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THE EXECUTOR.

CHAPTER I.

"THE woman was certainly mad," said John Brown.

It was the most extraordinary of speeches, considering the circumstances and place in which it was spoken. A parlour of very grim and homely aspect, furnished with dark mahogany and black haircloth, the blinds of the two windows solemnly drawn down, the shutters of one half-closed; two traditional decanters of wine standing reflected in the shining uncovered table; half-a-dozen people all in mourning, in various attitudes of surprise, disappointment, and displeasure; and close by one of the windows Mr Brown, the attorney, holding up to the light that extraordinary scrap of paper, which had fallen upon them all like a thunderbolt. Only half an hour ago he had attended her funeral with decorum and perfect indifference, as was natural, and had come into this parlour without the slightest idea of encountering anything which could disturb him. Fate, however, had been lying in wait for the unsuspecting man at the moment he feared it least. He had not been employed to draw out this extraordinary document, nor had he known anything about it. It was a thunderbolt enclosed in a simple envelope, very securely sealed up, and delivered to him with great solemnity by the next of kin, which carried him off his balance like a charge of artillery, and made everybody aghast around him. The sentiment and exclamation were alike natural: but the woman was not mad.

By the side of the table, very pale and profoundly discomposed, sat the next of kin; a woman, of appearance not unaccordant with that of the house, over fifty, dark-complexioned and full of wrinkles, with a certain cloud of habitual shabbiness, not to be cast aside, im-

pairing the perfection of her new mourning. Her *new* mourning, poor soul! got on the strength of that letter containing the will, which had been placed in her safe keeping. She was evidently doing everything she could to command herself, and conceal her agitation. But it was not a very easy matter. Cherished visions of years, and hopes that this morning had seemed on the point of settling into reality, were breaking up before her, each with its poignant circumstances of mortification and bitterness and dread disappointment. She looked at everybody in the room with a kind of agonised appeal—could it really be true, might not her ears have deceived her?—and strained her troubled gaze upon that paper, not without an instinctive thought that it was wrongly read, or misunderstood, or that some mysterious change had taken place on it in the transfer from her possession to that of Mr Brown. His amazement and dismay did not convince the poor dismayed woman. She stretched out her hand eagerly to get the paper to read it for herself. He might have changed it in reading it; he might have missed something, or added something, that altered the meaning. Anything might have happened, rather than the reality that her confidence had been deceived and her hopes were gone.

"Did you know of this, Mrs Christian?" said the rector, who stood at the other end of the room with his hat in his hand.

Did she know! She could have gnashed her teeth at the foolish question, in her excitement and exasperation. She made a hysterical motion with her head to answer. Her daughter, who had come to the back of her chair, and who knew the rector must not be offended, supplied the words that failed to

her mother—"No; we thought we were to have it," said the poor girl, innocently. There was a little movement of sympathy and compassion among the other persons present. But mingled with this came a sound of a different description; a cough, not an expression of physical weakness, but of moral sentiment; an irritating, critical, inarticulate remark upon that melancholy avowal. It came from the only other woman present, the servant of the house. When the disappointed relation heard it, she flushed into sudden rage, and made an immediate identification of her enemy. It was not dignified, but it was very natural. Perhaps, under the circumstances, it was the only relief which her feelings could have had.

"But I know whose doing it was!" said poor Mrs Christian, trembling all over, her pale face reddening with passion. There was a little movement at the door as the servant-woman stepped farther into the room to take her part in the scene which interested her keenly. She was a tall woman, thin and dry, and about the same age as her accuser. There was even a certain degree of likeness between them. As Nancy's tall person and white apron became clearly visible from among the little group of gentlemen, Mrs Christian rose, inspired with all the heat and passion of her disappointment, to face her foe.

"Did you know of this?" said the excellent rector, with his concerned malaprop face. Nancy did not look at him. The three women stood regarding each other across the table; the others were only spectators—they were the persons concerned. The girl who had already spoken, and who was a little fair creature, as different from the belligerents as possible, stood holding her mother's hand tightly. She had her eyes on them both, with an extraordinary air of control and unconscious authority. They were both full of rage and excitement, the climax of a long smouldering

quarrel; but the blue eyes that watched, kept them silent against their will. The crisis lasted only for a moment. Poor Mrs Christian, yielding to the impulse of the small fingers that closed so tightly on her hand, fell back on her chair, and attempted to recover her shattered dignity. Nancy withdrew to the door; and Mr Brown repeated the exclamation in which his dismay and trouble had at first expressed itself, "Certainly the woman must have been mad!"

"Will you have the goodness to let me see it?" said Mrs Christian, with a gasp. It is impossible to say what ideas of tearing it up, or throwing it into the smouldering fire, might have mingled with her desire; but, in the first place, she was eager to see if she could not make something different out of that paper than those astounding words she had heard read. Mr Brown was an honest man, but he was an attorney; and Mrs Christian was an honest woman, but she was next of kin. If she had known what was in that cruel paper, she might not, perhaps, have preserved it so carefully. She read it over, trembling, and not understanding the very words she muttered under her breath. Bessie read it also, over her shoulder. While they were so occupied, Mr Brown relieved his perplexed mind with a vehemence not much less tragical than that of the disappointed heir.

"I have known many absurd things in the way of wills," said Mr Brown, "but this is the crown of all. Who on earth ever heard of Phœbe Thomson? Who's Phœbe Thomson? Her daughter? Why, she never had any daughter in the memory of man. I should say it is somewhere like thirty years since she settled down in Carlingford—with no child, nor appearance of ever having had one—an old witch with three cats, and a heart like the nether millstone. Respect? don't speak to me! why should I respect her? Here she's gone, after living a life which nobody was the better

for; certainly *I* was none the better for it; why, she did not even employ me to make this precious will; and saddled me—me, of all men in the world—with a burden I wouldn't undertake for my own brother. I'll have nothing to do with it. Do you suppose I'm going to give up my own business, and all my comfort, to seek Phoebe Thomson? The idea's ridiculous! the woman was mad!"

"Hush! for we're in the house of our departed friend, and have just laid her down," said the inappropriate rector, "in the sure and certain hope——"

Mr Brown made, and checked himself in making, an extraordinary grimace. "Do you suppose I'm bound to go hunting Phoebe Thomson till that day comes?" said the attorney. "Better to be a ghost at once, when one could have surer information. I'm very sorry, Mrs Christian; I have no hand in it, I assure you. Who do you imagine this Phoebe Thomson is?"

"Sir," said Mrs Christian, "I decline to give you any information. If my son was here, instead of being in India, as everybody knows, I might have some one to act for me. But you may be certain I shall take advice upon it. You will hear from my solicitor, Mr Brown; I decline to give you any information on the subject."

Mr Brown stared broadly at the speaker; his face reddened. He watched her get up and make her way out of the room with a perplexed look, half angry, half compassionate. She went out with a little of the passionate and resentful air which deprives such disappointments of the sympathy they deserve—wrathful, vindictive, consoling herself with dreams that it was all a plot, and she could still have her rights; but a sad figure, notwithstanding her flutter of bitter rage—a sad figure to those who knew what home she was going to, and how she had lived. Her very dress, so much better than it usually was, enhanced the melancholy as-

pect of the poor woman's withdrawal. Her daughter followed her closely, ashamed, and not venturing to lift her eyes. They were a pathetic couple to that little group that knew all about them. Nancy threw the room-door open for them, with a revengeful satisfaction. One of the funeral attendants who still lingered outside opened the outer one. They went out of the subdued light, into the day, their hearts tingling with a hundred wounds. At least the mother's heart was pierced, and palpitating in every nerve. There was an instinctive silence while they went out, and after they were gone. Even Mr Brown's "humph!" was a very subdued protest against the injustice which Mrs Christian had done him. Everybody stood respectful of the real calamity.

"And so, there they are just where they were!" cried the young surgeon, who was one of the party; "and pretty sweet Bessie must still carry her father on her shoulders, and drag her mother by her side wherever she goes; it's very hard—one can't help thinking it's a very hard burden for a girl of her years."

"But it is a burden of which she might be relieved," said Mr Brown, with a smile.

The young man coloured high and drew back a little. "Few men have courage enough to take up such loads of their own will," he said, with a little heat—"I have burdens of my own."

A few words may imply a great deal in a little company, where all the interlocutors know all about each other. This, though it was simple enough, disturbed the composure of the young doctor. A minute after he muttered something about his further presence being unnecessary, and hastened away. There were now only left the rector, the churchwarden, and Mr Brown.

"Of course you will accept her trust, Mr Brown," said the rector.

The attorney made a great many grimaces, but said nothing. The

whole matter was too startling and sudden to have left him time to think what he was to do.

"Anyhow the poor Christians are left in the lurch," said the churchwarden; "for, I suppose, Brown, if you don't undertake it, it'll go into Chancery. Oh! I don't pretend to know; but it's natural to suppose, of course, that it would go into Chancery, and stand empty with all the windows broken for twenty years. But couldn't they make you undertake it whether you pleased or no? I am only saying what occurs to me; of course, I'm not a lawyer—I can't know."

"Well, never mind," said Mr Brown; "I cannot undertake to say just at this identical moment what I shall do. I don't like the atmosphere of this place, and there's nothing more to be done just now that I know of. We had better go."

"But the house—and Nancy—some conclusion must be come to directly. What will you do about them?" said the rector.

"To be sure! I don't doubt there's plate and jewellery and such things about—they ought to be sealed and secured, and that sort of thing," said the still more energetic lay functionary. "For anything we know, she might have money in old stockings all about the house. I shouldn't be surprised at anything, after what we've heard to-day. Twenty thousand pounds! and a daughter! If any one had told me that old Mrs Thomson had either the one or the other yesterday at this time, I should have said they were crazy. Certainly, Brown, the cupboards and desks and so forth should be examined and sealed up. It is your duty to Phoebe Thomson. You must do your duty to Phoebe Thomson, or she'll get damages of you. I suppose so—you ought to know."

"Confound Phoebe Thomson!" said the attorney, with great unction; "but notwithstanding, come along, let us get out of this. As for her jewellery and her old stock-

ings, they must take their chance. I can't stand it any longer—pah! there's no air to breathe. How did the old witch ever manage to live to eighty here?"

"You must not call her by such improper epithets. I have no doubt she was a good woman," said the rector; "and recollect, really, you owe a little respect to a person who was only buried to-day."

"If she were to be buried to-morrow," cried the irreverent attorney, making his way first out of the narrow doorway, "I know one man who would have nothing to do with the obsequies. Why, look here! what right had that old humbug to saddle me with her duties, after neglecting them all her life; and, with that bribe implied, to lure me to undertake the job, too. Ah, the old wretch! don't let us speak of her. As for respect, I don't owe her a particle—that is a consolation. I knew something of the kind of creature she was before to-day."

So saying, John Brown thrust his hands into his pockets, shrugged up his shoulders, and went off at a startling pace up the quiet street. It was a very quiet street in the outskirts of a very quiet little town. The back of the house which they had just left was on a line with the road—a blank wall, broken only by one long staircase-window. The front was to the garden, entering by a little side-gate, through which the indignant executor had just hurried, crunching the gravel under his rapid steps. A line of such houses, doleful and monotonous, with all the living part of them concealed in their gardens, formed one side of the street along which he passed so rapidly. The other side consisted of humbler habitations, meekly contented to look at their neighbours' back-windows. When John Brown had shot far ahead of his late companions, who followed together, greatly interested in this new subject of talk, his rapid course was interrupted for a moment. Bessie Christian came running across the street from one

of the little houses. She had no bonnet on, and her black dress made her blonde complexion and light hair look clearer and fairer than ever; and when the lawyer drew up all at once to hear what she had to say, partly from compassion, partly from curiosity, it did not fail to strike him how like a child she was, approaching him thus simply with her message. "Oh, Mr Brown," cried Bessie, out of breath, "I want to speak to you. If you will ask Nancy, I am sure she can give you whatever information is to be had about—about aunt's friends. She has been with aunt all her life. I thought I would tell you in case you might think, after what mamma said——"

"I did not think anything about it," said Mr Brown.

"That we knew something, and would not tell you; but we don't know anything," said Bessie. "I never heard of Phoebe Thomson before."

Mr Brown shrugged up his shoulders higher than ever, and thrust his hands deeper into his pockets. "Thank you," he said, a little ungraciously. "I should have spoken to Nancy, of course, in any case; but I'm sure its very kind of you to take the trouble—good-by."

Bessie went back blushing and disconcerted; and the rector and the churchwarden, coming gradually up on the other side of the road, seeing her eager approach and downcast withdrawal, naturally wondered to each other what she could want with Brown, and exchanged condolences on the fact that Brown's manners were wonderfully bearish—really too bad. Brown, in the

mean time, without thinking anything about his manners, hurried along to his office. He was extremely impatient of the whole concern; it vexed him unconsciously to see Bessie Christian; it even occurred to him that the sight of her and of her mother about would make his unwelcome office all the more galling to him. In addition to all the annoyance and trouble, here would be a constant suggestion that he had wronged these people. He rushed into his private sanctuary the most uncomfortable man in Carlingford. An honest, selfish, inoffensive citizen, injuring no one, if perhaps he did not help so many as he might have done—what grievous fault had he committed to bring upon him such a misfortune as this?

The will which had caused so much conversation was to this purport. It bequeathed all the property of which Mrs Thomson of Grove Street died possessed, to John Brown, attorney in Carlingford, in trust for Phoebe Thomson, the only child of the testatrix, who had not seen or heard of her for thirty years; and in case of all lawful means to find the said Phoebe Thomson proving unsuccessful, at the end of three years the property in question was bequeathed to John Brown, his heirs and administrators, absolutely and in full possession. No wonder it raised a ferment in the uncommunicative bosom of the Carlingford attorney, and kept the town in talk for more than nine days. Mrs Thomson had died possessed of twenty thousand pounds: such an event had not happened at Carlingford in the memory of man.

CHAPTER II.

The divers emotions excited by this very unexpected occurrence may be better evidenced by the manner in which the evening of that day was spent in various houses in Carlingford than by any other means.

First, in the little house of the Christians. It was a cottage on the other side of Grove Street—a homely little box of two stories, with a morsel of garden in front, and some vegetables behind. There, on that spring afternoon, matters

did not look cheerful. The little sitting-room was deserted—the fire had died out—the hearth was unswept—the room in a litter. Bessie's pupils had not come to-day. They had got holiday three days ago, in happy anticipation of being dismissed for ever; and only their young teacher's prudential remonstrances had prevented poor Mrs Christian from making a little speech to them, and telling them all that henceforward Miss Christian would have other occupations, but would always be fond of them, and glad to see her little friends in their new house. To make that speech would have delighted Mrs Christian's heart. She had managed, however, to convey the meaning of it by many a fatal hint and allusion. In this work of self-destruction the poor woman had been only too successful; for already the mothers of the little girls had begun to inquire into the terms and capabilities of other teachers, and the foundations of Bessie's little empire were shaken and tottering, though fortunately they did not know of it to-day. Everything was very cold, dismal, and deserted in that little parlour. Faint sounds overhead were the only sounds audible in the house; sometimes a foot moving over the creaky boards: now and then a groan. Upstairs there were two rooms; one a close, curtained, fire-lighted, stifling, invalid's room. There was Bessie sitting listlessly by a table, upon which were the familiar tea-things, which conveyed no comfort to-night; and there was her paralytic father sitting helpless, sometimes shaking his head, sometimes grumbling out faint half-articulate words, sighs, and exclamations. "Dear, dear! ah! well! that's what it has come to!" said the sick man, hushed by long habit into a sort of spectatorship, and feeling even so great a disappointment rather by way of sympathy than personal emotion. Bessie sat listless by, feeling a vague exasperation at this languid running accompaniment to her thoughts.

The future had been blotted out suddenly, and at a blow, from Bessie's eyes. She could see nothing before her—nothing but this dark, monotonous, aching present moment, pervaded by the dropping sounds of that faint, half-articulate voice. Other scene was not to dawn upon her youth. It was hard for poor Bessie. She sat silent in the stifling room, with the bed and its hangings between her and the window, and the fire scorching her cheek. She could neither cry, nor scold, nor blame anybody. None of the resources of despair were possible to her. She knew it would have to go on again all the same, and that now things never would be any better. She could not run away from the prospect before her. It was not so much the continuance of poverty, of labour, of all the dreadful pinches of thrift; it was the end of possibility—the knowledge that now there was no longer anything to expect.

On the other side of the passage Bessie's own sleeping-room was inhabited by a restless fever of disappointment and despair and hope. There was Mrs Christian lying on her daughter's bed. The poor woman was half-crazed with the whirl of passion in her brain. That intolerable sense of having been duped and deceived, of actually having a hand in the overthrow of all her own hopes, aggravated her natural disappointment into frenzy. When she recollected her state of exultation that morning, her confident intentions—when they were to remove, what changes were to be in their manner of life, even what house they were to occupy—it is not wonderful if the veins swelled in her poor head, and all her pulses throbbled with the misery of the contrast. But with all this there mingled a vindictive personal feeling still more exciting. Nancy, whom she knew more of than any one else did—her close, secret, unwavering enemy; and even the innocent lawyer, whom, in her present condition of mind, she could not

believe not to have known of this dreadful cheat practised upon her, or not to care for that prize which, now that it was lost, seemed to her worth everything that was precious in life. The poor creature lay goading herself into madness with thoughts of how she would be revenged upon these enemies; how she would watch, and track out, and reveal their hidden plots against her; how she would triumph over and crush them. All these half-frenzied cogitations were secretly pervaded—a still more maddening exasperation—by a consciousness of her own impotence. The evening came creeping in, growing dark around her—silence fell over the little house, where nobody moved or spoke, and where all the world, the heavens, and the earth, seemed changed since this morning; but the wonder was how that silence could contain her—all palpitating with pangs and plans, a bleeding, infuriated, wounded creature—and show no sign of the frenzy it covered. She had lain down to rest, as the saying is. How many women are there who go thus to a voluntary crucifixion and torture by lying down to rest! Mrs Christian lay with her dry eyes blazing through the darkness, no more able to sleep than she was to do all that her burning fancy described to her. She was a hot-blooded Celtic woman, of that primitive island which has preserved her name. If she could have sought sympathy, here was nobody to bestow it. Not the heart which that poor ghost of manhood in the next room had lost out of his chilled bewildered bosom; not Bessie's steadfast, unexcited spirit. The poor soul saved herself from going wild by thinking of her boy; holding out her passionate arms to him thousands of miles away; setting him forth as the deliverer, with all the absolute folly of love and passion. He would come home and have justice done to his mother. Never fancy was more madly unreasonable; but it saved her from some

of the effects of the agitation in her heart.

On the other side of the road, at the same hour, Nancy prepared her tea in the house of which she was temporary mistress. There could not be any doubt, to look at her now, that this tall, dry, withered figure, and face full of characteristic wrinkles, was like Mrs Christian. The resemblance had been noticed by many. And as old Mrs Thomson had not hesitated to avow that her faithful servant was connected with her by some distant bond of relationship, it was not difficult to imagine that these two were really related, though both denied it strenuously. Nancy had a friend with her to tea. They were in the cheerful kitchen, which had a window to the garden, and a window in the side wall of the house, by which a glimpse of the street might be obtained through the garden gate. The firelight shone pleasantly through the cheerful apartment. All the peculiar ornaments of a kitchen—the covers, the crockery, the polished sparkles of shining pewter and brass—adorned the walls. Through it all went Nancy in her new black dress and ample snowy-white apron. She carried her head high, and moved with a certain rhythmical elation. It is surely an unphilosophical conclusion that there is no real enjoyment in wickedness. Nancy had no uneasiness in her triumph. The more she realised what her victory must have cost her opponent, the more entire grew her satisfaction. Remorse might have mixed with her exultation had she had any pity in her, but she had not; and, in consequence, it was with unalloyed pleasure that she contemplated the overthrow of her adversary. Perhaps the very satisfaction of a good man in a good action is inferior to the absolute satisfaction with which, by times, a bad man is permitted to contemplate the issue of his wickedness. Nancy marched about her kitchen,

preparing her tea with an enjoyment which possibly would not have attended a benevolent exercise of her powers. Possibly she could almost have painted to herself, line by line, the dark tableau of that twilight room where Mrs Christian lay, driving herself crazy with wild thoughts. She did the gloom of the picture full justice. If she could have peeped into the window and seen it with her own eyes, she would have enjoyed the sight.

"I'll make Mr Brown keep me in the house," said Nancy, sitting down at a table piled with good things, and which looked an embodiment of kitchen luxury and comfort, "and get me a girl. It was what missis always meant to do. I'll show it to him out of the will that I was left in trust to be made comfortable. And in course of nature her things all comes to me. It's a deal easier to deal with a single gentleman than if there was a lady poking her nose about into everything. Thank my stars, upstarts such like as them Christians shall never lord it over me; and now I have more of my own way, I'll be glad to see you of an evening whenever you can comfortable. Bring a bit of work, and we'll have a quiet chat. I consider myself settled for life."

The young surgeon's house was at the other end of the town; it was close to a region of half-built streets—for Carlingford was a prosperous town—where successive colonies were settling, where houses were damp and drainage incomplete, and a good practice to be had with pains. The house had a genteel front to the road, a lamp over the door, and a little surgery round the corner, where it gave forth the sheen of its red and blue bottles across a whole half-finished district. Mr Rider had come home tired, unaccountably tired. He had kicked off one boot, and taken a cigar from his case and forgotten to light it. He sat plunged in his easy-chair in a drear brown study—a

brown study inaccessible to the solaces which generally make such states of mind endurable. His cigar went astray among the confused properties of his writing-table; the book he had been reading last night lay rejected in the farthest corner of the room. He was insensible to the charms of dressing-gown and slippers. On the whole, he was in a very melancholy, sullen, not to say savage mood. He sat and gazed fiercely into the fire, chewing the cud of fancies, in which very little of the sweet seemed to mingle with the bitter. He had been the medical attendant of Mrs Thomson of Grove Street, and had assisted this afternoon at her funeral, and you might have supposed he had hastened the advent of that melancholy day, had you seen his face.

On the whole, it was a hard dilemma in which the poor young man found himself. He, too, like Nancy, kept realising the interior of that other little house in Grove Street. Both of them, by dint of that acquaintance with their neighbours which everybody has in a small community, came to a moderately correct guess at what was going on there. Young Mr Rider sat in heavy thought, sometimes bursting out into violent gestures which fortunately nobody witnessed; sometimes uttering sighs which all but blew out his lights—impatient, urgent sighs, not of melancholy but of anger and resistance—the sighs of a young man who found circumstances intolerable, and yet was obliged to confess, with sore mortification and humbling, that he could not mend them, and behaved to endure. The visions that kept gliding across his eyes drove him half as wild as poor Mrs Christian: one moment a pretty young wife, all the new house wanted to make it fully tenable; but he had scarcely brought her across the threshold when a ghastly figure in a chair was carried over it after her, upstairs into the bridal apartments, and another woman, soured and drawn

awry by pressure of poverty, constitutionally shabby, vehement, and high-tempered, pervaded the new habitation. No use saying pshaw! and pah!—no use swearing bigger oaths, —no use pitching unoffending books into the corners, or breathing out those short deep breaths of desperation. This was in reality the state of affairs. Midnight did not change the aspect it had worn in the morning. Pondering all the night through would bring no light on the subject. Nothing could change those intolerable circumstances. The poor young surgeon threw his coat off in the heat and urgency of his thoughts, and pitched it from him like the books. There was no comfort or solace to be found in all that world of fancy. Only this morning sweeter dreams had filled this disordered apartment. In imagination, he had helped his Bessie to minister to the comfort of the poor old sick parents in Mrs Thomson's house. Now he knitted his brows desperately over it, but could find no outlet. Unless some good fairy sent him a patient in the middle of the night, the chances were that the morning would find him pursuing that same interminable brown study of which nothing could come.

Mr Brown's house was an old house in the middle of the town. The offices were in the lower floor, occupying one side of the building. On the other side of the wide old-fashioned hall was his dining-room. There he sat all by himself upon this agitating night. It was a large, lofty, barely-furnished room, with wainscoted walls, and curious stiff panelling, and a high mantel-shelf which he, though a tall man, could scarcely reach with his arm. It was dimly lighted, as well as barely furnished—altogether an inhuman, desert place—the poorest though the grandest of all we have yet looked into in Carlingford. Mr Brown was not sensible of its inhospitable aspect; he was used to it, and that was enough. It occurred to him as

little to criticise his house as to criticise his manners. Thus they *were*, and thus they would continue; at least he had always believed so till to-night.

He sat in his easy-chair with his feet on the fender, and a little table at his elbow with his wine. As long as there was anything in his glass he sipped it by habit, without being aware of what he was doing; but when the glass was empty, though he had two or three times raised it empty to his lips, he was too much absorbed in his thoughts to replenish it. He was not by any means a handsome man; and he was five-and-forty or thereabouts, and had a habit of making portentous faces, when anyway specially engaged in thought; so that, on the whole, it was not a highly attractive or interesting figure which reclined back in the crimson chair, and stretched its slippers to the fire, sole inmate of the dim, spacious, vacant room. He was thinking over his new position with profound disgust and perplexity. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that the subject lured him on, and drew out into stretches of imagination far beyond his wont;—hunting all the world over after Phœbe Thomson! But, after all, that was only a preliminary step; he was required only to use reasonable means, and for three years. If she turned up, there was an end of it; if she did not turn up— Here Mr Brown sprang up hurriedly and assumed the favourite position of Englishmen in front of his fire. There, all glittering in the distance, rose up, solid and splendid, an appearance which few men could see without emotion—twenty thousand pounds! It was not life and death to him, as it was to poor Mrs Christian. It did not make all the difference between sordid want and comfortable existence; but you may well believe it did not appear before the lawyer's eyes without moving him into a considerable degree of excitement. Such a fairy apparition had never appeared before in

that cold, spacious, uninhabited room. Involuntarily to himself, Mr Brown saw his house expand, his life open out, his condition change. Roseate lights dropped into the warming atmosphere which had received that vision; the fairy wand waved through the dim air before him in spite of all his sobriety. The wiles of the enchantress lured John Brown as effectually as if he had not been five-and-forty, an old bachelor, and an attorney; and after half an hour of these slowly-growing, half-conscious, half-resisted thoughts, any chance that had brought the name of the dead woman's lost daughter to his memory, would have called forth a very different "confound Phœbe Thomson!" from that which burst from his troubled lips in the house in Grove Street. Possibly it was some such feeling which roused him up a moment after, when the great cat came softly purring to his feet and rubbed against his slippers. Mr Brown started violently, thrust puss away, flung himself back into his chair, grew very red, and murmured something about "an ass!" ashamed to detect himself in his own vain imaginations. But that sudden waking up did not last. After he had filled his glass and emptied it—after he had stirred his fire, and made a little noise, with some vague idea of dispelling the spell he was under—the fairy returned and re-took possession under a less agreeable aspect. Suppose *he* were to be enriched, what was to become of the poor Christians? They were not very near relations, and the old woman had a right to leave her money where she liked. Still there was a human heart in John Brown's bosom. Somehow that little episode in the street returned to his recollection; Bessie running across, light and noiseless, with her message. How young the creature must be after all, to have so much to do. Poor little Bessie! she had not only lost her chance of being a great fortune, and one of the genteel young ladies

of Carlingford, but she had lost her chance of the doctor, and his new house and rising practice. Shabby fellow! to leave the pretty girl he was fond of, because she was a good girl, and was everything to her old father and mother. "I wonder will they say that's my fault too?" said John Brown to himself; and stumbled up to his feet again on the stimulus of that thought, with a kind of sheepish, not unpleasant embarrassment, and a foolish half-smile upon his face. Somehow at that moment, looking before him, as he had done so many hundred times standing on his own hearthrug, it occurred to him all at once what a bare room this was that he spent his evenings in—what an inhuman, chilly, penurious place! scarcely more homelike than that bit of open street, across which Bessie came tripping this afternoon, wanting to speak to him. Nobody wanted to speak to him here. No wonder he had a threatening of rheumatism last winter. What a cold, wretched barn of a room! He could not help wondering to himself whether the drawing-room was any better. In the new start his long-dormant imagination had taken, John Brown actually shivered in the moral coldness of his spacious, lonely apartment. In his mind he daresaid that the Christians looked a great deal more comfortable in that little box of theirs, with that poor little girl working, and teaching, and keeping all straight. What a fool that young doctor was! what if he did work a little harder to make the old people an allowance? However, it was no business of his. With a sigh of general discontent Mr Brown pulled his bell violently, and had the fire made up, and asked for his tea. His tea! he never touched it when it came, but sat pshawing and humphing at it, making himself indignant over that fool of a young doctor. And what if these poor people, sour and sore after their misfortune, should think that this too was *his* fault?

CHAPTER III.

Next morning Mr Brown, with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders up to his ears as usual, went down at his ordinary rapid pace to old Mrs Thomson's house. Nancy had locked the house-door, which, like an innocent almost rural door as it was, opened from without. She was upstairs, very busy in a most congenial occupation—turning out the old lady's wardrobe, and investigating the old stores of lace and fur and jewellery. She knew them pretty well by heart before; but now that, according to her idea, they were her own, everything naturally acquired a new value. She had laid them out in little heaps, each by itself, on the dressing-table; a faintly-glittering row of old rings and brooches, most of them entirely valueless, though Nancy was not aware of that. On the bed—the bed where two days ago that poor old pallid figure still lay in solemn ownership of the "property" around it—Nancy had spread forth her mistress's ancient boas and vast muffs, half a century old: most of them were absolutely dropping to pieces; but as long as they held together with any sort of integrity, Nancy was not the woman to lessen the number of her possessions. The bits of lace were laid out upon the old sofa, each at full length. With these delightful accumulations all round her, Nancy was happy. She had entered, as she supposed, upon an easier and more important life. Mistress of the empty house and all its contents, she carried herself with an air of elation and independence which she had never ventured to display before. No doubt had ever crossed her mind on the subject. She had taken it for granted that the expulsion of the Christians meant only her own triumph. She had even taken credit, both to herself and other people, for greater guiltiness than

she really had incurred. The will was not her doing, though Mrs Christian said so and Nancy was willing to believe as much; but she was glad to be identified as the cause of it, and glad to feel that she was the person who would enjoy the benefit. She was in this holiday state of mind, enjoying herself among her supposed treasures, when she was interrupted by the repeated and imperative demands for entrance made by Mr Brown at the locked door.

Nancy went down to open it, but not in too great a hurry. She was rather disposed to patronise the attorney. She put on her white apron, and went to the door spreading it down with a leisurely hand. To Nancy's surprise and amazement, Mr Brown plunged in without taking any notice of her. He went into the parlour, looked all round, then went up-stairs, three steps at a time, into the best parlour, uncomfortably near the scene of Nancy's operations. There was the old cabinet for which he had been looking. When he saw it he called to her to look here. Nancy, who had followed him close, came forward immediately. He was shaking the door of the cabinet to see if it was locked. It was a proceeding of which Nancy did not approve.

"I suppose this is where she kept her papers," said Mr Brown; "get me the keys. I want to see what's to be found among her papers touching this daughter of hers. You had better bring me *all* the keys. Make haste, for I have not any time to lose."

"Missis never kept any papers there," said Nancy, alarmed and a little anxious. "There's the best china tea-set and the silver service—that's all you'll find there."

"Bring me the keys, however," said Mr Brown. "Where did she keep her papers, eh? You know

all about her, I suppose. Do you know anything about Phoebe Thomson, that I've got to hunt up? She was Mrs Thomson's daughter, I understand. What caused her to leave her mother? I suppose you know. What is she? How much can you tell me about her?"

"As much as anybody living," said Nancy, too well pleased to divert him from his inquiries after the keys. "I was but a girl when it happened; but I remember it like yesterday. She went off—missis never liked to have it mentioned," said Nancy, coming to a dead stop.

"Go on," cried Mr Brown; "she can't hear you now, can she? Go on."

"She went off with a soldier—that's the truth. They were married after; but missis never thought that mattered. He was a common man, and as plain a looking fellow as you'd see anywhere. Missis cast her off, and would have nothing to say to her. She over-persuaded me, and I let her in one night; but missis wouldn't look at her. She never came back. She was hurt in her feelin's. We never heard of her more."

"Nor asked after her, I suppose?" said the lawyer, indignantly. "Do you mean the old wretch never made any inquiry about her own child?"

"Meaning missis?" said Nancy. "No—I don't know as she ever did. She said she'd disown her; and she was a woman as always kept her word."

"Old beast!" said John Brown between his teeth; "but, look here; if she's married, she is not Phoebe Thomson. What's her name?"

"I can't tell," said Nancy, looking a little frightened. "Sure, neither she is—to think of us never remarking that! But dear, dear! will that make any difference to the will?"

Mr Brown smiled grimly, but made no answer. "Have you got anything else to tell me about her? Did she ever write to her mother?

Do you know what regiment it is, or where it was at that time?" said the attorney. "Think what you are about, and tell me clearly—what year was she married, and where were you at the time?"

Nancy grew nervous under this close questioning. She lost her self-possession and all her fancied importance. "We were in the Isle o' Man, where the Christians come from. I was born there myself. Missis's friends was mostly there. It was by her husband's side she belonged to Carlingford. It was about a two miles out of Douglas—a kind of a farmhouse. It was the year—the year—I was fifteen," said Nancy, faltering.

"And how old are you now?" said the inexorable questioner, who had taken out his memorandum-book.

Nancy dropped into a chair and began to sob. "It's hard on a person bringing things back," said Nancy,—“and to think if she should actually turn up again just as she was! As for living in the house with her, I couldn't think of such a thing. Sally Christian, or some poor-spirited person might do it, but not me as am used to be my own mistress," cried Nancy, with increasing agitation. "She had the temper of — oh! she was her mother's temper. Dear, dear! to think as she might be alive, and come back to put all wrong! It was in the year 'eight—that's the year it was."

"Then you didn't think she would come back," said Mr Brown.

"It's a matter o' five-and-thirty years; and not knowing even her name, nor the number of the regiment, nor nothing—as I don't," said Nancy, cautiously; "and never hearing nothing about her, what was a person to think? And if it's just Phoebe Thomson you're inquiring after, and don't say nothing about the marriage nor the regiment, you may seek long enough before you find her," said Nancy, with a glance of what was intended to be private intelligence between herself and her

questioner, "and all correct to the will."

Mr Brown put up his memorandum-book sharply in his pocket. "Bring me the keys. Look here, bring me *all* the keys," he said. "What's in this other room, eh? It was her bedroom, I suppose. Hollo, what's all this?"

For all Nancy's precautions had not been able to ward off this catastrophe. He pushed into the room she had left to admit him, where all her treasures were exhibited. His quick eye glanced round in an instant, and understood it. Trembling as Nancy was with new alarms, she had still strength to make one struggle.

"Missis's things fall to me," said Nancy, half in assertion, half in entreaty; "that's how it always is; the servant gets the lady's wardrobe—the servant as has nursed her and done for her, when there's no daughter—that's always understood."

"Bring me the keys," said Mr Brown.

The keys were in the open wardrobe, a heavy bunch. John Brown seized hold of the furs on the bed and began to toss them into the wardrobe. Some of them dropped in pieces in his hands and were tossed out again. He took no notice of the lace or the trinkets, but swiftly locked every keyhole he could find in the room—drawers, boxes, cupboards, everything. Nancy looked on with fierce exclamations. She would have her rights—she was not to be put upon. She would have the law of him. She would let everybody know how he was taking upon himself as if he was the master of the house.

"And so I am, my good woman; when will you be ready to leave it?" said Mr Brown. "You shall have due time to get ready, and I won't refuse you the trumpery you've set your heart upon. Judging from the specimen, it won't do Phoebe Thomson much good. But not in this sort of way, you know. I must put a stop to this. Now let me hear

what's the earliest day you can leave the house."

"I'm not going to leave the house!" cried Nancy; "I've lived here thirty years, and here I'll die. Missis's meaning was to leave me in the house, and make me comfortable for life. Many's the time she's said so. Do you think you're going to order *me* about just as you please? What do you suppose she left the property like that for but to spite the Christians, and to leave a good home to me?"

"When will you be ready to leave?" repeated Mr Brown, without paying the least attention to her outcries and excitement.

"I tell you I'm not agoing to leave!" screamed Nancy. "To leave!—*me!*—no, not for all the upstarts in Carlingford, if they was doubled and tripled. My missis meant me to stay here comfortable all my days. She meant me to have a girl and make myself comfortable. Many and many's the time she's said so."

"But she did not say so in the will," said the inexorable executor; "and so out you must go, and that very shortly. Now don't say anything. It is no use fighting with me. You'll be well treated if you leave directly and quietly; otherwise, you shan't have anything. The other keys, please. Now mind what I say. You're quite able to make a noise and a disturbance, but you're not able to resist me. You shall have time to make your preparations and look out another home for yourself; but take care you don't compel me to use severe measures—that's enough."

"But I won't!—not if you drag me over the stones. I won't go. I'll speak to Mr Curtis," cried the unfortunate Nancy.

"Pshaw!" said John Brown. Mr Curtis was the other attorney in Carlingford, the one whom probably Mrs Christian had in her mind when she threatened him with her solicitor. He laughed to himself angrily as he went downstairs. If he was to undertake this

troublesome business, at least he was not going to be hampered by a parcel of furious women. When he had locked up everything and was leaving the house, Nancy threw open an upper window and threw a malediction after him. "You'll never find her! It'll go back to them as it belongs to," shouted Nancy. He smiled to himself again as he turned away. Was it possible that John Brown began to think it might be as well if he never did find her? The prophecy certainly was not unpleasant to him, though poor Nancy meant it otherwise. Mr Brown hurried up the monotonous side of Grove Street, we are afraid not without a little private exhilaration in the thought that Phœbe Thomson was not unlike the proverbial needle in the bundle of hay. The chances were she was dead years ago; and though he would neither lose a minute in beginning, nor leave any means unused in pursuing the search for her, it was certain he would not be inconsolable if he never heard any more of Phœbe Thomson. Doubtless he would not have acknowledged as much in words, and did not even have any express confidences with himself on the subject, lest his own mind might have been shocked by the disclosure of its involuntary sentiment. Still he took an interest in Mrs Thomson's bequest, greater than he took in the properties intrusted to him by his other clients. He could not help himself. He felt affectionately interested in that twenty thousand pounds.

But as he came up to it, John Brown remembered, with a little interest, that spot of the quiet street where Bessie, yesterday, ran across to speak to him. He could not help recalling her appearance as she approached him, though young girls were greatly out of his way. Poor Bessie! The baker's cart occupied at that moment the spot which Bessie had crossed; and one of the Carlingford ladies was leaving the door of the Christians' little house.

Mr Brown, though no man was less given to colloquies with his acquaintances in the street, crossed over to speak to her. He could not help being interested in everything about that melancholy little house, nor feeling that the very sight of it was a reproach to his thoughts. Poor Bessie! there she stood yesterday in her black frock—the light-footed, soft-voiced creature—not much more than a child beside the middle-aged old bachelor who could find it in his heart to be harsh to her. Across that very spot he passed hastily, with many compunctions in the mind which had been roused so much out of its usual ways of thinking by the events and cogitations of the last four-and-twenty hours. The lady to whom he paid such a marked token of respect was quite flattered and excited to meet him. He was the hero of the day at Carlingford. The last account of this extraordinary affair was doubtless to be had from himself.

"You've been at the Christians'. I suppose you were there for some purpose so early in the morning," said the abrupt Mr Brown, after the necessary salutations were over.

"Yes—but I am a very early person," said the lady. "Oh, forgive me. I know quite well you don't care to hear what sort of a person I am; but really, Mr Brown, now that you are quite the hero of the moment yourself, do let me congratulate you. They say there is not a chance of finding this Phœbe Thomson. Some people even say she is a myth and never existed; and that it was only a device of the old lady to give her an excuse for leaving you the money. Dear me! *did* you ask me a question? I forget. I am really so interested to see *you*."

"I like an answer when it's practicable," said the lawyer. "I said I supposed you were about some business at Miss Christian's house?"

"I must answer you this time, mustn't I, or you won't talk to me any longer?" said the playful in-

terlocutor, whom John Brown could have addressed in terms other than complimentary. "Yes, poor thing, I've been at Miss Christian's, and on a disagreeable business too, in the present circumstances. We are going to send our Mary away to a finishing-school. So I had to tell poor Bessie we shouldn't want any more music-lessons after this quarter. I was very sorry, I am sure—and there was Mrs Mayor taking her little girls away from the morning-class. When they expected to get Mrs Thomson's money they had been a little careless, I suppose; and to give three days' holiday in the middle of the quarter, without any reason for it but an old person's death, you know—a death out of the house—is trying to people's feelings; and Mrs Christian had given everybody to understand that *her* daughter would soon have no occasion for teaching. People don't like these sort of things; and Mrs Mayor heard of somebody else a little nearer, who is said to be very good at bringing on little children. I said all I could to induce her to change her mind; but I believe they're to leave next quarter. Poor Bessie! I am very sorry for her, I am sure."

"And this is how you ladies comfort a good young woman when she meets with a great disappointment?" said John Brown.

"La!—a disappointment! You know that only means *one thing* to a girl," said the lady, "but you're always so severe. Bessie has had no *disappointment*, as people understand the word; yet there's young Dr Rider, you know, very attentive, and I do hope he'll propose directly, and set it all right for her, poor thing, for she's a dear good girl. But to hear *you* speak so—of all people—Mr Brown. Why, isn't it your fault? I declare I would hate you if I was Bessie Christian. If the doctor were to be off too, and she really had a disappointment, it would be dreadfully hard upon her, poor girl; but it's to be hoped things will turn out better than that. Good

morning! but you have not told me a word about your own story—all Carlingford is full of it. People say you are the luckiest man!"

These words overtook, rather than were addressed to, him as he hurried off indignant. John Brown was not supposed to be an observant person, but somehow he saw the genteel people of Carlingford about the streets that day in a surprisingly distinct manner—saw them eager to get a little occupation for themselves anyhow—saw them coming out for their walks, and their shopping, and their visits, persuading themselves by such means that they were busy people, virtuously employed, and making use of their life. What was Bessie doing? Mr Brown thought he would like to see her, and that he would not like to see her. It was painful to think of being anyhow connected with an arrangement which condemned to that continued labour such a young soft creature—a creature so like, and yet so unlike, those other smiling young women who were enjoying their youth. And just because it was painful Mr Brown could not take his thoughts off that subject. If Phoebe Thomson turned up he should certainly try to induce her to do something for the relations whom her mother had disappointed so cruelly. If Phoebe Thomson did not turn up—well, what then?—if she didn't? Mr Brown could not tell: it would be his duty to do something. But, in the mean time, he did nothing except shake his fist at young Rider's drag as it whirled the doctor past to his patients, and repeat the "shabby fellow!" of last night with an air of disgust. John Brown had become very popular just at that moment; all his friends invited him to dinner, and dropped in to hear about this story which had electrified Carlingford. And all over the town the unknown entity called Phoebe Thomson was discussed in every possible kind of hypothesis, and assumed a different character in the hands of every knot of gossips. Nobody thought of Bessie Christian; but more and more as nobody

thought of her, that light little figure running across the quiet street, and wanting to speak to him, impressed itself like a picture upon the retentive but not very fertile imagination of Mrs Thomson's executor. It troubled, and vexed, and irritated, and unsettled him. One little pair

of willing hands—one little active cheerful soul—and all the burden of labour, and patience, and dread monotony of life that God had allotted to that pretty creature; how it could be, and nobody step in to prevent it, was a standing marvel to John Brown.

CHAPTER IV.

Mr Brown was well known everywhere as a famous business man—not perhaps in that sense so familiar to modern observers, which implies the wildest flights of speculation, and such skilful arts of bookmaking as ruin themselves by their very cleverness. Mr Brown did not allow the grass to grow below his feet; his advertisements perpetually led off that list of advertisements in the *Times* which convey so many skeleton romances to a curious public. All over the country people began to entertain guesses about that Phoebe Thomson who was to hear something so much to her own advantage; and Phoebe Thomsons answered to the call through all the breadth of the three kingdoms. Mr Brown had a detective officer in his pay for the whole year. He made journeys himself, and sent this secret agent on innumerable journeys. He discovered the regiment, a detachment of which had been stationed at the Isle of Man during the year 1808; he went to the island; he left no means untried of finding out this hypothetical person. Nearer at home, Mr Brown had made short work of Nancy, who, too deeply mortified by the failure of her hopes to remain in Carlingford, had returned to her native place with a moderate pension, her own savings, and her mistress's old clothes, not so badly satisfied on the whole, but still a defeated woman. While poor Mrs Christian, compelled by sore dint of time and trouble to give up her forlorn hope of getting justice done her, and reclaiming the wealth that had been so nearly hers from the hands of

Mr Brown, was half reconciled to him by his summary dealings with her special enemy. A whole year had passed, and other things had happened at Carlingford. Everybody now did not talk of Mrs Thomson's extraordinary will, and John Brown's wonderful chance of coming into twenty thousand pounds. People had even given over noting that the young doctor had thought better of that foolish fancy of his for Bessie Christian. All the persons in this little drama had relapsed into the shade. It was a very heavy shadow so far as Grove Street was concerned. The little pupils had fallen off, collected again, fallen off once more. If the cheerful glimmer of firelight had never failed in the sick-room—if the helpless old father, sitting in that calm of infirmity and age, making comments which would have irritated his careful attendants beyond bearing if they had not been used to them, never missed anything of his usual comforts—nobody knew at what cost these comforts were bought. But there did come a crisis in which patience and courage, and the steadfast soul which had carried the young breadwinner through the drear monotony of that year, failed her at last. Her mother, who was of a different temper from Bessie, and had gone through a thousand despairs and revivals before the young creature at her side began to droop, saw that the time had come when everything was at stake; and, more reluctantly and slowly, Bessie herself came to see it. She could not set her back against the wall of that

little house of theirs and meet every assailant; she could not tide it out in heroic silence, and abstinence alike from comfort and complaint. That was her natural impulse; and the victory, if slow, would have been certain: so Bessie thought at least. But want was at the door, and they could not afford to wait; something else must be attempted. Bessie must go out into the marketplace and seek new masters—there was no longer work for her here.

This was how the scene was shifted in the following conclusive act.

John Brown, travelling, and fuming and aggravating himself much over the loss of his time and the distraction of his thoughts, was in London that day—a May-day, when everybody was in London. He had seen his detective, and no further intelligence had been obtained. Phoebe Thomson was as far off as ever—farther off; for now that all these efforts had been made, it was clear that either she must be dead or in some quarter of the world impervious to newspaper advertisements and detective officers. Mr Brown bore the disappointment with a very good grace. He felt contented now to slacken his efforts; he even felt as if he himself were already the possessor of old Mrs Thomson's twenty thousand pounds. As he went leisurely through the streets, he paused before one of those "Scholastic Agency" offices which abound in the civilised end of London. It was in the ground-floor of a great faded, sombre house, in a street near St James's Park—a place of aching interest to some people in that palpitating world of human interests. It occurred to Mr Brown to go in and see if there were any lists to be looked over. Phoebe Thomson might have a daughter who might be a governess. It was an absurd idea enough, and he knew it to be so; nevertheless he swung open the green baize door.

Inside, before the desk, stood a little figure which he knew well, still in that black dress which she

had worn when she ran across Grove Street and wanted to speak to him; with a curl of the light hair, which looked so fair and full of colour on her black shawl, escaped from under her bonnet, talking softly and eagerly to the clerk. Was there no other place he could send her to? She had come up from the country, and was so very reluctant to go down without hearing of something. The man shook his head, and read over to her several entries in his book. Bessie turned round speechless towards the door. Seeing some one standing there, she lifted her eyes full upon John Brown. Troubled and yet steady, full of tears yet clear and seeing clear, shining blue like the skies, with a *great patience*, these eyes encountered the unexpected familiar face. If she felt an additional pang in seeing him, or if any grudge against the supplanter of her family trembled in Bessie's heart, it made no sign upon her face. She said "good morning" cheerfully as she went past him, and only quickened her pace a little to get out of sight. She did not take any notice of the rapid step after her; the step which could have made up to her in two paces, but did not, restrained by an irresolute will. Probably she knew whose step it was, and interpreted rightly, to some superficial degree, the feelings of John Brown. She thought he was a good-hearted man—she thought he was sorry to know or guess the straits which Bessie thanked heaven nobody in this world did fully know—she thought, by-and-by, shy of intruding upon her, that step would drop off, and she would hear it no more. But it was not so to be.

"Miss Christian, I want to speak to you," said John Brown.

She turned towards him directly without any pretence of surprise; and with a smile, the best she could muster, waited to hear what it was.

"We are both walking the same way," said Mr Brown.

In spite of herself amazement woke upon Bessie's face. "That is

true: but was that all you had to say?" said Bessie, with the smiles kindling all her dimples. The dimples had only been hidden by fatigue, and hardship, and toil. They were all there.

"No, not quite. Were you looking for employment in that office? and why are you seeking employment here?" said the attorney, looking anxiously down upon her.

"Because there's a great many of us in Carlingford," said Bessie, steadily; "there are half as many governesses as there are children. I thought I might perhaps get on better here."

"In London! Do you think there are fewer governesses here?" said Mr Brown, going on with his questions, and meanwhile studying very closely his little companion's face; not rudely. To be sure it was a very honest direct investigation, but there was not a thought of rudeness or disrespect either in the eyes that made it or the heart.

"I daresay it's as bad everywhere," said Bessie, with a little sigh; "but when one cannot get work in one place, one naturally turns to another. I had an appointment to-day to come up to see a lady; but I was not the proper person. Perhaps I shall have to stay at home after all."

"Have you any grudge at me?" said Mr Brown.

Bessie looked up open-eyed and wondering. "Grudge? at *you*? How could I? I daresay," said Bessie, with a sigh and a smile, "mamma had, a year ago; but not me. The times I have spoken to you, Mr Brown, you have always been kind to me."

"Have I?" said the lawyer. He gave her a strange look, and stopped short, as if his utterance was somehow impeded. Kind to her! He remembered that time in Grove Street, and could have scourged himself at the recollection. Bessie had taken him entirely aback by her simple expression. He could have sobbed under that sudden touch. To see her walking beside him,

cheerful, steadfast, without a complaint—a creature separated from the world, from youth and pleasure, and mere comfort even—enduring hardness, for all her soft childlike dimples and unaffected smiles—his composure was entirely overcome. He was going to do something very foolish. He gasped, and gave himself up.

"If you don't bear me a grudge, come over into the Park here, where we can hear ourselves speak. I want to speak to you," said Mr Brown.

She turned into the Park with him quite simply, as she did everything without any pretence of wonder or embarrassment. There he walked a long time by her side in silence, she waiting for what he had to say, he at the most overwhelming loss how to say it. The next thing he said was to ask her to sit down in a shady quiet corner, where there was an unoccupied seat. She was very much fatigued. It was too bad of him to bring her out of her way.

"But it is so noisy in the street," said Mr Brown. Then, with a pause after this unquestionable truism, "I've been thinking about you this very long time."

Bessie looked up quickly with great amazement; thinking of her! She was wiser when she cast her eyes down again. Mr Brown had not the smallest conception that he had explained himself without saying a syllable, but he had, notwithstanding, leaving Bessie thunderstruck, yet with a moment's time to deliberate. While he went on with his embarrassed slow expressions, fancying that he was gradually conveying to her mind what he meant, Bessie, in a dreadful silent flutter and agitation, was revolving the whole matter, and asking herself what she was to answer. She had ten full minutes for this before he came to the point, and before, according to his idea, the truth burst upon her. But it is doubtful whether that ten minutes' preparation was any advantage to Bessie. It destroyed the unconsciousness,

which was her greatest charm ; it made an end of her straightforwardness ; worst of all, it left her silent. She gave a terrified glance up at him when it actually happened. There he stood full in the light, with all his awkwardnesses more clearly revealed than usual ; six-and-forty, abrupt, almost eccentric ; telling that story very plainly, without compliment or passion ; would she have him ? He was content that she should think it over—he was content to wait for her answer ; but if it was to be no, let her say it out.

Strange to say, that word which she was exhorted to say out did not come to Bessie's lips. Perhaps because she trembled a great deal, and really lost her self-possession, and for the moment did not know what she was about. But even in her agitation she did not think of saying it. Mr Brown, when he had his say out, marched up and down the path before her, and did not interrupt her deliberations. Another dreadful ten minutes passed over Bessie. The more she thought it over the more bewildered she became as to what she was to say.

"Please would you walk with me to the railway," were the words that came from Bessie's lips at last. She rose up trembling and faint, and with a kind of instinct took Mr Brown's arm. He, on his part, did not say anything to her. His agitation melted away into a subdued silent tenderness which did not need any expression. He took her back into the streets, all along that tiresome way. He suffered the noise to surround and abstract her without any interruption which would make her conscious of his presence. It was a strange walk for both. To have called them lovers would have been absurd—to have supposed that here was a marriage of convenience about to be arranged would have been more ridiculous still. What was it ? Bessie went along the street in a kind of cloud, aware of nothing very clearly ; feeling somehow that she leant upon somebody, and that it was somebody

upon whom she had a right to lean. They reached the railway thus, without any further explanation. Mr Brown put the trembling girl into a carriage, and did not go with her. The Carlingford attorney had turned into a paladin. Was it possible that his outer man itself had smoothed out and expanded too ?

"I am not going with you," he said, grasping her hand closely. "I won't embarrass or distress you, Bessie ; but recollect you have not said no ; and when I come to Grove Street to-morrow, I'll hope to hear you say yes. I'll let you off," said John Brown, grasping the little soft hand so tight and hard that it hurt Bessie. "I'll let you off with liking, if you'll give me that ; at my age I don't even venture to say for myself that I'm very much in love."

And with that, the eyes, which had betrayed him before, flashed in Bessie's face a contradiction of her elderly lover's words. Yes ! it astounded himself almost as much as it did Bessie. He would still have flatly contradicted anybody who accused him of that folly ; but he went away with an undeniable blush into the London streets, self-convicted. A year's observation and an hour's talk had resulted in a much less philosophical sentiment than Mr Brown was prepared for. He went back to the streets, wondering what she would like in all those wonderful shop-windows. He traced back, step for step, the road they had come together. He was not six-and-forty—six-and-twenty was the true reading. That was a May-day of his youth that had come to him, sweet if untimely ; a missed May-day, perhaps all the better that it had been kept for him these many tedious years.

And though Bessie cried all the way down to Carlingford, the no she had not said did not occur to her as any remedy for her tears ; and, indeed, when she remembered how she had taken Mr Brown's arm, and felt that she had committed herself

by that act, the idea was rather a relief to Bessie. "It was as bad as saying yes at once," said she to herself, with many blushes. But thus, you perceive, it was done, and could not be altered. She must stand to the consequences of her weakness now.

It made a great noise in Carlingford, as might be supposed; it made a vast difference in the household of Mrs Christian, which was removed

to the house in which she had formerly hoped to establish herself as heir-at-law. But the greatest difference of all was made in that dim, spacious, wainscoted dining-room, which did not know itself in its novel circumstances. That was where the change was most remarkably apparent; and all these years Phoebe Thomson's shadow has thrown no cloud as yet over the path of John Brown.

THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES.

A NEW SONG.

HAVE you heard of this question the Doctors among,
Whether all living things from a Monad have sprung?
This has lately been said, and it now shall be sung,
Which nobody can deny.

Not one or two ages sufficed for the feat,
It required a few millions the change to complete;
But now the thing's done, and it looks rather neat,
Which nobody can deny.

The original Monad, our great-great-grand sire,
To little or nothing at first did aspire;
But at last to have offspring it took a desire,
Which nobody can deny.

This Monad becoming a father or mother,
By budding or bursting, produced such another;
And shortly there followed a sister or brother,
Which nobody can deny.

But Monad no longer designates them well—
They're a cluster of molecules now, or a cell;
But which of the two, Doctors only can tell,
Which nobody can deny.

These beings, increasing, grew buoyant with life,
And each to itself was both husband and wife;
And at first, strange to say, the two lived without strife,
Which nobody can deny.

But such crowding together soon troublesome grew,
And they thought a division of labour would do;
So their sexual system was parted in two,
Which nobody can deny.

The Origin of Species, by means of Natural Selection. By CHARLES DARWIN, M.A. 1859.

The Temple of Nature; or, the Origin of Society. A Poem. By ERASMUS DARWIN, M.D. 1803.