and I think what we learn best from the experience of life, is to accept those natural hardships and make the best of them, and to forbear from wild endeavours and expedients to escape, which only land us in dilemmas sorer still.

As I have here been seduced into letting loose my opinion, I beg everybody's pardon, and trust that my good friends who are indifferent to my opinion will do me the favour to skip the passage.

It was with these thoughts that I went down, a bewildering journey through that strange Babel called the City, with Matilda and Sophy Nugent towards the place where the fate of Miss Austin's nephew and their *protégée* was about to be decided. My amiable cousins were in a flutter of excitement and importance. They carried with them an embroidered bag, full of folded papers, which

they counted and re-counted with zeal and perseverance, and which, I was given to understand, were proxies for the election. Presently we came to the important scene of this event, and were ushered up a long staircase, patched with the placards of various candidates, with cards of the same tied to the balusters, strewed on tables in the landing places, distributed in every possible corner where they could catch the subscribing eye. The room itself, when we reached to it, was a long room, used for all kinds of purposes—public dinners, public meetings, important committees, charities, and, as in the present case, elections. It was filled with a succession of little tables, each placarded with the name of a candidate, each in possession of some one, agent and representative of the same. “Vote for John Smith, one of seven children, dependent on the mother, who keeps a school.” “Vote for Harriet Johnson; five little brothers and sisters under six years old; no means of

subsistence," with hosts of other polling-bills of like import, aggravated by all the possible details of poverty, met my eye on every side—and my companions made their way hastily through the crowd to a table, where appeared, in colossal letters, the paper which poor Miss Austin had torn into fragments. "Vote for James Tancred, ten years old; both parents dead; two little sisters dependent on an aunt of limited means." This was the present termination of our journey. At this table sat two ladies; one of them Mrs. Austin, one a stranger to me, busily engaged in counting the proxies which they also carried in little carpet bags; and looking out for friends and assistants among the crowd. Upon this crowd I looked with astonished eyes. There were a great many ladies of various kind and degree; some gentlewomen—some rather doubtful imitations of the same; a number of rusty men in black, who looked like agents, to whom this was a profession—with a respectable sprinkling

of comfortable, stout, red-nosed gentlemen, who went about with easy indifference, and their hands in their pockets, and who, Sophy Nugent informed me in a whisper, were “people from the City with *quantities* of votes.” This miscellaneous assemblage circulated about the tables with—after the first surprise was over—a good deal of monotony. Sometimes the buzz of talk brightened with the triumphant declaration of some one that “*my* candidate” was sure ; sometimes a stranger with votes to bestow blundered through the crowd—which encircled him eagerly, anxious to intercept his progress, and turn him each to their own particular table—looking for the name to which he had pledged himself. Sometimes a figure in ringlets and flounces, like my cousins, made her way along the rank, asking us, among the rest, if we had any votes to exchange. I think Mrs. Austin had some ; whereupon there ensued a scene of lively chaffering, in the midst of which I was disturbed by the sudden appa-

rition of a very poor, forlorn-looking woman, in rusty crape and widow's weeds, who held out to me, with a pathetic expression on her hopeless white face, a card, which she did not evidently expect me to take. I had seen her before, making her silent way up and down the room, saying nothing, only holding out her card, and turning that wistful despairing look to eyes far too busy and important to notice it. I held out my hand for it; the poor woman started, paused, her eyes filled; but then she glanced hopelessly at the placard on the table where I was standing, and at my companions, and went on again, on her melancholy way, as if her heart were too sick to allow any hope to enter. *My* heart, which had been growing hard in spite of myself under the influence of this business-like charity, melted in a moment to the one touch of nature. Poor woman! perhaps some other spectator like myself noticed the weary, dragging, noiseless step, the mournful faded

garments, the look of hopeless, melancholy patience; but as for the managers of to-day's business, they were all too busy with their proxies and exchanges, and nobody took any notice of the only real applicant there, whose whole heart was in the "case," for which her pitiful look pleaded.

When this little episode was over, and when the exchange had been negotiated, Mrs. Austin turned to me, with great cordiality; she thanked me for my vote; she trusted soon to see me at her house; she desired to know, in rather a loud tone, whether I had brought my own horses? for she understood it was much better to have job horses—London did wear them out so—and my lovely greys! She was sure she never enjoyed anything more than her visit to Estcourt; and only regretted that Mr. Austin's *devotion* to business, prevented her so often from availing herself of the delightful hospitality of her friends. She hoped Harriet was well, and the dear children;

she trusted they were quite sure to be successful to-day, and have this poor dear boy delightfully provided for. She had come thus far, when she stopped hysterically—cried out, and became deadly pale. Looking round I could see nothing but a sickly looking man, poorly dressed, approaching with feeble haste the table where we were standing. Weak though he looked, he pushed the crowd aside with the vehemence of passion—rushed up to us, thrust Matilda and Sophy aside with one arm, and myself with the other, and tearing down the placard with a force and noise which caused a universal commotion, crushed the fragments in his hands, and threw them furiously in Mrs. Austin's face. She had sunk in her chair, pale, trembling, and powerless.

“Dr. Tancred!” she murmured with her white lips; that was enough to explain the whole scene.

“This is how you dispose of my boy!” cried the resuscitated man. “Could you not

afford to wait, with all your wealth, to see whether I really was dead or alive, before you made a pauper of my boy. Oh, mean, vile, abominable! this is what you call charity; here, take the rubbish," he cried, wildly tossing the bags of proxies from the table. "Nobody shall dare to say he gave his charity to a boy of mine. Where's Harriet, with the others? she's gone to work for them, poor soul; and, answer me, you cheat and hypocrite, where is my boy?"

The frightened woman pointed to me in her panic: he turned upon me instantly; but the man looked so weak, and so inflamed with passion that I hastened to interfere.

"Miss Austin is with me; the children are at school and well," I said, hurriedly. "Had you not better husband your strength for their sake, than waste it here?"

I believe the unfortunate man's brain was bewildered. He caught at one word only of what I said. "Husband!" he muttered in a tone of the most utter despondency. "I'm no

husband ; I'm a widower. Amy, even, could not wait to know the truth. Amy made haste to leave me desolate, and died. Well, never mind ; you are right, whoever you are ; I need not make a show of it all. Madam, you'd better clear these papers away, for I'll come to you to-night to claim my boy."

He went away immediately, leaving after him a gradually subsiding excitement, which leaped into another channel as soon as the eager crowd realised the fact that all these votes lay without an owner. Siege was immediately laid to Mrs. Austin and her coadjutor, who recovered a little under this flattering violence. I saw the poor widow looking on with a wistful look, which grew almost greedy as she saw the means lying almost within her power. Well ! I suppose it was perfectly right, and could not be accomplished otherwise ; yet somehow, my heart failed to be touched, and my mind was not greatly impressed with this phase of the wonderful public charities of London.

CHAPTER XX.

THAT same evening, late, when my good fat hostess had begun to think of the sherry and biscuit, which made her nightly farewell to waking existence, a cab drove up hastily to the door, and I was startled by the arrival of Matilda and Sophy Nugent, extremely eager, excited, and full of news. The first thing they did was to soothe their agitation by violently embracing me, a process which I did not much like. They were in evening dress, without bonnets, displaying their bare arms and shoulders from under the shelter of their cloaks. They both exclaimed simultaneously: "Oh, Cousin Clare! such a scene!" and began to tell the story together with mutual

interruptions and corrections, till I begged to hear it from one. Then Sophy took up the tale; and Sophy's narrative ran thus:

“We were going to Mrs. Austin's to-night—and of course after what had happened we could not have stayed away, lest she should suppose we meant something unkind—and when she was likely to have such a scene to go through, it was a friend's duty to support her, poor thing; besides, I wont deny,” said Sophy, with charming ingenuousness “that I wanted hugely to see the story out. So we went; she was in a great fright and flutter, as may be supposed, nervous, starting at every sound, half thinking she had seen a ghost; and Mr. Austin would not come near her, and would not let her forbid the servants to let Dr. Tancred in. He said it was all her fault, and she must make the best of it; really he *is* a bear! I am sure I do pity a nervous woman who is married. Men have *so* little feeling! Well,

dear, we had sat for a good while, when some one knocked at the door, a strange jerking sort of knock, that no ordinary person could have given. Mrs. Austin knew it in a moment; she turned red and she turned pale, and I thought she would have fallen from her chair. Then he came in; he is quite an interesting looking man, so pale, and with dark eyes, and such splendid black hair. I should think he must have been very handsome once. So then he demanded his boy; and Mrs. Austin began, *in her way, you know*, to make quite a long speech about knowing him to be dead, and what reason had they to think he was alive, and his wife believing it, and a great deal more; and all that he answered was, 'Give me my boy.' So she started again, saying nobody knew when their own children might be orphans, and that was what she and her husband had to look to, and he could not expect them to

maintain his children. Then he fairly thundered at her:—‘ Will you bring me my boy?’ till I got quite frightened, and so did she. She ran out of the room, quite in a tremor, to find little James, to fetch him to his papa, and left us all alone with this terrible man, who died in Australia—really it had quite an effect upon my nerves.”

Sophy paused to take out her smelling bottle. Matilda struck in anxiously:—

“ We spoke to him, poor man, as soon as she was gone. We told him we knew of Miss Austin, and that indeed, cousin Clare, you had taken her on our recommendation,” said Miss Nugent; “ but he never seemed to mind us till I asked him where he was going to take the poor little boy. He quite started when I said that, and stared at me, and looked all about him like a man in a dream, and then he said: ‘ I dont know: anywhere!’ and gave such a sigh. Do you know Clare, I am quite fond

of little James Tancred; I always was; I thought to myself, why should not we do as Clare does; and all at once I told him to take the boy to our house for the night. 'You can come in the morning and arrange where he shall go,' said I; 'but it's late for him to-night, poor child; he ought to be in bed now—only don't mention it to Mrs. Austin.' He stared at me again, then he stared at the card I had just given him, and then went into an odd smile; but he had so little tact, that he actually held the card quite open in his hand when Mrs. Austin came into the room."

"I *stared* at Matilda! I thought she was crazy," cried the lively Sophy; "to think of *us* taking a child, and of a gentleman we didn't know, bringing it to our house so late at night—it was quite daring, almost improper; but it's all through you Clare; and he really is one of the most interesting men!"

“And what of the child?” said I.

“The poor thing was frightened,” said Matilda. “He didn’t know his father, and was afraid of him, which made the poor man more miserable than ever. At last they went away together, and when we came out, a little after, what do you think we found, Clare? That poor man, and that unfortunate little child, walking about in the street, Dr. Tancred holding fast hold of his little boy’s hand, but never saying a word, and the poor child staring up in his face, and looking at all the doors as if he’d would like to go in, and shivering with cold. I never felt so all my life before Clare.”

“Nor I,” said Sophy, with a slight shiver, and in a subdued voice.

“So we stopped our fly and took them in,” said Miss Nugent, blushing a real blush as she thought of the achievement; “and took them to our house—and poor little

James I put to bed, in the little dressing closet—and when we came down stairs, Dr. Tancred had fallen asleep on the sofa—and dear, dear, Clare, what are we to do?”

It was rather a dilemma for these old young ladies. They had been moved quite out of themselves for once in their lives, but it was rather hard to advise them what to do, while they palpitated in their little flutter of excitement, terror and benevolence, fearing lest it might be thought improper, and constantly realizing the immovable figure of the stranger stretched upon their little maidenly sofa. It was a severe penalty 'to pay for their first fit of charity. The only thing that our united wits could hit upon at last, was, that John, whom I had brought with me to London, should go home with them as a protection, and try what he could do with the unfortunate man who had fallen into their hands so strangely, and that Miss Austin should be summoned instantly to

look after her brother-in-law. This was something of a consolation—though what between interest in the stranger, dread lest Mrs. Austin should find it out, fright at their own marvellous achievement, and a lurking sentiment of terrified self-applause behind all, it was not very easy to soothe into quietness the tumult which had arisen in the bosom of my cousins. They left me at last, gratified in the midst of their excitement by the respectful attendance of John, and eager with the novel idea that “something might have happened” since they left home.

“Good-night, my dear,” said my fat old lady, as she followed her maid and candle out of the room. “Good-night, my dear. But I must say I don’t approve of such kinds of charity, especially by young people; there are public institutions, my dear, quantities of them, for the poor. I don’t approve of young ladies taking in strangers;

it would have been thought highly improper when *I* was young."

I was left by myself to cogitate upon this wise deliverance. I did not feel quite comfortable about the affair myself, it must be confessed; I thought it imprudent, incautious—yet who shall say? One cannot be cautious and prudent, when one's fellow-creature is perishing.

CHAPTER XXI.

THIS incident, so unusual and so much out of their way, was a rather serious one, as it turned out, for the Misses Nugent. The unfortunate emigrant, who had returned to find his wife dead and his little boy a candidate for a charitable institution, did not leave their astonished household for weeks. He fell ill; he had a violent brain fever, very severe and dangerous; his frame had been thoroughly weakened before, by the malady of which he had been supposed to die, and for a long time his life hung in the balance. It is scarcely possible to imagine the effect this extraordinary disturbance of their life had upon my good-natured

cousins. They could not comprehend it at first. Then their ideas of "propriety," the habits of their self-regarding existence, which hitherto had not opened wide enough to admit any one save themselves, the usages of their maidenly and restricted *menage*, all rose up in rebellion against so sudden and unlooked-for an intrusion. But they had human hearts within them after all; helplessness, total and friendless, appealed to them with a force above all arguments. They submitted to give up even their ordinary customs, and put themselves to countless little bits of trouble for the unfortunate stranger. They no longer set out after the frugal "something" which they called lunch, but which answered all the purposes of dinner, on a weary long afternoon's work of visiting, making calls upon all their acquaintance. To do this grand business of their lives, one sister had to be sufficient now; while one, with much im-

portance, kept the house "in case anything should happen." "Fancy *me* going out to make calls by myself!" cried Sophy, holding up her hands and drooping her head, which pantomime was her favourite imitation of bashfulness; "but really, Clare, we are obliged to do it now—one of us must stay at home, having such a responsibility on us."

I had called upon them, with a message from Lady Greenfield, who had just arrived in town from her bridal tour—and Dr. Tancred's illness had by this time taken a favourable turn. Their responsibility, moreover, was lightened by the presence of Miss Austin, who had come to take charge of her brother-in-law at the beginning of his fever—but this, though it relieved their delicate fears of impropriety, did not make them less sensible of the extreme importance of their own care and constant presence in the house.

“I am sorry for that,” said I; “for I am commissioned to ask you to dinner, and I trusted you could both go—”

“To dinner—to Harley Street! really, Clare, it is so kind of you,” said Sophy, with no particular readiness. I saw she did not much care for *that* effort of hospitality.

“Not to Harley Street. Lady Greenfield has come back,” said I, “and wishes to assemble once more, as she says, the same delightful party we had at Christmas. You must try to go.”

“Lady Greenfield — Oh! *Eleanor!* Upon my word!” said Matilda. “I think she is very insulting, cousin Clare.—A *delightful* party! she means that for a sneer at you.”

“Was it not a delightful party?” said I, laughing.

“Oh, charming! but one knows exactly what she means,” cried Sophy, eagerly. “She wants to show us all how different she is now. I daresay this will be quite a splen-

did affair. Oh, *I* know her ways.—She wants to be quite a great lady, and generous to her poor relations. I know Eleanor so well; so different from you, dear Clare!”

As this climax was accompanied by the sudden enthusiasm of a half embrace, my composure was disturbed a little. But both sisters were quite excited by the news.

“I suppose she’ll have all the people who used to ask *her*,” said Matilda, with perhaps a sympathetic consciousness of what she herself would do under the same circumstances, “just to show them how well she is married, and to have a little triumph. Well! I am sure I wish her joy of her good fortune; but *I* should not have married Sir Willoughby, had he been Duke of Devonshire, a rude country squire!”

“I daresay she’ll wear her diamonds, and have all the plate up for the occasion; or are they in a hotel, Clare?” said Sophy. “And poor Sir Willoughby will have his big

brooch. Well, I must say, for my part, I *do* pity Eleanor; a woman of her taste! But I should certainly like to go."

"Should you?" said Matilda, shrugging her shoulders. "But of course it is quite natural at your age—and, my dear child, you shall go. I'll stay at home, and take care of everything, and I really should be pleased that one of us was there."

This was the beginning of a most disinterested and sisterly discussion, each striving to yield the pleasure to the other, which I interrupted rather disrespectfully, by asking why they should not both go; whereupon both sisters turned upon me.

"Clare! do you think that I *could* prefer pleasure to *duty*?" said Matilda, with severe virtue.

"Oh Clare, you thoughtless darling! you forget what a responsibility we have, with an invalid in the house," cried Sophy, tapping me on the hand in lively reproof.

It was arranged accordingly that Sophy should be the representative sister on this occasion, and should accompany me. Sir Willoughby had taken his bride to a house in one of the squares, which I fear she did not entirely approve of; one of those heavy magnificent places just settling down on this side of the fashion, which "county families" affect, and brides of taste and aspiring minds, do not. Such as it was, however, it was in very good hands, and was made the most of. I don't know who it belonged to; but, under Lady Greenfield's skilful government, it had, already, in a week, come to look quite like an ancient family mansion, the "town house" of the race. My fat old lady was invited with me, and Sophy joined us, radiant in white, with blush roses in her hair, and "simple" ornaments, like a girl of eighteen.

I was mortified, though I could not help

a smile, for I knew very well that the family affection which was about to meet us in the persons of Lady Greenfield and Mr. Hyde, would be but too happy to laugh at Sophy. The house in the square, was illuminated from top to bottom; *that* was Sir Willoughby—but he did not have his diamond brooch, and my lady was not resplendent with jewels, as Sophy expected. Though she could not quite rule her new husband to her standard, everything else, in Lady Greenfield's hands, was in the "most exquisite taste."

Her party was not very large, but it was chosen with skill, perhaps only too apparent. There was an Indian General and his daughter, who in their day, had noticed the poor Captain's widow; and to confuse these amiable people, and put them into the back-ground, there was a baroneted soldier, high in command, who had won battles in his day, and was delighted to

pay his homage to the pretty new wife of his old school-fellow. Then came once again the Croftons, country neighbours; and an old Lord Frederick, of the same class as Mr. Hyde, to humiliate that gentleman, while for my especial behoof appeared Edward Nugent, who made me an appalling bow, and noticed me no more. The remainder of the party was made up in the same manner, an old friend and a new one, the new being specially selected to dazzle and over-awe the old.

Not more than half of the guests had arrived when we entered the room. My lady came up to us with her soft step, took our hands lightly, touched our cheeks in succession, and thought it was so kind of us to come! while Sir Willoughby, coming forward, grasped both my hands and shook them heartily.

“Glad to see you, Clare; glad to have a peep at a home face. How’s all in

the country, eh? Polly, poor old woman! I've not seen her these three months; jilted her as sure as life—but a man can do nothing when he's in chains and fetters; eh, Nell, what do you say?"

"Fie, Sir Willoughby!" said my lady, tapping him sharply with her fan; "you are so busy talking to Clare, that you don't see cousin Sophy. Sophy, dear, you remember Sir Willoughby?"

"Oh *perfectly!*," cried Sophy, with unquestionable meaning.

"Got the advantage of me, mum," said Sir Willoughby. "I took you for Kate Crofton's younger sister. Glad to see every friend of my lady's—and *now* I remember! Dress makes a deal of difference, as pooty women know."

Sophy did not know whether to blush and be ashamed, or to smile upon the compliment; but Sir Willoughby did not mean to make her uncomfortable, though

he could not help indulging in his kind of wit, such as it was, at her expense. He found a place for her immediately, between Lady Crofton and a person of fashion, who looked with dismay upon Sophy's white flounces—to the extreme confusion of my lady, who had kept that place for a much more distinguished guest; immediately after which achievement, Sir Willoughby called his brother-in-law "Ned" to my side, evidently thinking he was meeting the wishes of both parties. Mr. Edward stood over me, a very sulky sentry, till the master of the house was out of the way, and then withdrew to strike up a very brisk flirtation with a young lady at my right hand, by which proceeding, I presumed, my amiable relation hoped to mortify me.

The dinner was like everything else, in "perfect taste." There was a great display of plate, as Sophy had predicted,

and beautiful flowers, of which Lady Greenfield said carelessly, "Yes, we had them up from Fenosiers. I believe the gardener there is quite clever, and has everything delightfully out of season."

The Indian General and his daughter, who sat on opposite sides, of the table, exchanged glances at this speech; she raising her eyebrows a little, while he smiled. She was a pretty woman of thirty, composed and intelligent, and I could see her glance rapidly up and down the table from Sir Willoughby to his wife, with doubtless her own reflections; for our host and hostess were an odd enough contrast to each other, and poor Sir Willoughby, without intending it, did all he could to aggravate my lady. By some unlucky chance he caught the point of all Mr. Hyde's amiable and refined sarcasms, but was obliged to have every one of Lord Frederick's explained to him, in a manner most humiliating to that rival

wit and ancient beau. Then Sophy, one of the most unconsidered guests at the table, had been placed not far from the wrong hand of the baronet, who, moved with a kindly impulse, paid a great deal of good-humoured attention to his new relative, finding her ear and smile always ready for those jokes of his, which were not the most refined in the world. Lady Greenfield's angry glances, travelling down the whole length of the table, fell quite innocently upon her unconscious husband; who "liked his joke" as he himself said, "but meant no harm," and, was utterly unaware of the amiable malice of his wife's intentions. Finally Sir Willoughby crowned his misdemeanors, later in the evening, when the gentleman joined us up-stairs, by leading his warlike acquaintance, the great commander, up to "my lady's old friend," the Indian General's daughter, whom this lion of the evening seemed very well disposed to make

himself agreeable to. I saw Lady Greenfield tap her husband with her fan, rather more sharply than became her self-command, and I think her glance might have consumed the unconscious soldier, had he been less used to such artillery.

“You dear old blunderer!” I heard her say to her husband aside. “What did you do that for? She’s no friend of mine; I don’t want to gratify her vanity. I shall get *so* vexed with you!”

“My dear Nell! why did you ask her?” said the innocent Sir Willoughby.

“To see what a good husband I had got, and how happy I was; she used to patronize me when I was poor,” cried my lady, ingenuously. Oh, vanity! Thy name is *not* woman. The delighted new husband kissed my lady’s hand, and went off to disturb, in his fox-hunting fashion, the interesting conversation which did not please his sovereign mistress; for which

good turn, the General's daughter repaid Lady Greenfield with her intelligent eyes.

All this time, while I noticed the bye-play going on round me, what does any one suppose was my own fate in this happy party? I was sitting by Kate Crofton, listening to all her happy confidences. She began to tell me of Craven Lodge, what a delightful little house it would be. She begged my advice about it, hoping I would come *so* often—she bent down whispering with the bloom of her young happiness on her young face, and her cheek almost touching mine—and I—I listened. I began to feel dully aggravated, impatient of the whole matter. I could see Lady Crofton watch her daughter and myself curiously. *She* knew well enough; she might have warned Kate, had there been any kindness in her; but no—that would have been still worse; so I sat and listened, with a heat of resent-

ment and impatience stealing over my heart; and Sophy kissed dear Eleanor, and thanked her for "such a delightful evening!" when we came away.

CHAPTER XXII.

IT was June when I left London; I came home, sadly against the inclinations of the Misses Nugent, who, now that their patient was getting better, began to look forward to the agreeable task of amusing me, and doing the honours of a season in town to my inexperience. They had quite lost their friend Mrs. Austin, whose peace of mind had been greatly disturbed by the illness of Dr. Tancred, and his refuge in the house of her accommodating acquaintances; but I think this "sacrifice," gave quite a zest to all the other excitements and troubles of this startling incident in their quiet life. "I believe it is quite impossible, in this wicked world, to do

good without suffering for it, Clare," said Miss Nugent; "and we cannot expect to be exempted;" so I think they quite enjoyed this little bit of martyrdom.

Dr. Tancred, however, was unquestionably recovering, and Miss Austin was to follow me in a week. Just at this time, Miss Austin was not remarkably amiable. She was extremely "put out," by the reappearance of her brother-in-law, who seemed to be indeed a very useless person, one of those men, without nerve or purpose, who are always unsuccessful. "He will snatch the children from school—have them to live with him—bring them up to shifts and disorderly poverty," said the governess, with quiet exasperation; "and what can any one do against their father?" So, though she nursed him faithfully, Miss Austin was not much elated in her mind by the recovery of her patient. "The most shocking idea! as if the poor man should have died to please her!" Matilda Nugent

said, with great horror. "She might have had her wish, if we had not met him that night; or if dear Matilda had been less courageous," echoed Sophy, solemnly; and I believe they were right enough in their self-applause.

I did not leave town alone. I carried with me a shy and doubtful little train, four little girls, whom it had been my principal errand in London to select and take charge of. They were all orphans and destitute; I thought it best to undertake only this number at first, till I found how my plan answered; and my hope was to make a family feeling and bond of common affection among the desolate little creatures, who had no other home. I was very full of solicitude and anxiety on the subject; I meant to give my life to it henceforward, and to do what I could to work out my own problem. Hopes of extreme influence over them, of moulding their characters, of making them model women, or examples to

the world, did not, I confess, trouble my imagination; I meant to make them happy children if I could, and to bring them up in the common duties, common hopes, and in the one faith, to take their part where God guided them, in common life.

Immediately after reaching Estcourt, I had to go to Mrs. Harley and explain to her my motives and conduct, which explanation resulted in a rather painful scene. The widow was grieved and disappointed, and "did not expect it of me;" but she did not go so far as to withdraw her children. I still kept conscientiously to my first idea respecting Alice and Clara; *they* were the children of the house; they still had their room close to mine, and kept their familiar privileges; but their mother could not bear to see the other children, poor city sparrows! drawing breath in the park at Estcourt, and resented their introduction as a slight to her girls. Notwithstanding this—and foolish, as it was, it

affected me—I went on steadily with my arrangements; the children had plain little apartments appropriated to them, and plain dresses, which I took pleasure in having made in good fashion and various, that no one might suspect me of wishing to give them a uniform; I gave all these details a jealous attention; for I did not mean to cheat them with a few years' luxury, or unfit them by unwise kindness, for their real position in common life.

The neighbourhood was very still and quiet at this time; even the lesser gentry who contented themselves with a fortnight in town, took that fortnight now. Fen-Osiers, for the first time during twenty years, was shut up and deserted; and I, without even Miss Austin to bear me company, could not help recalling with considerable vividness, my first dreary time of solitude, ere I had roused myself from my great grief; yes, here I was, and here was my life. I had found it impossible to make a

family out of such discordant materials as those scattered Nugents, whom I had once thought of uniting under this family roof; and now for my second experiment—my little family of orphan children; but they were still shy little strangers, half afraid of me; and I had yet to prove, whether this second trial *could* succeed.

The only neighbour within reach was Miss Polly; she had taken up her abode in the old jointure house, which was a pretty place, retired and pleasant, within easy distance of the village. I believe Miss Polly was happier than she had ever been; she had her niece with her, a gentle little widow, whose whole heart was in the two delicate babies, whom it was so hard to believe could belong to such a child; for I don't think Emy was twenty-one even now. When I went to see them, I could not help remembering for the first time, that in all my calculations of useless solitary people, where there were so many, it had

never occurred to me to remember Miss Polly among the list. She was just as lonely as the rest of us; she had not seen it necessary to make "responsibilities" for herself, as I had done; yet at Fen-Osiers and at her own house, the old lady somehow held a natural place, an unremarkable but unmistakable influence; no one could tell of anything "out of the common," any piece of voluntary heroism, or visible self-sacrifice in all her quiet life; yet there she was, always doing something—a referee in difficulties innumerable, a simple plain solution of this problem, which had teased me so long—simple! which means that it was natural to her, and to sundry others; but entirely unteachable, and beyond the comprehension of all who had not the natural gift.

I thought over this and it humbled me, driving home from Miss Polly's. I, then, much as I had said about it, had not this natural gift. My heart was rather heavy as I went

along the sunny way, returning to my orphan children. My life was before me now, fully arranged and planned out; a life in which I must at least be of use to somebody, if something did not frustrate all my purposes. If only this marriage were over! I thought of its delay with impatience, as a personal injury; why keep an affair to which nobody had any objection so long in suspense? it was like dallying with the security of their happiness. It was nothing to me; yet I thought I could be easier in my mind, freer for my work, if only this event was completed. Then, at least, it would no longer stand before me a thing to be looked forward to; and my weakness was such that I could not help looking forward to it; folly! but folly I suppose, like misfortune, disappointment, and calamity, is one of the things which life is made of. I could not separate this miserable weakness from my heart. But when it was over, when they were married and settled, a county family

like other people; when, perhaps, I saw one of them descended out of the clouds, to be an ordinary man, then I could very well make up my mind to it; then, indeed, it would be nothing to me; and then I could see Mary once more—Mary, my dear old girlish *confidante*. It was at thought of her that the tears came.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SHORTLY after Miss Austin returned home ; her brother-in-law was as well as a man with a shattered constitution and a weak mind was like to be. He had promised to allow the girls to remain at school, she told me, but was to carry the little boy with him to a little country town, where there was "an opening for a general practitioner."

This Miss Austin reported with a certain grim irony ; she knew what would come of it. But she did not tell me what I heard afterwards, that Dr. Tancred had made a "proposal" to Matilda Nugent, offering himself to her acceptance, in gratitude for her kindness ; Matilda had the good sense to say "No," but

liked it notwithstanding. I can't tell whether it was the first affair of the kind to my good-hearted cousin, but I suspect every woman who does not marry, is pleased to have it in her power to refuse some one—vindicating thereby her womanly privileges, if not to other people, at least to herself.

Thus we settled down at once into regular habits; Miss Austin's schoolroom was busy and populous, and when the working day was over, the children were free to escape into the park and garden, where the little things luxuriated, growing healthier, rosier, and stronger every day.

Alice and Clara, who stood a little on their dignity at first, gradually melted into companionship with the others; I think, without vanity, that a happier little party of school-girls could scarcely be, and I took care that they were not broken in upon by strangers, nor kept for exhibition. They lived as privately, as plainly, and were as much accus-

tomed to help themselves, and do the ordinary little duties of their position, as if they had still been in the homes from which I brought them.

There were only six of us. I could not, what with travelling, party-giving, marriage presents, and the aid which I could not but give to the Nugents to cover the expenses of their patient, afford a larger household now.

Thus we had made our beginning comfortably, and to the satisfaction of everybody, save Mrs. Harley, when I received a letter from Kate Crofton; I could not help a pang of indignation, wonder, and mortified feeling, when I read it; it was a very kind and pressing invitation, begging me to be present at her bridal—me!—The idea made me speechless, but roused a ferment in my mind which I could not calm down. Was it possible then, that she knew nothing, or rather that her mother knew nothing, of how things had

been? Nay; I knew Lady Crofton was aware of all that happened years ago; could she mean to insult me, this cold-blooded, well-bred woman?

At first I resented it passionately. It looked like a cool deliberate assault on my temper and my pride—but, by-and-by, I thought better of it. People seldom do such things without a motive—I do not believe in gratuitous malice—and motive there was none; Kate, I knew to be as true and frank as ever girl was; *he*, of course, could have no part in it; and all that connected his former story and mine, must have died out of everybody's remembrance—*that* must be the explanation.

So much the better!—yet I felt humiliated to think that I alone dwelt in secret upon this old story, which all the world had forgotten; that it had slipped so entirely out of the memory of himself, and all those most near to him, that I could be invited to his wedding—while still *I* was thinking upon it,

brooding over it, day by day; I felt a chill strike to my heart at the thought. Was it really so far off, so long ago?—or rather was it not all a dream, an impossible delusion, the fancy of a fever? Heaven preserve the troubled brain which has to think all these things without the relief of saying them! I lived blankly in a kind of torpor, all that day.

The next day I wrote to Kate Crofton; I wished her all the tender wishes which should attend such a bride; I prayed God's blessing upon her and her husband—but told her that many circumstances united in making it impossible for me to be present at her marriage. I did even more than this; I gave her an account, playfully—feeling quite strengthened and able to do so—of my present occupations; of the desire I had to establish and conclude upon the future tenor of my life, and of the family with which I had provided myself.

I entered very much into detail; there was

a satisfaction in it. I meant to imply that if one of us had made a new life for himself, so had the other; I meant her to tell him of it; I wished that he should know the change in my plans, at the time when I knew that *his* were decided. And, along with this letter, I sent Kate the present I had prepared for her.

It was a little jewelled cross, attached to a very richly-wrought chain, the links of which were joined at intervals with emeralds. It could be worn either as a bracelet or a necklace. It was a fancy I had; I thought nothing was so suitable from me, as that emblem of suffering and endurance—though I pray God lay the cross lightly upon Kate Crofton's life!

Then that new incident was over; the marriage itself was to be in a week, and Mary was to be there. So I went into the week, and began to live through it, knowing it was not one hour to be got over, but a succession

of nights and days, full of eating and sleeping, walks and needlework, the supervision of my orphan children and my household affairs. One has to order dinner all the same, whatever happens. A strange comment on the real prevailing greatness of common necessities, and the transitory and passing nature of human calamities, however great.

But this marriage which was coming, strained all my senses—I seemed to be always listening for it, looking for it; it mingled, somehow, in what was said to me, in everything that passed at Estcourt. It made the days unnaturally long, for one thing, and raised in me such a strange restless feeling of impatience. All life and time afterwards looked calm as a lake, but there was this fretting rugged passage, this fiery and precipitous rapid, to be surmounted first.

One good thing was, that no one was here who knew anything of the matter, or could chafe me with wonders and inquiries; I had

no one individual in the world, to whom it would have eased me to tell the story of this long vigil of mine, which indeed nobody would have understood.

So I waited on quietly, enduring a good deal of self-contempt, and sometimes smiling at myself bitterly enough, yet without sufficient power or sufficient energy to resist it; waited, straining all my mind towards that one event, thinking of little else—looking for it as if it determined *my* existence instead of Kate Crofton's—as, heaven knows, it might have done, had all been well.

Then I was glad that they were dead; glad and grateful, and blessed their memories, lying in that dear happiness of rest in the family grave. They would have fretted their tender hearts with blame of themselves; I, in my secret thoughts, might have reproached them; others might have spoken unjustly of the father and mother who could not part with their only child. But that was all safe;

they were dead, and the story was forgotten. Lady Crofton had permitted her daughter to ask me to the wedding, and every sensible mind, even among country gossips, had forgotten it—all but me.

So I waited for the day—thinking that thankfulness and content, and the quiet, yet busy course of my new life, lay undisturbed beyond it; that only when this was over, all would be well.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It was the marriage day.

After so long a period of expectation, my restlessness and subdued excitement had come to a climax. I could not be still anywhere; as for self-control and restraint, I abandoned the hope of them; sometimes it is well to give way. I made no longer any effort after the proper feelings, the right sentiment of the time; I had no feeling whatever that I can describe, except an intense uneasy restlessness, a strange consciousness that to be quiet was the one thing utterly impossible. I think I should have been glad even of Mrs. Herbert's insinuations, or the inquiries of Sophy and Matilda. To be left all to myself

as I was, for the long, slow morning, Miss Austin, with her pupils in the schoolroom, and I alone in our little morning parlour, hearing the subdued domestic sounds of the house—hearing now and then the echo of a child's voice, or a servant's foot on the stairs; but perfectly still in my own apartment—stifled by this oppression of calm and leisure and silence, without even an impertinent talker to rouse me into command of myself. It was unbearable. I started at last out of my retirement, with a wild idea of throwing away all restraint. It was the wisest thing after all; to be just as restless, just as unquiet as was the mood upon me; to carry out its caprice of motion and haste, its incapacity for quiet. "Then I shall be tired out to-morrow," I said to myself, with a sigh of longing for that time. So I went out, wandering through the woods and park, saying nothing—thinking nothing; only unable to keep still.

In the afternoon this feeling had increased

so strongly upon me that I set out, by myself and on foot, to the Craven Woods; I wanted to see Craven Lodge once before they came to it—Craven Lodge!—the old scene and dwelling-place of my old dreams. It was three miles off, but I felt no fatigue. I hastened through these luxuriant woods, gay in the rustling leafage of June. I did not remark the streams of dropping sunshine, the deep umbrage of delicious shade. I went along softly, yet swiftly, by those banks of mossy fertile soil, mounded and interwoven with great roots of trees, where the wood sorrel hung its delicate leaves, and the ground was blue with wild hyacinths. But I never lingered to notice them. I went forward steadily, as if with a purpose, to Craven Lodge.

Strange! and I had no purpose at all, except to look at it. It was greatly changed since I saw it last. The place was sweet with early honeysuckles and roses; the windows open, the lawn bright with clumps of flowers.

In the white curtains waving at the windows, in the glimpse through them into rooms prepared and daintily habitable; in the flowers and the freshness, and the look of ornament and joy about the place, there was a tender human sentiment which struck me through all my haste and discontent; and when I heard the voice of the woman in charge calling loudly to the children not to touch the flowers, and the harsh tones of the father, half gruff, half kindly, adding, "Them's for young master and missis when they come home," I turned away with changed feelings. What is the past and its troubles to the budding and blossoming earth which is always young? I grew indignant at myself, as I took my last look at the bride's house, which stood ready to welcome her. Why shadow a good event with my own poor repinings and recollections forsooth, as though those gave me a superior footing—a place above the brighter lives? Blessing and joy to to-day, and to all who

were glad in it! let yesterday and to-morrow care for themselves.

So saying, I turned out of the wood into the dusty high road, in this June sunset. There I had not gone far when I met Miss Polly in her stiff man's hat and ancient riding-habit, and on the tall old grey which had been her steed for years. Miss Polly rode, rather disconsolately, with a groom a long way behind her, while more incongruous than ever looked the mild old woman's face, and the masculine dress and occupation.

"I find I miss my exercise, Clare," said Miss Polly, bending towards me from her lofty steed; "so I take a constitutional, my dear, every day." Poor Miss Polly, who had galloped for twenty years by the side of Sir Willoughby over all the rough ground in the country, went off solemnly at a walking pace—her tall figure, on the tall horse, looming strangely against the summer sky—after she had confided to me in passing this little

distress of hers. I paused in my own foolishness to look after her and smile; it was a distress, though it was a ludicrous one, and I could not help thinking of the time when Sir Willoughby and his sister left Estcourt together, he looking back to wave his hand to Mrs. Herbert; she rather affronted with him, and a little troubled about the widow; whereas, now Miss Polly stalked away silently into the sunset, throwing a gigantic shadow behind her, her horse's long legs "spindling into longitude immense," as the disconsolate old hunter curbed its steps into that doleful walk. I daresay Miss Polly, and perhaps the hunter, were thinking, too, of the past; and I smiled and went on thinking to myself that there were many people in the world who would smile at me for this day's pilgrimage, and that by-and-by, perhaps, I might even join their mirth. Even now, looking back upon that wonderful day, I smile at the thought of Miss Polly's constitutional ride, and the old horse

stalking gravely into the sunset; it is strange to carry such a remembrance among other thoughts so unlike.

But what with the bright face of Craven Lodge, prepared for its young mistress, and what with Miss Polly's exercise, I got out of my fever a little and came into a more human condition. Then I began to think—it was a strange medley; I thought of him in his new circumstances—I wondered if remembrance of me ever crossed his thoughts—and at the same moment I thought, with a sensation of comfort, of the life which I had begun. These two ideas came both together, jostling each other, without a moment's interval between them. I should see him, too, in his family, and he would see me in mine; and at the same instant it occurred to me that I had forgotten some piece of work I was busy about, and would be too late to see the children at play in the park when I returned. I knew by this maze and confusion of thought that

my strength was very nearly gone, and I was glad ; I thought of sleep, with an anticipation of repose, deep, soft and refreshing. I remembered, with a very glow of gratitude, that blessed unconsciousness which is "tired nature's best restorer." I went slowly along, pleasing myself with thoughts of the night's repose, feeling how grateful it would be to my wearied limbs and my tired heart. I went quite softly, with lingering steps, and a mind too much fatigued to be unhappy ; and it was in this soothed and wearied mood that I passed into our own park.

It was nearly midsummer—glorious weather—and not a shower or a cloud had broken all that day the perfect beatitude of June. Against the ruddy western sky, which gleamed through them and behind, the trees stood out with a refreshed and brightened green. All over that expanse of sky were droppings of red gold, which burned through the foliage with the intensest glory ; and where these fiery

bits of radiance had begun to fade, falling fainter from the paling skies, long narrow peninsulas of cloud stretched out with an unspeakable calm into that wonderful pale sea. It was an evening full of infinite content, yet touched with a wistful human longing. The height and fullness of summer time and natural beauty, yet looking in the silence for something more glorious unrevealed.

When I was struck with sudden resentment to see a stranger—a man—standing under one of the trees. I became angry with a quite sharp sudden unexplainable pang of impatience. Who was he? and of all places in the world what did he *there*? It was a sacred tree in its way; I never stood under its shadow myself—never willingly permitted any one else to do so. What did this intruder *there*?

I quickened my pace unconsciously. I did not even look, as I might have done, to see if I could recognise the offender. I made sure he was either the rector or the doctor, or pos-

sibly some one from Estbury about some affair of business. I hurried up to tell him he must not stand there—that I was ready to hear his business, whatever it was—that my house was the place to wait for me. In my haste and foolish anger I threw away even the common protection of an undisturbed mind. I came up to him perfectly unprepared—quite defenceless; at the sound of my hasty step, but not till I was close to him, he turned round upon me. Heaven help us!—Derwent Crofton!

I did not shriek nor fall down; but my eyes grew fiery hot, and something tingled and fluttered, and buzzed in my ears, so that I could hear nothing. There he stood—Derwent Crofton!—looking as he used to look; standing where he used to stand; gazing at me with his lover's eyes. Oh, heaven! Oh, earth! Oh, life, most wonderful! was this the ending of the dream?

“Clare!”

I think that was all he said; I remember

no more. I said, the words falling out of my mouth like sobs, and with scarcely power enough to say them, "Don't stand there; I cannot tell why you should come to me; but not there—at least, not there!"

I suppose this wounded him somehow, though I could not tell why. He stepped aside, but I could not move; then he returned. The singing and fluttering in my ears was so great, I scarcely knew how to keep my footing. "Clare," he cried again; "You will faint!" I almost thought I should; but the thought saved me. "No," said I—"no—it is only surprise: never mind, I shall be well presently;" and I got well, because I would.

He kept standing there watching me—watching the colour change in my face, as if he had a right to do it—looking on with a kind of impatient steadiness, as if it was only for my sake that he bore this delay. "Clare! come now—you are better—don't trifle with me!" he cried at last with a quick breath

and a flush of agitation. Then, when he saw my startled look—"You are surprised; good heaven! *surprised!* did you think it was in the nature of man to be in England and not here?"

It was time I had some command of myself, for he was losing his. I said—it was best to say the truth—"I have been thinking of you all day, and wishing you well; but you know that I know all that has happened this morning; is it strange that I should be surprised?"

He looked at me blankly for a moment, and then shook his head. "These are riddles," he said, hastily; "I don't know them; they will do for greater leisure. Clare, I don't know why we parted—I did not ask—I accepted your decision knowing it must be. I have blamed no one—least of all do I blame anyone now; but everything is changed; you are not as you were; you were my first love—I was yours—and what now?"

Oh, my heart! was the man speaking blasphemy? I held up my hands to stop him—but I could not have spoken for my life.

“Clare, listen to me; I came home with Mary to little Kate’s wedding, but I had no heart for weddings. I came down here—I have been waiting hours for you here. I do not know what perverse fate has kept me so long in this terrible suspense; but for pity’s sake say something now!”

I could not help it—I fell upon the tree, sobbing, weeping—overpowered like a child. I pressed my forehead against the rough bark and threw my arms round it to steady me. I cried like an infant audibly. I never knew till then how I had suffered this day.

He was alarmed, impatient—quite perplexed. He drew my hand away from the oak and tried to soothe me. He could not comprehend my strange passion and helplessness. I heard his voice like something far off, saying that he would not vex me thus again; that he would

rather suffer himself than move me so; that he would wait till I was stronger; while all the time he held my hand in a sorrowful astonished clasp, as if he did not know what to do with it, whether to hold it firmly as his own, or to drop it as the hand of a stranger. When I had eased my heart, and was able, I raised myself up and turned to him again.

“Derwent, I thought you were Kate’s husband,” I said humbly. I stood before him, crying, agitated, humbled, having betrayed myself. He, angry, triumphant, tyrannous, seized upon me like a hostage. I do not think he asked—I am sure I said nothing more; it seemed all needless, vain—what was there to say? I could not make out nor tell his burst of wrath at the idea, his flush of victory over my secret grief; for he was not magnanimous nor placid of temper. He was furious to think I could have believed it—indignant at anybody who could be supposed to share in the delusion. Yet, triumphant beyond measure,

over proof so unquestionable (as he thought) of the state of my feelings. When he found out, by degrees, my secret expedition to Craven Lodge, he fairly shouted, and threw up his travelling cap in the air.

“But I suppose I must show your regiment of women the respect of proper decorum,” he said, as he drew my arm within his own; “fortunately, they all knew me at Estcourt, and wished me luck. Seriously, Clare, you can’t wonder to find a man half crazy after all this. To suppose *your* lover could have married Kate Crofton—ridiculous! absurd!”

“Why so?” said I.

He gave me a thundering look, half fond, half angry, which melted as he kept looking at me; for I daresay I was pale, and looked worn out. “Come in and rest,” he said, drawing my shawl closer around me; “you have walked too far, Miss Nugent; you are fatigued. What, Clare, do you look grave?”

may I not have my triumph? I deserve it, after all these years."

But I was ashamed, for all that, and did not like to hear any more about it, though my limbs ached with that foolish walk, which I would not have told him of, had I been prudent. We went along silently after that, towards the house. The gold had faded quite out of the sky, and in the pale heaven before us, there was one star—when we were nearly home, Derwent stopped abruptly and looked up.

"Clare, their eyes are clear; they are pleased now," he said, with solemnity: mine were dim, yet I could see the star shining out of God's heaven where they were. Yes, now that all the harm was over, I felt in my heart that they blessed us, in their better wisdom, and thanked God.

CHAPTER XXV.

I CANNOT tell how my thoughts were the morning after this eventful interview. I don't mean respecting *it*, of course, for one generally keeps one's emotions of that description for one's own private entertainment. But when I came down stairs and saw the six little girls at breakfast, I confess my heart failed me. What of my life, which I had planned out for myself? What of those six little "responsibilities?" What of the expectations I had raised of my own future work and existence? I blushed in spite of myself with painful shame, as they all bade me good morning—blushed uncomfortably under the eye of steady Miss Austin, who pursued *her* way

without divergence, and knew no change in the plans of her grey and sober life. I was vexed with myself for never having thought of this before; troubled to remember that Derwent did not know it—and dismayed to think of my letter to Kate Crofton, over which, doubtless, that saucy little person would make merry, when the change in those firm and particular plans of mine became known. Oh, consistency! when one comes to be nearly thirty, and to be “respected,” one loves to preserve one’s character; and I almost thought I could hear Mrs. Herbert’s malicious laugh, and a coarse chuckle from her new husband. To be rather happy, and conscious of a warmth and ease at my heart, which had not been there for years, I was in as troubled and uncomfortable a state as it is possible to conceive.

And then Derwent was not philanthropical. He was kind, generous, liberal; but the uses of benevolence had not fallen upon him, and

he was not accustomed to the idea. Alas! my leisure and freedom were gone, while my occupation remained; and I knew very well that whatever people said before, everybody would agree now that these half dozen children were ridiculously out of place, and that I, their volunteer guardian, had placed myself in a somewhat absurd position. I thought it all over to the utmost of my ability, but could make very little of it. Of our private plans, of course, nothing was yet arranged; and I was obliged unwillingly to confess to myself, that the disposal of my orphans must greatly depend upon the settlement of those other matters, which I could not think of without embarrassment, and in which I certainly could not take the initiative.

When he came that day, Mary was with him; I was so overjoyed that I forgot my perplexity. She told me he had travelled post all night to London, and had compelled her to start with him, at an unheard-of hour this

morning. "Mary is to stay," he said, in his arbitrary fashion; "because I mean to come to Estcourt, Clare;" and when that was said, remembering what an advantage he had over me, and what an entire want of generosity he showed in using it, I felt that I had very little leisure or respite to look for; but must make up my mind to the consequences of my self-betrayal without delay.

I confided my difficulties to Mary, and she laughed at them. Presently afterwards came Derwent, rather cloudy. "You had more confidence in Mary than in me," said this tyrant, looking at me, as if he should like to administer correction. "I'll be head master of the concern, if that will please you;" and I fear I did not think of consistency much more.

The sum of the whole is, that shortly after, the thing being inevitable, we were married; that the Nugents sent me presents, and loves, and tender wishes, beyond counting; that I got a pretty piece of jewellery, so like the

present I made *her*, that I almost thought at the first glance she had returned it—from Sir Willoughby and Lady Greenfield; and that Miss Polly kissed me, and whispered in my ear, that she had prayed for this for years. Dear old Miss Polly! I dare say she had thought upon us in her prayers on the very morning of that day, when she and her tall old horse interposed a comic incident between my visit to Craven Lodge and my meeting with Derwent; and I smiled again, though the tears were in my eyes.

We went to Hilfont, Derwent's place; he had a large property there, and I thought it right that we should reside at it. I say *I*, because he was indifferent in the meantime at least, and had never thought much, I fear, of his duty to his people and his land. At Estcourt, we left the little company of girls with their governess; I went to see them frequently; but here ended—at present—this vain enterprise of mine to which, I supposed,

I had fixed my life. I tell the whole story, not because there is any lesson in it, because it is just one of those common enterprises of human life, which, elaborately planned, are turned into nothing and vanity by the unlooked-for event of a day.

I was not at all proud of the issue of my undertaking. I blushed at all the hard things I had once said of Matilda and Sophy Nugent, in opposition to their harmless, if useless, way of existence; I had set up a life for myself, and meant to do something in my generation, when, lo! Providence came in to confound all my intentions, making me happy in the overthrow of the very scheme which had cost me so much thought—Amen. I tell it as one among a hundred of those shortsighted human projects, planned for years, and overthrown in an hour, of which everybody's history is full; and so ends the first fytte of my story; perhaps by-and-by, if any body cares, I may find that "another is for to say."

I beg, however, to assure everybody concerned, that my orphans were not neglected; they were all educated carefully, and turned out exceedingly well, which I trust will be as satisfactory to all the excellent people interested in the subject as it was to me.

And I had almost forgot to say, that Kate Crofton's husband, who caused me so much trouble, was another Crofton, a distant cousin, nearly as young as herself, and whom I never saw. They were quite as happy as I had wished them to be; but on the whole, orphans and all considered, I think I am better pleased that *their* happiness did not interfere with mine.

THE END.

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