THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE

AND

THE HEIR APPARENT

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CHAPTER I

When Lord Frogmore arrived at Grocombe Vicarage the day but one before his marriage, Mary was still so pale, so depressed and nervous, that the brisk old bridegroom was much disturbed. It had been agreed in the family that it would be better to say nothing about that visit, which after all, though disagreeable, had done nobody any harm. This arrangement had been consented to by everybody, but Mrs. Hill and Agnes were always doubtful whether the vicar and Mary could keep their own counsel. And it turned out that these discreeter members of the family were right. For, indeed, Lord Frogmore had

not spent an hour with his bride before he ascertained the cause of her low spirits and troubled looks. He was angry yet relieved.

"I had begun to think you had found out since I left you that you could not be happy with an old man," he said.

"Oh, Lord Frogmore!"

"It was a reasonable fear. You are a great deal younger than I am, though you think yourself so old, Mary. However, if it is only Mrs. John and the dowager who have frightened you, it is to be hoped we may get over that."

Mary shivered but did not speak. It was her cold hanging about her still, her mother thought, but Lord Frogmore was not quite of that opinion.

"They must have said something very nasty to take such a hold upon you. What was it? Come now, Mary. You will not make me think worse of them (which is what you are afraid of) by anything you can tell me, and it will be a relief to you to get it out."

"It was—nothing particular," Mary said; but again a shudder ran through her. "It was just, I suppose, what people say when they are very angry."

"Come, Mary. What did she say?"

"Oh, Frogmore," cried Mary at last, "she could not mean it. You know she could not mean it. Poor Letitia! she is a mother, and they say a mother will do anything for her children. I am sure she had no ill meaning. She said she hoped I would be cursed, that if I had a——oh, I can't, I can't repeat what she said. That she wished I were dead, or would go mad, or——No, no, she could not mean it. People don't curse you nowadays. It is too dreadful," Mary cried, and she shivered more and more, wrapping herself up in her shawl.

"The devil," cried Lord Frogmore. "The little fierce devil!—a mother. She is no more a mother than a tigress is. She hates you because after all her ill-treatment of you, you will have the upper hand of her. And I hope you will take it and make her feel it too. What a woman for my poor brother John to have brought into the family! I can forgive his mother, who is as stupid as a figure-head, but would cut herself or any one else in little pieces if she thought it would be good for John; but not John's wife, the odious little shrew—the——"

"Oh, Frogmore," cried Mary, "don't speak of her so. I can never forget how kind she was to me."

"Kind to you—accepting all your time and care and affections and downright hard work, and giving you how much for them?—nothing. Now, Mary, there must be an end of this. She has made a slave of you. I hope you don't mean to let her make a victim of you at the end."

"Oh—she could not mean it. I don't think she could mean it; but to curse me—just when every one, even the old women in the almshouses, send their blessing."

Mary fell into a fit of shivering again, vainly wrapping herself in the shawl to restore warmth, and keeping with difficulty her teeth from chattering. The old lord was much disturbed by this sight. He tried to caress and soothe her into composure, but elicited little save a weeping apology. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Frogmore."

"Mary," he said at length, "I suppose we're both agreed as to the source from which blessings and curses come—or rather, let us say good fortune and bad, for I don't like to credit God with the curses, for my part."

Mary, a little startled, looked at him with wide open eyes, the tears, for the moment at least, arrested. She was not sure whether he was not about to say something profane, and as a clergyman's daughter she felt it her duty to be on her guard.

"Well," said Lord Frogmore, "I shouldn't, for my part, think the people who call down curses were very likely to be heard up there —do you think so, my dear? If they are, it is not in accordance with anything we know. Curses are only in use in romance books. And as for believing that Mrs. John has any credit in that quarter, I don't, Mary. I'd back the old women in the almshouses against twenty Mrs. Johns."

It was very profane—still it introduced a view of the subject which proved, after a while, consolatory to Mary. She recognised reason in it. And the presence of the old lord, who was so cheerful and self-possessed, and was afraid of nobody, was also very supporting, as Mrs. Hill said. He had the confidence of a man who had always been accustomed to have his own way, and to be baulked by nobody, which is a great prop to the minds of people

who have the persistent sensation, due to the records and traditions of many failures, that something is always likely to interpose between the cup and the lip. Lord Frogmore did not take any such contingency into consideration. When he found that Mary's cold was so obstinate he changed all his plans with the most lordly indifference to calculations, and resolved to take her to the Riviera for what he had too much sense to call the honeymoon. "Moons," he said to Mr. Hill, "do not drop honey when the bridegroom is sixty-seven, but I hope to make it very pleasant to Mary for all that." And this was exactly what he did. The marriage and all the little fuss and excitement—for the parish was moved from one end to the other for the vicar's daughter and her wonderful match—shook her up and roused her spirits. And she wanted to do credit to the old lord, and would not have him carry off a bride with watery eyes and a red nose. So that even before they left Grocombe, Mary had recovered herself. She had few wedding presents, for her friends were not rich enough to send anything worthy of a lady who was going to be a viscountess. But there was one which moved

her much, and amused the old lord. The family at the Hall had taken no notice of what was going on in the vicarage—indeed it was so rough a man's house that the amenities of life were disregarded altogether. But the day before the wedding Ralph Ravelstone, who had been known to be at home, but had showed very little, appeared at the vicarage with a stable-boy behind him leading a colt. He went in to the house, leaving this group at the gate, and paid his respects to the family, where he was received without enthusiasm. "You see I've come back," he said.

"Yes, we heard you had come back," said Mrs. Hill.

"Mary would tell you. I'm rather put out about Mary. I always meant," said Ralph, "to marry her myself. Oh, I don't mind if Frogmore hears. He's a connection of mine and very jolly. I always meant to marry her myself."

"You showed your good taste, Mr. Ralph; but I am glad that I was first in the field," said Lord Frogmore.

"That's what it is to have plenty of money," said Ralph, with a grave face. "You see

things on the other side didn't turn out as well as I expected. I've brought her a wedding present, though. He looks leggy at present, but he's a good sort. You wouldn't know his sire's name, perhaps, but it's well known in Yorkshire, and if he's well trained he'll make a horse. There he is at the gate. I don't say but he looks a bit leggy as he is now ——"

"Oh—is it that foal? I am sure it was very kind of you, Ralph," said Mrs. Hill, in an extremely doubtful tone.

They had all gone to the window to look, and for a moment there had been some perplexity in the minds of the ladies as to which of the two animals visible was the wedding present — the half-grown stable-boy or the neglected colt. Mary repeated, still more doubtfully, "I am sure it is very kind of you, Ralph," and there was a momentary pause of consternation. But this Lord Frogmore disposed of in his brisk way.

"We'll send him to the Park," he said, "where I don't doubt he'll be attended to; and who knows what races you may win with him, Mary? She shall run him under

her own name. We'll make the Frogmore colours known on the turf, eh, my dear? Mr. Ravelstone has given you a most valuable present, and for my part I am very much obliged."

"Lord Frogmore always speaks up handsome," said Ralph. "I saw that the first moment we met at Tisch's little place. And that little shaver, don't you remember? By Jove, now he'll have his little nose put out of joint."

It was not perhaps a very elegant joke, and the ladies took no notice of it save by alarmed mutual glances between themselves. But Frogmore — the refined and polite little old gentleman, Frogmore, with his old-fashioned superiority in manners, Frogmore — laughed! There was no doubt of it — laughed and chuckled with satisfaction.

"Well," he said, "such things can't be helped. It's best in all circumstances not to count one's eggs before—— My brother John's family were, perhaps, what we may call a little cocksure."

"I don't know much about your brother," said Ralph. "But, lord, I shouldn't like to

come in Tisch's way when she knows. Oh, she knows, does she? I'd just like to see her face when she reads it in the papers. Tisch is a fine one for pushing on in the world, but when she's roused——"

"Ralph," said Mrs. Hill, "you might be better employed than speaking against your sister. She has been very kind to Mary; and Lord Frogmore would never have met my daughter at all if it had not been in her house."

"That was all the worse for me, perhaps," said Ralph.

"You are quite right, my dear lady," said Lord Frogmore. "We have all, I am sure, the greatest respect for Mrs. John. She has made my brother an excellent wife, and she has put me in the way of acquiring for myself a similar blessing." He made this little speech in his precise way, quite concluding the argument, and even quieting Ralph in a manner which much impressed the ladies. But the big bushman shook his head and his beard as he went away. "That's all very well," he said, "but if Tisch has ever a chance to come in with a back-hander——" He

went off, continuing to shake his head all the way.

Fortunately, Mary did not notice this, being diverted by the perplexity and embarrassment caused by Ralph's "leggy" gift, what to do with it, how to find accommodation for it in the little stable at the vicarage, already occupied by an old and self-opinionated pony, very impatient of being interfered with. But Mrs. Hill and Agnes shook their heads too behind the bride's back. If Tisch ever had it in her power to do an ill turn to Mary! Even all the excitement of the wedding preparations could not banish this thought from Mrs. Hill's mind. She impressed upon her other daughter the oft-repeated lesson that there is no light without an accompanying shadow. "In the course of nature," said the vicar's wife, "poor Mary will be left a widow to struggle for herself. It is true that the settlement is all we could desire —but if Tisch is at the back of it, her husband being the heir, how can we know what may happen—and your father an old man, and me with so little experience in the ways of the world——"

"But, mother," said Agnes, with hesitation,

"Mary is not so old, she is only two years older than I am. She may have——"

"Oh, my dear! Heaven forbid there should be any family!" cried Mrs. Hill, lifting up her hands and eyes.

CHAPTER II

MARY came back from her travels a most composed and dignified young matron, bearing her honours sweetly, yet with a mild consciousness of their importance. I say young, for though she was forty she had always preserved her slim youthfulness of aspect, and the unwrinkled brow which belongs to a gentle temper and contented soul. She looked younger as Lady Frogmore than she had done as Miss Hill. The simple dresses, which were perhaps a little too simple for her age, had not become her so well as those she now wore, the rich silks and velvets which the ladies at the vicarage felt and pinched and admired with an elation of soul in regarding "Our Mary," which it would be impossible to put into words. Mrs. Hill herself had now a velvet dress, a thing to which she had looked wistfully all

her life as the acme of female grandeur without any hope of ever attaining it; and Agnes had been supplied with a little trousseau to enable her to pay in comfort her first visit to the Park. But when Mary appeared in the Frogmore diamonds at the head of her own table, receiving the best people in the county, Agnes was silent in awe and admiration. For Mary Hill, who had never asserted herself anywhere, had insensibly acquired the self-possession of her new rank, her sister could not tell how. And the little old gentleman beamed like a wintry sun upon his household and his guests. Impossible to imagine a kinder host, a more delightful brother-in-law. He was good to everybody who had ever had to do with Mary: the old aunts in London; even, oddly enough, Ralph Ravelstone, who had so frankly informed Lord Frogmore of his intention to marry Mary had all gone well with him. There had been an additional little episode about Ralph which nobody knew of, not even Mary herself. For Lord Frogmore had received from Mrs. John Parke, a day or two before the marriage, the note which Mary had written to Ralph, begging him to meet her at the sundial in

the grounds of Greenpark on that eventful day on which Lord Frogmore had made his first appearance. The reader may recollect that this note had been an urgent appeal for an interview, Letitia having demanded of Mary that she should send Ralph away. Lord Frogmore burnt the little note, which, indeed, was evidently a note written in great perturbation of mind, and drew his wife into conversation upon the events of the day, from which he very speedily came to an understanding of the situation, and the exact character of Mary's intercourse with Ralph. He replied by a most polite note to Letitia, informing her that he was very glad to be able to do, in response to her friendly recommendation, something for her brother—not, perhaps, equal to his merits, but the best that was in his power—by making Ralph agent for his Westmoreland property. There was not very much responsibility, nor a large income, but at all events a life of activity and freedom which he believed was in consonance with Mr. Ravelstone's habits and tastes. Letitia was entirely overwhelmed by this communication. She grew pale while she read, overawed as by a superior spirit.

It will be well, however, to draw a veil over the behaviour of Letitia at this trying moment of her career. She had reason to be angry. There were scarcely any of the lookers on at this drama of ordinary life who did not acknowledge that. All her actions for years had been shaped by the conviction that sooner or later she would be Lady Frogmore. She had married John Parke on that understanding. It is possible, indeed, that, as no one else offered, she might have married him anyhow, for the substantial, if modest, advantages which his individual position secured. But nowadays Letitia did not remember that, and felt convinced that she had married him because he was heir presumptive to Lord Frogmore. Who could say now when that designation might be erased from the peerage? And even if it were never erased, there was still the humiliating certainty that Mary—Mary Hill—was my Lady Frogmore, a fact that produced paroxysms almost of madness in the bosom of Mrs. John Parke. And she had a right to be angry. Even Mrs. Hill allowed this. To have had for years only an old bachelor between you and your highest hopes—and then

that he should marry at sixty-seven! If ever woman had a grievance, Letitia was that woman. A certain amount of rage, virulence, revengeful feeling was what everybody expected. It was even allowed that the fact of the interloper being a dependent of her own—a useful old friend—made things worse. She was bound, indeed, for her own sake, to preserve appearances a little more than she did; but, except in that respect, nobody blamed her. It was a very hard case. And more than by anybody else was this felt by Lady Frogmore, who did everything that woman could do to conciliate Letitia. She sent endless presents to the children, invited them to the Park—endeavoured in every way to keep them in the foreground. She even urged that Duke should spend as much time with them as possible, in order that Lord Frogmore should get to know his heir! His heir! Poor Mary insisted upon this—repeated it, lost no opportunity of directing attention to the fact—good heavens!—until at last one day——

One day—it was early in the year, a day in spring, when she had been married for more than a twelvemonth, and had quite got used to

her position, and felt as if she had worn velvet and diamonds, and a coronet upon her pocket-handkerchiefs, all her life. Mary had got so used to it all that when a stranger in a London shop, or a cottager, or any person of the inferior classes called her ma'am instead of my lady, she was much amused by the mistake. And she had forgotten all evil prognostications, and was almost happy in a sort of truce with Letitia, kept up by the presents and the visits and numberless overtures of amity which it pleased her to make, and which Mrs. John condescended to accept. She had begun to think that all was well, and to know herself to be happy, and to feel as if nobody could ever be ill or die, or fall into trouble more.

When suddenly Mary made a discovery—the first suspicion of which threw her into a faintness which made the world swim all about her. It was a beautiful day, full of light and life and hope. The birds were twittering in every tree, talking over their new nests and where to build them, flitting about to look at different sites. Mary was out walking in the grounds, rejoicing in the lovely air, when suddenly it occurred to her what was the matter

with her, for she had been slightly invalidish—out of her usual way. All at once her head swam, her whole being grew faint. She tottered along as well as she could till she came to one of the late cuttings in the avenue, where the great trunk of a tree was lying on the side of the path: and there she sat down to think. A great tremor came over her, a something of sweetness indescribable, something like the welling out of a fountain of joy and delight. She had never been a knowing woman or experienced in the events of life, but rather prim and old-maidish in her reserve. And she had not known or thought what might be going on; was this what it was? She sat down to think, and for half an hour Mary's mild spirit was, as it were, in heaven. Tears, delicious tears came to her eyes—a tender awe came over her, a feeling which is one of the compensations of women for the many special troubles that they have to bear. As the one is indescribable, so are the others. Mary could not for her life have put into words the emotions which filled her heart.

Presently Lord Frogmore came in sight walking briskly up the avenue, the trimmest,

most active, cheerfullest of old gentlemen. He was never far off from where his wife was, liking to be near her, regarding her with an honest homely affection that had something pathetic in it. He came up to her quickening his pace. "Are you tired, Mary," he said, "or were you waiting for me?"

"Partly the one and partly the other," said Mary, bringing herself back to ordinary life with a little start and shock. He seated himself beside her upon the tree.

"I think, my dear," he said, "that you have been of late more easily tired than you used to be."

"Oh, no," said Mary, with a sudden flush, for she was jealous of her secret, and shy as a girl, not knowing how it ever could be put into words. She got up quickly, shaking her skirts from the dead leaves which had been lying in the crevices. "I am not in the least tired now," she said, "and it is time to get home."

"On account of little Duke?" said Lord Frogmore. "You may be sure the boy is happy enough. I think you are as fond of that boy, Mary, as if he were your own."

She had been a step in advance of him going on, but now she turned round suddenly and gave him a look—such a look. Never in all their life before had Mary's mild eyes confessed such unfathomable things. The look filled Lord Frogmore with amazement and dismay. "Mary," he said, "my dear, what is the matter? What has happened? What is wrong?"

She made him no reply; but suddenly the light went out altogether from the eyes which had turned to him so solemn and wonderful a look. And Mary did what she had never done in her life — slid down at his feet in a faint, falling upon the grass on the side of the way. It was all so quiet — so instantaneous — that poor Lord Frogmore was taken doubly unprepared. There was nothing violent even about the fall. She slipped from his side noiselessly, and lay there without a movement or a cry. The old lord was for a moment terrified beyond measure, but presently perceived that it was merely a faint, and knelt down by her, taking off her bonnet, fanning her with his hat, watching till the life should come back. He had shouted for help, but Mary came to herself

before any help arrived. She raised herself from the ground, the damp freshness of which had restored her, and put up her hand to her uncovered head in confusion. And then the colourless face suddenly flushed red, and she cried, "Oh, what have I been doing? I beg your pardon. I beg your pardon, Frogmore."

"Hush, my dear, you have done nothing but what is quite natural," said the old lord, who was far more experienced than Mary. "Don't hurry yourself, nor jump up in that impetuous way. Gently, gently, my love, here is some one coming. Bring round the pony carriage at once, Gregory, your mistress is tired. At once, I say."

"Oh, I can walk. There is really nothing the matter, Frogmore."

"Nothing at all, my dear," said Lord Frogmore cheerfully. "Keep quite quiet and don't disturb yourself." He sat down beside her on the grass, though he knew it was very bad for him. "Never mind the bonnet, you don't want it this pleasant day. And what pretty hair you have, Mary! It is a good thing when your bonnet falls off, it shows your pretty hair."

With such words he soothed her, with little

compliments and tendernesses as if she had been a child, divining many things, and not feeling any of those inclinations to blame which younger husbands exercise so freely. Lord Frogmore was all indulgence for the wife who was young in his eyes, so much younger than himself. He put her into the little carriage when it came, and drove her gently home with all the care of a father. Mary had quite recovered herself by this time, and had arranged her bonnet and looked herself, trim as usual, though a little pale, when Gregory came jingling back with the quiet pony and the little cart in which Mary herself drove about the park. And they had quite a cheerful drive home, though Mary's subdued tones—she who always was so quiet—and paleness were very touching to her old husband. But when they reached the hall door, where her maid and the housekeeper were both waiting, having heard that Lady Frogmore had been ill, and being both of them better instructed women than she—just as she stepped out of the carriage with her husband's help, smiling and saying it was nothing, there was a childish shout in the hall, and Duke, rushing out with a bound, flung himself upon her.

"Oh, Aunt Mary, I've got something to tell you—I've got something to tell you!" cried the boy.

"Get away with you, child," said Lord Frogmore; "out of the way—out of the way. Don't you see she's ill?"

The colour that had been coming back fled out of Mary's cheeks again. Her eyes once more gave a look of anguish, straight into her husband's heart. She stopped as if struck to stone, with her foot upon the step. But she did not faint again as they feared. She put out her hand to the boy.

"He must not suffer—he must not suffer. Promise me," she said, with a shudder, "that he shall not suffer, Frogmore."

Fortunately this was said almost under her breath, so that no one could distinguish what it was except the old lord himself, who was extremely distressed and puzzled. He remained downstairs very anxious while the women attended Mary to her room. What should little Duke have to do with it? Why should he be brought in? The child hung about his uncle asking a thousand questions. What was the matter with Aunt Mary? Why did she

look so pale? Was she going to bed so early before tea? What did she want with the doctor? Duke had not discrimination enough to see that he was not wanted, but when Lord Frogmore's patience broke down, and he said sharply, "Go away, child; for goodness sake go away," Duke retired in great offence, feeling that the world was a desert, and that nothing but an abrupt return home would make it worth while to live. It was all he could do to keep himself from setting out at once on foot. He rushed out into the hall with that intention, but was checked by the sight of the butler at the door, who was still giving his instructions to the mounted groom outside. "He's to come as fast as he can, and you're to go on wherever he may have gone till you find him—a deal of fuss about nothing," the butler was saying. "My missus——" but here he broke off, seeing the puzzled face of little Duke; and the groom rode off at great speed, as if he had never lingered for a minute's gossip during all his life.

"Is Aunt Mary very ill?" said Duke.

"I don't think so, sir; no more than other ladies," said the experienced butler.

"Mamma's ill sometimes," said the little boy.

"They mostly is, sir," returned the other grimly.

"But she won't take nasty physic as we have to do—nurse never asks me, though I am the oldest, and the one that is of most consequence."

"You've always been the heir, my little gentleman," said the little butler, "and made a deal of fuss with; but I wouldn't say nothing on that subject if I were you now."

"Why?" said Duke, opening large eyes; but Mr. Upjames had occupied enough of his precious time with a little boy, and now turned away vouchsafing no reply.

CHAPTER III

LORD FROGMORE had always been cheerful, but now he was gayer than ever—for to be sure Mary soon recovered from her momentary illness, which was more nerves than anything else, though she was so far from being a nervous subject. She was taken the greatest care of during that summer, and the old lord looked twenty years younger. He whistled when he went out for his walks, he had a smile and a pleasant word for everybody. He grew absolutely juvenile in his extreme satisfaction with himself and everything about him. "You'd say fifty-five at the very most to see him smirking along the road like a new-married man," said the old woman at the gates, who was just Lord Frogmore's age, and "expected" a great-grandchild in a week or two. Nothing could exceed his satisfaction and complacency.

He reconciled himself to Duke by presenting the boy with a pony all to himself to take home, which had been Duke's chief earthly desire—and took him to the stables to see the "leggy" colt, which was Uncle Ralph's present, and which had grown into a tough but not lovely hunter, justifying his original owner's prophecy.

"Do you think Aunt Mary could ride this, Duke?" the old gentleman asked, with a chuckle.

"Aunt Mary!" cried the boy with a shout, "she's frightened of Polo when he's fresh."

"So she is," said Lord Frogmore. "I shouldn't wonder if she let you ride this one when your father takes you out with him."

"Oh, Uncle Frogmore! why, he could step over the big fence without jumping at all," cried Duke in ecstasy. The old lord was kind to the boy, kinder than he had ever been before.

Why it was that Letitia should have come herself to fetch Duke home on that occasion I have never ascertained. Perhaps it was something in the air, one of those presentiments, sympathetic or antipathetic, brain-waves as the wise call them, which suggested to Mrs. John

Parke the possibility of some new turn in the aspect of affairs. She did not ask any questions or receive any definite information during her stay of three days, at least from the heads of the house, but no doubt she drew her own conclusions from the extreme cheerfulness of the old lord and the subdued but anxious conciliatory ways of Mary. Mary was always conciliatory, always anxious to make up to Letitia as for an imaginary wrong, but she had never been so anxious as now. She took advantage of a birthday in the family to send a great box full of presents in which every child in the house had a share. She was eager to know if there was anything Letitia wanted—a desire in which Mrs. Parke did not balk her, notwithstanding that it was gall and wormwood to receive anything from Mary's hands. We have all, however, a good deal of gall and wormwood to swallow in the course of our lives, and it was something to secure a solid advantage even at that cost. Letitia did not let her pride stand in the way. But to come to the Park and see Mary in full possession, with that old fool, as his sister-in-law called him, smirking and smiling at her, and everybody serving her

hand and foot, was hard for Letitia to endure at any time—and was doubly hard now. For all the more that she was not told anything, Mrs. Parke felt danger and destruction in the air. The care with which Mary was surrounded, the gaiety of Lord Frogmore, seemed proof positive at one moment of the failure of all her own hopes. But then she said to herself, why were they so exuberant towards Duke, petting the boy as he had never been petted before? This bewildered his mother, for she would not herself have felt any compunction in such a case. Her feelings in Mary's circumstances would have been pure triumph. Thus notwithstanding the assurance given by her maid, and all the other signs which she could not ignore, Letitia left the Park with her son, still unsatisfied. Duke was kissed and blessed and tipped more than ever when he left the Frogmores. His pony had been sent off in charge of a groom, every distinction was done to him that could have been done to the future heir. If it was all because he was no longer certain to be the heir! but that was beyond the intuitions of Mrs. John Parke. She went home in heaviness and anger, but still uncertain what to believe. All that

she could do was to make poor John's life very uncomfortable to him when she returned. He was cast down too, as was natural. He walked up and down the room gloomily with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders thrust up to his ears as she told the story of her visit. When they were alone Mrs. Parke exercised some uncomfortable economies, though she always contrived to do her husband credit when guests were in the house. Thus there was only one small lamp in the room and no fire, though the day had been damp and cold, and John Parke did not feel disposed to warm himself as his wife did with hot cups of tea.

"Well," he said with a sigh—"there was nothing else to be expected. You might have made up your mind to that from the day they were married; I did," said John with a nod of his head, which was sunk between his shoulders, as if he had been the most foreseeing philosopher in the world.

"I have not made up my mind yet," said Letitia, "for why didn't they tell me? Mary could never have kept in her triumph. And as for Frogmore, he would have been bursting

with it. To be sure, Felicie—but I don't put much faith in what the maids say. And then, why should they have been so more than usually fond of Duke? No, I won't believe it," Mrs. Parke cried; "they couldn't have resisted the triumph over me."

"I tell you what," cried John, "I won't have that little brute of a pony in my stables. If Frogmore chooses to give Duke presents like that he must keep it for him. A little beast! and fit to eat as much corn as my best hunter. I can't have it here."

"John! We must not offend Frogmore."

"Oh, offend Frogmore! When you tell me we are to be cut out and disinherited and lose everything."

"I never said that. I wouldn't say it," said Mrs. Parke piously, "even if the worst had happened; for there's always Providence to take into account, and measles and whooping-cough and that sort of thing. And it might be a girl, and a hundred things might happen —if it's anything at all, which I don't believe myself," Letitia said, yet with a tremor at her heart. "Go away, for goodness sake, and dress," she added with irritation; "to see you

going up and down, up and down, like the villains in the theatre, is more than my nerves can stand. For goodness sake go away."

"I can't take this sort of news so easily as you do," said John, with his head upon his breast.

"So easily as I do! Oh, go away, go away, and don't drive me mad with your folly," cried his wife. "Do you think it can ever be half as much to you as it is to me? To see that Mary Hill in the place that should be mine, to kiss her and pretend to be friends when I could tear her in pieces with my hands, to see your old fool of a brother, who ought to have been dead and buried——"

"Letitia, not a word against Frogmore!"

"Oh, fiddlesticks about Frogmore! as if one could have any patience with an old—— He ought to have been dead and buried long ago. No man has a right to live on for ever, and keep other people out of their rights. And to marry at that age! It ought to be punished like murder. It's as bad as murder and robbery and sacrilege and high treason all together. I can't think how you can find a word to say for him, John Parke."

"For one thing he's not seventy—as you may see in any peerage——"

"Oh, don't talk to me!" cried Letitia; and what answer could be made to that? Altogether Greenpark was on that evening a melancholy house.

Such questions cannot remain long in doubt, and before the summer was at all advanced Mrs. Parke was compelled to give full credence to the terrible truth. Needless to say that in the bottom of her heart she had been certain of it all along, though she held out so stoutly and would not acknowledge it to be true. But when it became known that Mrs. Hill and Agnes had arrived at the Park for a long visit, Mrs. John had a paroxysm of almost frenzy which for a day or two kept her to her bed, where she lay devouring her soul with imaginations of what was happening. Imaginations! Did she not know as well as if she had seen them what was going on? Mrs. Hill, oh with what beaming of pleasure on her face, bustling about, putting everybody right. Agnes, like another Mary, full of importance too. The family from the vicarage altogether at the head of affairs, regulating everything, occupying the

whole place, scarcely leaving room enough in his own house for poor old Frogmore, the old fool, the old ass, who had brought all this upon his family. Letitia raged within herself with internal war and wails of wrath and anguish, like a wild beast, for three days; and then she got up and announced her intention of paying a visit to the Park.

"It's only right that I should go and ask for her!" she said, with a curl of her lip over her teeth, which made this English lady look like an hyena.

"For goodness sake, Letitia, mind what you're about. Don't go and betray yourself," said her husband in alarm.

"Oh, you may leave me to take care of that," she said.

She arrived quite suddenly and unexpectedly, without a maid even, with a small travelling bag. "I felt that I must see dear Mary once more before—— At her age one always feels a little nervous for an affair of this kind," she said sympathetically to Lord Frogmore, whose radiant countenance naturally clouded over at this remark. "I can go home to-night if there's no room for me," she added, "though

I brought a bag, you see, in case I should stay."

"There must always be room for my brother John's wife in any circumstances," said the polite old lord, but he did not lead the way into the inner sanctuary until he had carried the news of this unexpected arrival. "Mrs. John Parke, my dear," he said, "is so terribly anxious about you, Mary, that she has come all this way to know how you are."

"Oh, Letitia!" cried Mary, and "Tisch!" cried Agnes, in equal consternation. They looked at each other and grew pale.

"Let me go down and speak to her. She will frighten Mary out of her wits if she comes upstairs."

"Oh, no," said Mary faintly, "she must come in. Oh, Frogmore, I can't blame her, when I think of those poor children. Perhaps she will feel a little more for me—now——"

"Feel for you! You are the happiest woman I know," said Agnes, indignant at her sister's weakness.

"She feels nothing but envy and malice and all uncharitableness," cried the old lord. "Never mind, my love. We'll do our best

for the children all the same; but you won't let a woman like that interfere with your happiness, Mary?"

"N—no," said Mary doubtfully. She grew very white, and then very red, and cried, "Oh, let her come at once, let me get it over," with something that was very like a cry of despair.

But there was no offence in Letitia's looks when she made her appearance. She explained again that she had brought a bag in case they could have her for the night, but otherwise that she could very well return to Greenpark the same day, for she would not for all the world upset dear Mary. Her eyes went round the room taking in everything at a glance. Oh, so like the Hills, she said to herself. Just what she would have expected of them. The big chair which was exactly Mrs. Hill, as if it had been made in imitation of her, and all the little trumpery ornaments and things, little pots of flowers and so forth. But Letitia took the chair which was like Mrs. Hill, feeling a momentary satisfaction in disturbing the habit which no doubt the vicar's wife had already formed of sitting there, and beamed upon

the little party as if she were as happy in her friend's prospects as any of the family could be.

It was not until the evening that she showed the claws that were hid under all this velvet. She had been so *nice*, so exactly what a sympathetic sister-in-law should be, that Mary's mother and sister had not hesitated to leave her alone with their interesting invalid. Lord Frogmore had gone out for one of his frequent walks. The twilight was falling upon the long warm August day. It had begun to get a little dim in the room, though Mary through the open window was still watching the last evening glories in the western sky. Mary, too, had lost her fear of Letitia. It was so much more natural to think well of every one; to believe at bottom an old friend must always be kind. And what could be more natural between two old friends than to go back at such an hour upon the past, especially the past which had linked them so much more closely together?

"When one thinks," said Letitia with a laugh, "how strangely things come about. Do you remember, Mary, how we met in the

picture gallery? It was the Grosvenor Gallery, wasn't it? But no; they had not begun then. It must have been in the Academy, I suppose. It was just a chance, as people say, that took you and me there at the same time. You were with those old-fashioned aunts of yours. And you were very old-fashioned yourself, my dear, if I may say so now. Very neat, you know—you always were neat—but your things looking as if they had all been made at home, and made a good while ago, and so well taken care of. Oh, I think I can see you now! and to think from that chance meeting how much has come!"

"Yes, indeed," said Mary, "when one thinks of it as you say——" Poor Mary's voice trembled. She gave a despairing glance towards the door. But no one came to her rescue. Mrs. Hill and Agnes were busy laying out a whole wardrobe of "things" to show to Tisch.

"Yes—when one thinks of it—what put it into my head, I wonder, to ask you to come to Greenpark for a long visit? I hadn't so much as thought of you for years, and all at once I saw you standing there, and the thought came

into my head. If something hadn't put that into my mind how different everything might have been for both of us! You would have been just Mary Hill, the vicar of Grocombe's daughter, living very poorly in that dreadful old place, and I should have been —well, looking forward sooner or later to having this nice old house, and the title and all that. Dear me, how little one knows what difference in one's life a rash word can make!"

"You can't feel it more than—I do, Letitia," said Mary in very subdued and tremulous tones, pulling closer round her with her old agitated movement the lace shawl that had replaced her knitted one.

"Oh, yes," said Letitia, "I do, my dear, for I have suffered by it, you know, while you have benefited—that makes all the difference in the world. When I think how different things might have been had I only just said, 'How d'ye do, Mary?' and gone by. Then you would never have met Frogmore, never had it in your power to change everything, never turned against me and the poor children——"

"Letitia, oh, don't say I have turned against you. How have I turned against you? I love the children as if—as if——"

"My dear," said Letitia, "you know we needn't discuss that. You would never have turned against us, I am quite sure, if it hadn't been so very much to your own advantage. And nobody would expect you for a moment to have done otherwise. Think of what you've gained by it. A title—who would have thought of a title for one of the vicar of Grocombe's daughters?—and everything that heart could desire. A handsome house, two very fine places which you know Frogmore has, not to speak of the house in town which he lets, but which I'm sure you won't allow him to go on letting. And now having got everything else, you're going to have an heir, Mary Hill—oh, I forgot, you're not Mary Hill, you're my Lady Frogmore—an heir, which is the best of all, to turn my poor boy out of his chance, out of what we all thought so sure. No, I don't want to say it—I'm amazed at myself for saying it, but I can't help it. I'm Duke's mother, and I can't—I can't but think of my boy."

"Oh, Letitia!" said Mary piteously, holding out her hands in an agonised appeal.

"Oh, I don't blame you," cried Letitia; "how could you be supposed not to think of your own advantage? What am I to you? What are we to you that you shouldn't think of yourself first? Oh, of course you thought of yourself first. It would have been quite unnatural if you hadn't done so. But I can't help dwelling on it, Mary, with little Duke upon my mind, and thinking what we must do with him, and that he must be brought up to get his own living now. I can't help thinking if I had just said, 'How d'ye do, Mary?' that day—if I had taken no more notice and never thought, 'Well, they're very poor at the vicarage, and one person's living would never be missed in our house, and that it might be such a thing for you.' Oh, if I hadn't been so silly, how different everything might have been. I don't blame you; not the least in the world; for of course you thought first of what was to your own advantage. But I do blame myself! Oh, I do blame myself! If it hadn't been for that you would never have seen Lord Frogmore, and how different everything would have been."

"Oh, Letitia!" cried Mary, as she had done at intervals all through this long address. The tears were pouring down her cheeks. Sometimes she hid her face in her hands; sometimes raised it to give her tormentor an appealing look, a protest against this cruelty. "Oh, Letitia, Letitia, spare me. It is not my fault. I never thought—I never believed—I would rather have died than injure you or the children. It made me ill when I first knew, to think of little Duke. Oh, Letitia, I think my heart will break!"

"Oh, my dear," said Letitia, "I know all about hearts breaking. It never stops you from having your own way. What is the use of saying you would rather die? Would you rather die with all the good things in life before you? Nonsense, Mary! Don't talk to me as if I didn't know all about it. Now you'll be petted and fêted and made as if there never was the like before. You and your baby—while my poor Duke, my Duke, that was the real, rightful heir——"

Mrs. John burst forth in sobs and tears, and the room grew darker and darker. Mary, huddled up in a corner of the sofa, heard and saw no more.

CHAPTER IV

THE baby was born next morning, after a night which was terrible for all the household in the Park. Mrs. John left hurriedly after she had called the attendants to Mary, who, she said, did not seem well. She got the brougham to drive her to the station, saying that she would not stay to add to the trouble of the house at such a moment, but begging the butler to send her a telegram as soon as there was any news to tell, "which will not be long," she said. I think she did feel a little guilty as she drove away. It was, one might say, Letitia's first crime. She had done many things that were very doubtful, and she had not been very regardful of her neighbour generally, nor loved him as herself. Yet she had never addressed herself to a fellow-creature with an absolute and distinct intention to do harm before. And

she was not comfortable. She tried to reassure herself that she had spoken nothing but the truth, and that they deserved nothing better at her hands, but still she was not easy in her mind. She could not get out of her eyes the sight of Mary huddled up in her corner, with nothing but a gasping breath to show that she was alive—nor could she help asking herself what might be happening as she herself hurried through the softly-falling night, getting away as fast as she could from the house in which that drama of life or death was going on. She had heard the scream Agnes gave as she went in with her candle. In the urgency of attending to Lady Frogmore no one noticed Mrs. John running so hastily downstairs. Nobody, she said to herself, would think of identifying her with it, whatever happened. And nothing would happen. Oh, no, no. No such chance. They had constitutions of iron, all those Hills. And why should it harm Mary or any one to hear what was the simple truth?

It was a dreadful night at the Park. The old lord wandered up and down like an unquiet spirit unable to rest. Rogers, who was more

shocked than words could say by an exhibition of feeling which went against all the laws of health, endeavoured in vain to get him to go to bed. "For you can do no good, my lord—none of us can do any good. Things will take their course, and the medical man is here. My lady would be most distressed of all if she knew that you were losing your night's sleep, which is the most important thing, more important even than food. I do entreat your lordship to go to bed. I'll sit up and bring the first news—the very first, if you'll go to bed, my lord."

"It is easy speaking," said Lord Frogmore. "You're a good fellow, Rogers. Go to bed yourself. It's my turn to sit up to-night."

"But it don't affect me—and it will affect your lordship—and what will my lady say to me when she knows?"

"Oh, don't speak to me," cried the old lord, with the water in his eyes. "I'll give you a sovereign for every word she says to you, when she's able to take any notice, Rogers, either of you or me."

"That'll be to-morrow, my lord," said the man, "and I know her ladyship will never put

faith in me again. But at least you'll take your beef-tea."

Lord Frogmore pushed him away, and bade him take the beef-tea himself, and coddle himself up as he had done his master so long. As for himself, he kept trotting up and down-stairs all the night. It was far too late at sixty-eight, after taking such care of himself, to begin this life of emotion and anxiety; and the morning light, when it stole in through all the closed shutters, flouting the candles, and poured down the great staircase, making the lamp in the hall look so foolish, made sad game of the old lord's rosy face, generally so fresh and smooth. But, happily, ease came with the morning, and the best of news: a boy—and all very quiet, and every prospect that everything would go well. Lord Frogmore was allowed to peep at the top of a small head done up in flannel, and at the mother's pale face on the pillow, and then he resigned himself to Rogers to be put to bed. But he was now so overflowing with delight that he chattered like an old woman to his faithful servant. "Rogers," he said, "you've heard it's a boy?"

"Yes, my lord, and I wish you every happiness in him," Rogers said.

"I am afraid my wife will be disappointed," said Lord Frogmore, "she's so fond of my little nephew, little Duke. She would rather it had been a girl for that. Poor little Duke! Now he's quite out of it, the little shaver." And Lord Frogmore laughed. He was sorry for Duke, or at least would have been had there been room in him for anything but joy. "Did I ever tell you, Rogers, what that little fellow said the first time I went to Greenpark, eh? He said, 'When you're dead papa will be Lord Frogmore, and when papa's dead, me.' Poor little shaver! He was too cocksure," said Lord Frogmore again with a triumphant laugh.

"It'll make a deal of difference to him, my lord."

"Yes, it'll make a deal of difference. But they couldn't expect me to consider them before myself," said Lord Frogmore. "A man likes to have an heir of his own, Rogers —a son of his own to come after him."

"Yes, he do, my lord," Rogers said.

"A man loves to have an heir of his own," repeated the old lord with a beaming face,

"his own flesh and blood — his own son to sit in his place. That's what a man prefers before everything, Rogers."

"He do, my lord," Rogers once more replied.

"You put up with it when you can't help it; but a son of your own to come after you, Rogers!"

"Yes, my lord—if you'll drink this while it is hot, and get into bed."

"You're a sad martinet, Rogers. I don't believe you mind a bit, or care, whether it was a girl or a boy. I'll have no beef-tea. I'll have some champagne to drink to the heir."

"Oh, my lord, my lord! You'll have one of your attacks: and then what will her ladyship say to me?" said the much-troubled Rogers, to whom his old master was generally so obedient.

It was enough to drive a man who had the responsibility, whom everybody looked to, out of his mind! At last, however, the old lord was got to bed, and after his exhausting night had a long and sound sleep.

But before Lord Frogmore awoke, agitating rumours had already begun to run

through the house. Nobody quite knew what it was; but it began to be rumoured that her ladyship was not doing so well as was expected, that she was in a bad way. Whether it was fever or what it was nobody could tell. A consciousness of such a fact will breathe through a house or even a country without either details or certainty. The doctor's face, as he came downstairs, his lingering after it was clear he was no longer wanted, an exclamation, surprised from the lips of one of the ladies, or even a gravity in the aspect of the nurse, to whom a curious housemaid had handed in something that was wanted, each supported and strengthened the other. Not so well as might be expected. When Lord Frogmore awoke it was afternoon, for he had slept long in the satisfaction of his soul and the calming of his fears, and he saw a revelation in the face of Rogers when questioned how my lady was. Rogers lied with his lips, or at least he brought forth with a little difficulty the usual words; but Lord Frogmore could not be deceived by his face. The old gentleman rose with a sudden chill at his heart and dressed hurriedly and hastened to his wife's room,

where he could see they were reluctant to admit him. Mary was lying with a clouded countenance, not like herself, not asleep as they said at first, but muttering to herself, and the faces of her sister and the nurse who were watching by her were very anxious. "She wants something. What is it she wants?" said the old lord anxiously. The experienced nurse shook her head with an ominous gravity, and begged that the poor lady might not be disturbed. "They are like that, sometimes," she said, "till they get a good sleep."

"But what is it? What is it she wants? Get her what she wants," said Lord Frogmore, going to the side of the bed. Mary saw him, for she moved a little and raised her voice. "It is a girl — it is a girl — say it is a girl. Say — say it is a girl!" She looked at him with a piteous appeal that broke his heart. Ah, no, she did not know him. She appealed to him as some one new, as one who could satisfy her. "It is a girl—you know—you know it is a girl!" she cried.

The heart of the poor old lord swelled to bursting. This was all as new to him as if he had been a boy-husband, disturbed, yet so

joyful and proud. "No, Mary," he said; "no, my dear. It's a beautiful boy. The thing I desired most in the world: it's the heir."

Mary gave a shriek that rang through all the house. She got up in her bed, her face convulsed with horror and terror. "No, no," she cried; "no, no, no. The heir — not the heir—not the heir. Oh, take it away. Didn't you hear what she said: It will grow up an idiot and kill us. Take it away—take it away."

"Mary!" cried the old lord, taking her hand, "Mary! This is that wretched woman's doing that has frightened her. Mary, my love, it is your own child; a beautiful child. Our son, the boy I wanted, Mary."

Mary snatched her hand from his. She shrank away from him to the other edge of the bed. "No, not a boy—no, no, no!—no heir! —there is an heir," she cried, clutching at the woman who stood on the other side as if escaping from a danger. "He doesn't know—he doesn't know," she cried, flinging herself upon the nurse. "It will grow up an idiot and kill us. Do you hear? Do you hear? Say it's not so—oh, say it's not so!"

"No, no, my poor, dear lady, no, no! It's

as you wish, it'll be all you wish," said the nurse, holding the patient in her arms. And Mary clung to the woman holding her fast, whispering in her ear. Lord Frogmore stood with piteous eyes and saw his wife shrinking from him, talking to the woman, who bent over her, with the dreadful whisper of insanity, which meant nothing. Was this what it had come to—all the pride, and triumph, and joy? The old lord stood with his limbs trembling under him, his old heart sore with disappointment and cold with terror. His mild Mary! What had changed her in a moment, in the midst of happiness, to this frenzied sufferer? When he saw that she kept hiding her head in the nurse's breast, clinging to her, he withdrew sorrowful and subdued to where Agnes sat by the fire with the little bundle of flannel on her lap. She was crying quietly under her breath, and looked up at him as he came towards her with sympathetic trouble. "They say," she whispered, "that it's often so just at first when they want sleep. Oh, don't lose heart!"

"It's that accursed woman," he said, under his breath.

"Oh, I hope not — I hope it's only — she will be better when she has slept. Look at him, poor little darling," said Agnes, unfolding the shawls. Lord Frogmore cast a troubled glance at the poor little heir who seemed about to cost him so dear. He had no heart to look at the child. He crept out of the room afterwards feeling all his years and his unfitness, a man near seventy, for the cares and responsibilities of a father. A father for the first time in his sixty-ninth year. And Mary, Mary! So soon was triumph changed to terror and woe.

The doctor gave him a little comfort when he came. He said that such cases were not very rare. So great a shock and ordeal to go through acted on delicate nerves and organisation with a force they were unable to withstand, and sometimes the mind was pushed off its balance. There would be nothing to be alarmed about if this state should continue for a week or two, or even more. It was not very uncommon. The doctor had various instances on his tongue as glib as if they had been a list of patronesses at a ball. Nothing to be afraid of! It would pass away, he declared,

and leave no sign. As for the interview with Mrs. John, he did not think that had anything to do with it; there was quite enough to account for it without that. He thought it best that Lord Frogmore should keep out of the way, not to distress himself with so melancholy a sight. Yes, it was distressing and melancholy; but soon it would pass over, and be like a dream. The old lord was comforted by this consolatory opinion, for the first hour very much so, hoping, as he was told to hope, that in a few days all that alarmed him might be over, and his wife restored to him. But he was less confident at night, and still less confident next day. Indeed he wanted constant assurance that everything would soon be well. He flagged almost immediately after the new hope had been formed in him, as every day he stole into his wife's room, and every day came downstairs again with the horrible conviction that there was no improvement. Poor Mary! her very face seemed changed; it was haggard and drawn, and her eyes, so wistful and so watchful, shone upon him like stars, not of hope but of misery. Oh, the terror in them, and the watchfulness! For some days she was afraid of

him, and turned to the nurse from him, as if to hide herself from his look. But by-and-by she became quiet, supporting his presence, though keeping always a watchful eye upon him; supporting him and enduring his presence. Oh, what a thing to say of Mary, his gentle wife, his happy companion! The heart of the old lord sank lower and lower as those dreadful days went by.

CHAPTER V

To describe the state of the Park under the effect of this event would be very difficult. It changed altogether in the most curious way. Indeed Lord Frogmore's country seat had gone through several transformations of late. Nothing could have been more composed, more orderly and perfect than it had been under the sway of Mr. Rogers and Mr. Upjames, the respectable valet and butler who had organised the life of the bachelor lord into an elegant comfort and tranquillity which was beyond praise. Everything had gone upon velvet in those halcyon days; not a sound had ever been heard to disturb the calm, save the sound of conversation among the well-chosen visitors or of a cheerful fire burning, a thing which could not be reduced to absolute subjection. There had never been any hitch in the arrange-

ments; not even a crumpled rose-leaf on a couch. The servants moved about like polite ghosts, noiselessly warding off every annoyance. It had been a model of a luxurious home. Then there had come a strange modification when the bride was brought home, and the entire dwelling had recognised her presence with mingled distrust, and affection, and pride. The flutter of women's dresses about the place and women's voices had been at first difficult for the old servants to bear, who had always hitherto kept the women strictly in their proper places, there being no housekeeper—for Mr. Upjames was more than equal to that office—and only a meek cook to make any division of authority. Rogers and Upjames had, however, on the whole taken kindly to Lady Frogmore, who did not attempt to make any fundamental changes, and who always was exceedingly civil, and not jealous of their authority; and they were elated to think that their old lord at sixty-seven was as equal to taking upon him all the responsibilities of life as if he had been thirty. The mild time of Mary's reign had therefore only added a little brightness, a little ornament, a gentle

gaiety to the well-ordered house. Rogers himself had grown younger, and Mr. Upjames added a grace to his perfect manner. The butler had been heard to acknowledge before that he did not feel equal to tackling the ladies, but he made no such acknowledgment now. Lady Frogmore reconciled them to the feminine sex, and the Park gained a certain consequence and liberality and light. It was not so completely centred in the task of making exquisite the comfort of its own master. It began to have thoughts of other people and other things.

But now! The house became at a touch the saddest house. All the great sitting-rooms lay empty, like a sort of vestibule to the rooms upstairs in which trouble and sorrow dwelt. Lord Frogmore came and went with a troubled face. His marriage had not changed his habits much. He had taken all the old precautions to keep in perfect health. His beef-tea and his baths, and the certain amount of walking which was necessary every day, and all his other sanitary regulations, had been fully observed as before. But now he cared nothing for any of these things. He walked about all day, going out in the morning after breakfast, and wander-

ing aimlessly about, instead of his habitual brisk constitutional. But when he came in, instead of going to the library to write his letters or read his papers, all that he did was to walk upstairs to the door of his wife's room to see if there was any change. He came in always with a little hope for the first few weeks, confidently expecting each time he asked the question to hear that she was better. But after that his countenance changed. He became very grave, scarcely smiling, seldom speaking to any one. Every time he came in he went upstairs with the same question; but there was something spiritless in his look, in his step, in his aspect generally, which made you feel that he had given up expecting a good reply. And when the poor little baby, who was the cause of all this trouble, was brought out to take the air and walked about in its nurse's arms up and down the avenue, the old lord would walk up and down too, accompanying the group with a look of such melancholy in his face as was like to break the spectator's heart. The baby, it was allowed on all hands, was very delicate. The flannel shawls, so soft, and white, and fine, were scarcely opened a little from its tiny face

to let in the sunny atmosphere, and with never a smile on his thin old countenance, the father would walk beside it up and down, up and down. Poor little thing! and poor old gentleman! they were at the opposite extremities of human feebleness, and the fully matured life which should have linked them together was not with them. Lord Frogmore did not look much at his little boy. He was afraid of the child lest something should happen to it. It was to him rather a part of the substantial nurse who carried it, and in whose powerful arms it was safer than anything belonging to him. And yet he walked by its side with his brisk step subdued, his head cast down, a melancholy languor about him. The starch seemed to have gone out of his collar, his cheek so rosy and firm had grown limp. To see him turning up and down, up and down by the side of that infant was enough to break any one's heart.

Meanwhile to poor Mary there came but little change. She did not recover as the doctor had promised. She had nothing that could be called a recovery at all. She kept her bed because apparently she had no desire to get

up. And sometimes she would hold long conversations about baby clothes and the like with the nurse, rationally enough, as if her mind was able to occupy itself with ordinary duties. Sometimes even she would allow the baby to be brought to her, and cry over it. "Poor little thing!" she would say, "if that is to be its fate; oh, it is not the little thing's fault. I might be to blame, but it couldn't be to blame. Oh, poor little thing! I'll not cry out if you kill me, poor baby. It will not be you, but dreadful, dreadful fate."

"Oh, my lady, don't talk like that. The child will grow up to be your comfort and joy."

"Listen, then," said Mary, "it's only to you I will tell the secret," and she would put her lips to the woman's ear and whisper that eager, anxious, busy whisper that meant nothing. And when this secret communication was completed, Mary added in her ordinary voice: "So you see we cannot help it, neither he nor I. Oh, to think he should have been born only for this, and to put everything wrong. Take it away, take it away," she would cry suddenly, her voice rising to a scream, thrusting the poor child into her sister's arms. And then

she would draw the nurse to her and whisper again. "Tell him, tell him," she said; but the whisper was never intelligible, and the look which the poor old lord gave her made the unfortunate nurse lose her head altogether. "Oh, my lord!" the woman said, and Mary nodded her head with satisfaction as if everything was being explained. Lord Frogmore would turn away more wretched than ever, unable to elicit a word or hardly a look which reminded him of her former self, and went downstairs to pace up and down the library, up and down, paying no attention to anything. Never was there a more sad house. Agnes, who remained with her sister, though Mary took no notice of her, would steal down after those dreadful interviews to comfort the poor old gentleman.

"She will not speak to me at all," said Agnes, weeping. "She thinks I am a stranger. I don't think she knows me."

"What is she always whispering?" said the old lord. "There must be something in that. The nurse ought to make out what it is. Perhaps she wants something. Perhaps we might find some way to work if we could but know what that whisper was. I don't think

you should stand upon a point of honour, but try—try to understand what she says."

"Oh, dear Lord Frogmore," cried Agnes with tears in her eyes. "It is nothing. I don't think she says words at all."

Lord Frogmore in his trouble ignored this speech. "You should not be punctilious," he said, walking about the long room with short agitated steps. "It may be a matter of life and death. You should not stand upon a point of honour. You should make every effort to understand what your dear sister says."

And it was by a pitiful sort of understanding between them that Agnes said no more. He knew as well as she did that poor Mary's whispered communications were unintelligible —but he would not allow it to be said. He preferred to blame some one for an exaggerated point of honour in not listening, not understanding. Such voluntary miscomprehensions are among the most piteous subterfuges of despair.

It cannot be supposed that Mary's condition and the sad change in the house could be long ignored by Letitia, whose every faculty was on

the alert to know what, if anything, had followed her last dreadful attempt against the unfortunate mother of the heir. Letitia was as yet inexperienced in what may be called crime. She had never, as has been said, knowingly assailed the life or reason of a fellow-creature before, and she had not had any certainty that her attempt would be successful. It was not exactly like a knife or a revolver. Letitia was very well aware that such operations as she had carried out upon Mary would not in the least have affected herself — and, therefore, she felt herself justified in ignoring the possibility of serious harm. But when the news was brought to her, whispered with bated breath, that Lady Frogmore's mind was affected—indeed, that she was mad, which was the succinct way of stating the matter—Letitia was so much startled and horrified that she cried — which did her great good with her husband. John had been uneasy at the vehemence of his wife's hatred of Mary in her new exaltation, and when he saw her suddenly burst into most real tears, his good heart was touched and he felt that he had been doing her injustice. He got up from his seat in his

compunction and went to his wife and caressed and soothed her. "You must go over and inquire, Letitia," he said. And once more Letitia was so moved by genuine horror, that, anxious though she was to know everything, she held back from doing this.

"Oh, John," she said, "I did perhaps say something that was too strong when I knew what her schemings had come to. They might not like me to go."

"I have always told you, Letitia, I did not think there was any scheming about it. But, anyhow, Frogmore would be pleased — he would see that we bear no malice. Of course, I felt it at the first just as you did," said the unconscious John.

"The child," said Letitia, "is very delicate, too." She could not help stealing a glance at John under her eyelids to see whether he would respond.

"Poor people!" said John, "or rather poor old Frogmore, to put off so long and then have such a sad time of it. I'm very sorry for the poor old fellow."

"He had no right to do anything of the kind," Letitia cried.

"Well, it was hard upon us," said John with a sigh; "but I've made up my mind to it now. You had better go over to-morrow and ask how she is."

Letitia was very eager to go, to see with her own eyes what was the condition of affairs; but yet it was not without difficulty that she persuaded herself to return to the house where her last visit had been so disastrous. It was now September, and the days were beginning to get short, but this time she took no bag, nor had she the least intention of staying over the night. An hour would be enough, she thought, to hear all she wanted and see what she could. But her sense of guilt would not be subdued as she approached the house and remembered how she had fled away from it six weeks before, having done all the harm that it was possible to do. She had no intention now of doing any harm; oh, no, no! only to inquire and if practicable see for herself what prospect of sanity there was for Mary or life for her boy. When she met, in her progress up the avenue in the fly she had hired at the station, the little pathetic group above described, the nurse carrying the infant and Lord

Frogmore marching melancholy at its side, she hurriedly stopped and sprang out, feeling that Lord Frogmore was likely to be more easily dealt with than Agnes, whose feminine instincts would divine her object. But Letitia did not find that a very gracious reception awaited her. Lord Frogmore looked up with a little irritation as the cab drew up. He evidently thought a visitor an impertinence. When he was compelled by his sister-in-law's eager and excessively affectionate accost to stop in his walk and speak to her, a gleam of angry light came into his eyes. "Oh, it is you, Mrs. John!" he said.

"Oh, Frogmore," cried the lady, "how is Mary? I could not rest when I heard how ill she was till I had come over to see for myself."

"I do not know," said Lord Frogmore stiffly, "how ill you may have heard she was; but I don't wonder that you should wish to see for yourself."

"No: can you wonder? We have been like sisters almost all our lives."

Though Letitia quaked at the old lord's tone, she felt that it was the wisest way to ignore all offence.

"Sisters, if all tales are true, are not always the best of friends," said Lord Frogmore. "Familiarity interferes with the natural bounds of good breeding. I think, Mrs. John, that I must ask you not to go any further, or at least not to insist on seeing Lady Frogmore."

"Is she so very bad?" said Letitia in a thrilling whisper.

"No," he said with irritation. "I did not say she was very bad. I said I could not admit visitors who, perhaps, might forget what is due to a delicate and sensitive woman."

"I did not know," said Letitia with an injured air, "that I was so little worthy of confidence. I am very sorry that Mary is so ill; so is John. We both felt we could not rest without knowing personally how much or how little of what we hear is true."

"And what do you hear?" Lord Frogmore, though he felt it his duty to defend his wife, was not willingly ungracious, and felt it of all things in the world the most difficult to shut his door in any one's face. His courage failed him when Letitia put forth so reasonable a plea.

"Oh, Frogmore," said Mrs. John, "what is the use of questioning and cross-questioning? Tell me how dear Mary is; that is all I want to know."

He was shaken in his resolution, but still tried to be stern. "What did you say to her," he asked, "the last time you were here?"

"What did I say to her? Oh, a hundred things! and she to me. We talked of how wonderful it was, and how much may come from the smallest event; that if I had not one day met her in the Academy, and asked her to come and stay with me, you might never have met her, and all that has happened would never have been. That was the last thing we talked of. Is it supposed it did any harm, that talk between Mary and me? Oh, Lord Frogmore, people must be malignant indeed if they can find any harm in that."

"I don't know that there was any harm in it. It depends upon how a thing is said, whether there is harm in it or not."

"I know," said Letitia, "that I have enemies in this house. I know Mrs. Hill and Agnes. Oh, Agnes is spiteful! She never

wishes to see Mary with me. She thinks I put her against them; as if I would ever interfere between a woman and her own family. But, Frogmore, you know what women are. They are jealous; they are spiteful; they never lose an opportunity to whisper against one that has done better than themselves. I know very well what it is that turns you against me. It is Agnes Hill that has put things into your head."

"No," he said, but doubtfully, feeling that to think so badly of his brother's wife was very inconvenient, and that perhaps after all it was Agnes who had put it into his head; she had not said much, but it might be she who had suggested it, for it was according to all the tenets with which he was acquainted that a woman should be spiteful, as Letitia said. He hesitated a great deal as to what he should do; whether he should hold by his first resolution to allow Letitia to come no further; or whether it might perhaps be an awakening thing for Mary to see her. Letitia followed him with soft and noiseless steps while he pursued this thought, and then she said suddenly, as if she could contain herself no longer:

"Surely, at least, there can be no reason why I should not see the dear child."

She took the baby out of the nurse's arms as she spoke, and deftly, with practised hands, folded down the coverings in which it was wrapped. The mother of five children knew how to handle with ease and mastery, which made the old lord wonder and tremble, the little fragile new-born baby, which to him was an object so wonderful.

"If I were you," said Letitia to the nurse, "I would not have the child covered up so. The air will do him nothing but good. Throw off all your shawls, and let him breathe the good air. I am sure his mother would say so if she were here."

Letitia, at least in that action, meant no harm to the child. She said it as she would have done to any ignorant cottager who half smothered her baby to keep it from cold. But while she held the infant in her arms, and put down her cheek upon its little dark, downy head, an impulse that was horrible came over her. Oh, the little interloper!—the child so undesired, so unnecessary—who had taken her children's inheritance from them! To think

that a little pressure more than usual, a little more close folding of the shawls, and it would stand in Duke's way no more. The thought made her strain towards her with a sudden throb of almost savage excitement the little helpless atom, who could never tell any tale.

CHAPTER VI

MARY was lying as usual in bed, much shrunken from the Mary we knew, her mild countenance clouded with that haze of trouble which seems to come with any disturbance of the mind. There was no reason that she should lie in bed except that prostration of will and feeling which came from a disordered brain. It troubled her to move at all, to raise her head, to use her hand, except in moments of spasmodic energy, when she would spring up in bed, and a stream of wild and terrified life would seem to flow in her veins. Terror was always a chief part of her energy, a desire to fly, to hide herself, to avoid some terrible, ever-menacing danger. On this morning she had been very quiet. For about an hour her sister had been seated by the bedside holding her hand, talking to her about common things; and Mary, when

she had replied at all, had replied, Agnes thought, with so much sense and calmness that her heart was quite light. "She is a great deal better, nurse. Don't you think she is a great deal better this morning?" Miss Hill had said. The nurse shook her head, standing on the other side of the bed, but made with her lips a reassuring reply. And peace was in the room where perhaps, the anxious watchers thought, excitement and danger were passing over, and all might be beginning to be well.

Suddenly there were voices heard coming up the stairs, approaching the room, a faint little wail from the baby, a soothing "hush-sh!" from the nurse who carried him. And then another voice—not loud, not ungentle, the voice of a woman trying to ingratiate herself with some one who accompanied her. Mary had started at the sound of the infant's cry, but when she heard the other voice she rose up in her bed and put out a terrified hand on each side to her nurse and to Agnes. An anguished look of listening came into her face. She clutched their hands, drawing them in close to her, her eyes staring like those of

a hunted creature straight before her, as if prepared to rise and flee. Then Letitia's voice became audible again. "I will just go in. It will rouse her to see me." Both the watchers heard these words distinctly, though they would have sworn that the wild shriek which ran through the house burst from Mary's lips before they were half said. Mary flung herself first on one, then on the other, with cries that succeeded each other wildly, then she threw herself back into her bed, pulling the coverings over her head. "Save me! save me!" she cried, "oh, save me, save me!" The force of her hold was such that the women on either side were forced upon the bed, their heads meeting across her concealed and covered head, from which shrieks muffled but terrible still continued to come. "For God's sake, don't bring her in, don't bring her in," cried Agnes, almost as wildly. The group outside paused terrified; Letitia was livid with fear. She turned back hastily, as if the mad creature who feared her was at her heels, and without saying a word ran downstairs. She had courage enough on ordinary occasions, but to be within reach of a madwoman, which was the unmitigated

phrase she used to herself, was not one of the dangers which she could face. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her down the long staircase. No plea for Mary did Mrs. Parke make. Through the ringing of those shrieks, which became more and more hoarse as the unfortunate patient wore herself out, all the bystanders heard the patter of quick little steps running downstairs. She darted out at the open door, and ran along the terrace outside, a self-condemned fugitive; or was she only a nervous woman, terrified, as some people are, of anything that sounds like insanity? The unhappy family heard in their imaginations Letitia's steps running through everything all the dreadful hours that followed. But the fact was that she ran in her panic to where she had left her cab, never drawing her breath, and got into it and drove quickly away. For one thing she had found out all she wanted to know.

What followed on that dreadful day no one ever knew clearly. Poor Mary, out of her brooding and miserable madness, which yet everybody hoped might in time have dispersed, as the shock and horror that produced it died

away from her brain, became for a time acutely, terribly mad, striving to hide herself from the light of day, haunted by a horror of her enemy, who was for ever pursuing her, ready to clutch her, at the door. Her confused brain caught this one point of reality and never relinquished it. Letitia was always at the door to Mary's terrified and distorted fancy. Her voice was always there, saying, "I will go in." Every time the door opened there was a fresh access of the wildest terror, which lasted through days and nights, so dreadful to the watchers, that they could not tell how long it lasted or how often the long day ended in a night full of alarm and terror. Poor old Lord Frogmore—such a picture of an old gentleman! so active, so brisk, so well, doing everything that younger men could do—fell into pathetic ruin, lost his colour, his strength, his spirits, and became an old man in that week of misery. The old vicar from Grocombe and his wife, who came hurrying to the Park, with the idea that the near relations should always be collected on such an emergency, added to the trouble by their unnecessary presence; for Mrs. Hill, who was not to be kept out of her daughter's room,

had to be removed from it periodically in a state of utter prostration, from which it required all the care of Agnes to restore her: and the vicar himself stood about in the hall or the library staring at everybody who went and came; asking in a hoarse whisper: "Is she any better?" and always in the way.

When this terrible state of affairs had lasted for a week, and every one was worn out, the doctors — for they were now many, Lord Frogmore having summoned every one who could be supposed to be of any help—requested an interview with him; and then announced their opinion that Lady Frogmore should be removed from home. Having thus to renounce the hopes he had still been cherishing against hope that her illness might still prove only temporary, the old lord struggled for some time against the dreadful necessity. He declared that he was ready to fill the house with attendants; to undergo any expense; to give up his house entirely to his wife and go away himself if they considered it necessary. But by-and-by calmer counsels prevailed. Mary's family were more reasonable than her husband. They pointed out to him with much practical

sense that he was risking his own health, destroying his own life, without any advantage to her, and that his life was more than ever valuable, for his child's sake, and even for her sake, poor forlorn lady, who had no protector but he. It was hard for him in his weakened state to stand out against the doctors, against the dull persistency of the vicar, who, besides, could not be got rid of till poor Mary was removed, and against what was more than all, the dreadful sight of Mary convulsed with frenzy, or lying in her calm intervals like a dead thing, her mild face grown into a tragic mask of misery. On the whole it was better not to see that, to have the knowledge of it without having one's heart rent every day by the dreadful, dreadful sight. Lord Frogmore at last consented to this miserable yet inevitable step, which he felt to be a public proclamation of the wretchedness which had so soon closed over the late and tranquil happiness of his old age. He went away for a few days with Rogers, as sad an old man as any under the stars, and gave himself up meekly into his faithful servant's hands, to be brought back to life as far as was possible.

"Yes," he said, "Rogers, do what you can for me; for I have my little boy to look after, my poor little baby—that ought to have been my grandchild, Rogers."

"Don't say so, my lord. Oh, don't say so. He'll grow up to be a comfort to you."

The old lord shook his head with a melancholy smile. "He's cost me dear, he's cost me very dear, and he's a delicate little mite with no stamina, an old man's child. Poor little beggar that has cost his mother her reason! It would be the best thing for him, Rogers, to die comfortably and be buried with her when I go."

"Oh, my lord! please God you'll live to see him come of age, and my lady as bright as ever, and all well."

Lord Frogmore gave a deep sigh, and then a little laugh, which was perhaps the sadder of the two. "Well," he said, "let's hope so, Rogers, since nobody can tell how it may be."

He could not help wondering sometimes what he had done that this should have fallen upon him in his old age, or if he had done anything, or if God worked no miracles now save in sustaining and supporting the human

spirit to bear, but let the laws of nature take their course. It was Mary's nature, he felt, to be thus driven frantic by the thought of having wronged another for her own happiness, and in his sad musings he followed all the course of the story which he himself, without perhaps sufficient motive, had set in motion. He said to himself that perhaps after permitting John to believe himself to be the heir for so long, it was wrong on his part to have put himself in the position of supplanting John. He thought of his first visit to Greenpark, and wondered whether he had been so petty as to be nettled by little Duke's baby swagger. He had been nettled by it. "When you are dead, papa, and when papa is dead, me——" The child had cleared both John and himself out of his little path with such ease as if it did not matter! He had been vexed—he, a man who ought to have known better — by what the child had said; and was it possible that a little prick of offence like this should have originated all that followed? And then he thought of Mary, his Mary, so patient and sweet, putting up with everything, and with the insolence of the servants, from which he had delivered her.

No, no, he could not think he had been anything but right in interfering to save Mary, to raise her above all her tormentors. He had been certainly right to do that—certainly right! But had it been better for her that he did so? Would not even Letitia's dependent, simply loving and serving Letitia's children, humble enough and poor enough, but reaping the fruits of patience in a gentle life, which was all sacrifice — would not she have been happier like that without rising to triumph (which was out of accordance with her nature) for a time, to be plunged afterwards into such horrible depths? Poor Lord Frogmore, when he had sounded all these depths, was obliged at the end to come back, and to acknowledge that he knew nothing—nothing! Perhaps he had not even done sincerely what he hoped would be for the best, being moved by wrath against little Duke and pity for Mary beyond what was reasonable, and so having set all those dreadful agencies in motion which could not be balked, which must proceed to their natural end. He lost himself in the metaphysics of this question which was so difficult to fathom. For his brother John and

his brother's family had a perfect right to think themselves the heirs, and it was hard, very hard upon them to be displaced. And at the same time he himself had a perfect right to marry, and have an heir of his own. Who can decide such questions? and yet one way or another there must have been a harvest of trouble and pain.

When Lord Frogmore returned to the Park, Mary was gone. She was gone, and all trace of her, except the poor little delicate baby, the puny thing which had no stamina and which everybody thought would die. Poor little thing, people said, it would be a comfort if it was to die, for it never could have any health to make life pleasant, and madness in the mother's family and the father so old, so that it was not possible he could live to see it grow up. Everybody allowed that it was a most pathetic thing to see the old lord walking in the avenue through all the winter mornings, up and down, up and down in the sunshine, beside the bundle of white cashmere which contained this little weakly bud of humanity, the little thing who had not even the honours of his sex, but was called "it" by all who

spoke of him. It was a very still little thing, rarely cried, but often when the veil was drawn aside from its face was seen to be gazing up at the heavens with two solemn brown eyes. Kind women cried when they saw this forlorn little creature, worse than motherless, looking up "to where it had come from," some said — "to where it was going fast," said the others. According as they were of hopeful dispositions or not people took these different views; but all thought it was a most pathetic thing to see old Lord Frogmore taking these silent walks along with his heir.

After a time, when it was seen that difficulties were apt to arise with the child's attendants, some of whom were too kind to him, and some not kind enough, Agnes Hill left Grocombe and came to live at the Park. It was not concealed that she came chiefly to act as head nurse to the boy. But Agnes did not interfere with the father's supervision of his child, nor with their walks, for if she were not so emotional or so interesting as her sister Mary, she was very sensible and capable of letting well alone, which is a thing that few persons can do in a masterly way,

and women especially are often deficient in. And thus life went on for five or six years. Five or six years! A frightful time, if you will think of it, for a poor woman to be shut up in an asylum, and to know nothing of the fate of her nearest and dearest. To be sure she was visited periodically, and sometimes knew her friends, and would ask them questions which showed she remembered. But, however long the years may be, they come only day by day, and this makes them so much more easy to get through—and human nature is the strangest thing, falling into any routine, adapting itself to all circumstances.

Life at the Park fell into this channel and went on quite peaceful, even not unhappily, strange as it may seem. Lord Frogmore recovered his health under the constant ministrations of Rogers. He had an excellent constitution: his cheeks got back their rosy hue and became firm and round again; his step recovered its elasticity. He was again pointed out to everybody as the most wonderful old gentleman of his age in the whole county. He still walked in the avenue daily with his little boy, who, though later than

ordinary, learned to walk, and trotted by his old father's side in a way which was not quite so pathetic, making the woods ring with a little voice, which, though it was perhaps not so loud as other little boys' voices, was still full of "flichterin' noise and glee." The child was always with his aunt Agnes when he was indoors, and therefore he acquired something of that undue development which falls to the share of those children brought up exclusively among elder people. Lord Frogmore kept up the habit which his wife and he had established at the beginning of their married life, of having Duke very often at the Park. Duke was now a big boy and at school, but he was exceedingly, tenderly good to the baby, as boys sometimes are. Little Marmaduke preferred his namesake and cousin (whom he had supplanted) to any one in the world. It was the prettiest relationship; to see the big boy so tender to the small one did the heart good. Duke seemed to know that he had something to make up and was in some special manner appealed to by the delicacy of the little cousin, though indeed it was quite the opposite point of view that commended itself to most people.

But Lord Frogmore had thought of that also. He had thought it his duty to provide specially for Duke, which was always something, though it did not by any means subdue the grudge in Letitia's heart.

Thus, however, things went on in a subdued composure and calm of life that was not unhappy. It may be said that the thought of Mary, his wife whom he loved, was never long absent from Lord Frogmore's mind, and gave him many a pang; but still every day, taking off a legitimate time for sleep, is at the least, let us say, fifteen or sixteen hours long, and there were many intervals in which he did not think of Mary, or at least not exclusively. And little Marmaduke (who was called Mar to distinguish him from his cousin) became very amusing as he grew older, and his father doted upon him. In the evening before it was time to prepare for dinner, and especially in the winter evenings when Mar sat upon his stool before the fire, with the warm light reflected in his eyes, and chattered about everything, the old lord had many happy hours; as happy almost as if it had been Mary and not Agnes who sat on the other side of the fire.

But when a man comes to be seventy-four it is better for him that he should hold these pleasures with a light hand. There seems no reason in particular, in these days when the pressure of age is so much less than it used to be, why a man who has attained that age should not go on till he is eighty-four or more, as is so often the case. But still there are accidents which occur from time to time and prove that humanity is still weak, and that the three-score and ten is a fair limit of life. There was very cold weather in the early winter of the year in which Lord Frogmore completed his seventy-fourth and Marmaduke his fifth year. They both took bad colds, belonging as they did respectively to the most susceptible classes; but little Mar got soon better, whereas Lord Frogmore got worse. It was December, and everything was dark and dreary. The news from the asylum was agitating, for it was reported that Lady Frogmore was passing through an unexpected crisis of her malady, and that "a change" might take place at any moment. A change! what did that mean? When people in an ordinary illness speak of a change it generally

means death. Was this to be the end of everything? The morning after the disturbing intelligence was received Lord Frogmore was in a high fever, and the doctors looked very anxious. It seemed as if poor little Mar was about to lose both parents at once.

CHAPTER VII

LORD FROGMORE'S bronchitis was very severe, so bad that the doctors looked very serious, and notwithstanding the vigilance and understanding of Rogers, who knew his master, as he said, better than any of them—insisted upon adding a trained nurse to all the other embarrassments of the great establishment, which were so heavy upon the shoulders of Agnes Hill. The old lord's grave condition, the ominous announcement of "a change" in her sister's state, the care of that house full of servants, the jealousy of Rogers who could not endure "the woman" who had been placed over his head, and in the midst of all the two noisy boys—Duke, who was at the Park for his holidays, and little Mar, who considered it part of his religion to do everything that Duke did—went near to over-

whelm poor Agnes, who had never been used to any great responsibility, and was anxious beyond what words could say. She might, indeed, have spared herself all trouble about the house, since Mr. Upjames, the butler, was fully equal to any emergency; but the susceptibilities of Rogers were a very serious matter.

"The only thing for me to do, Miss 'Ill, is to retire," he said. "To have a woman put over my head, and one as knows nothing about it, is more than I can be expected to put up with."

"Oh, Rogers, you must not leave your master. What could he do without you?" cried Agnes, with anxious conciliation.

"That's what I say, ma'am," said Rogers. "I'm torn in two, I am. My lord gives me a look! Though he's choking with his cough, he does like this with his finger; and then he points to her, and he does like that."

Rogers imitated first the motion of beckoning and then that of pushing away.

"I will speak to the doctor when he comes," said Agnes. "But oh, Rogers, you would never have the heart to leave him?

What does it matter about the nurse? Try to make her useful. She does know a great deal, and she might be useful——"

"She don't know nothing about my lord. Miss 'Ill, nobody but me knows my lord," said Rogers solemnly. "I know just what he'll bear, and what he won't bear. He can't be treated like a hospital case. And that's what them women do. As if he was just a number in a bed! He's been very different all his life, has my lord; and that's what he won't bear."

"No," said Agnes soothingly, "of course he won't bear it; and you must just stand between him—— Rogers, what is that? I am sure I heard a carriage driving up to the door."

"It will be some one coming to inquire," said Rogers. "Don't you be frightened, Miss 'Ill. If I can get free of that woman, don't you be miserable. We'll pull him through."

"Do you think it can be any one coming to inquire?" cried Agnes. "Surely there is a great commotion downstairs. Oh, Rogers, for Heaven's sake go and see what it is. I heard a cry. What's that? What's that? Surely I know that voice."

Agnes did not know what she feared.

There were sounds on the stairs which denoted some strange event — many voices together — the sound of steps hurrying. She stood at the door half afraid to open it, listening intently, overcome with alarms which she could not explain. What had happened? The voices came nearer, one of them talking in gentle but persistent tones. Agnes threw up her arms and uttered a wild but faint cry. What did it mean? What could it mean? The wildest hallucination, or her sister's voice?

And then the door was opened quickly, and into the wintry daylight, in which there was no mystery, Mary walked without excitement — smiling, yet with a serious face, as if she had never left her own house where she was supreme, but was coming upstairs after a private consultation with the doctor, in which he had told her that her husband was ill, but not so ill as to cause any extreme of anxiety. She came in smiling to Agnes, and, taking both her hands, kissed her.

"I am so glad," she said, "to find you here. Then Frogmore has had some one to rely upon. Fancy, I have been away on a visit, and they never told me he was ill till to-day."

"Oh, Mary, dear!" Agnes cried. She was choking with excitement and emotion, but the imperative gesture by which her sister's companion warned her to be on her guard stopped the tears in her eyes and the words in her mouth. Even in that glance Agnes perceived that it was the doctor in whose care Mary had been placed who came in behind her. This did something to still the beating of her amazed and anxious heart.

"Oh, Rogers," said Mary, "I am so glad to see you before I go to him. How is he? He was quite well when I left home. Do tell me everything before I go to him, for I am sure you have never left him, you faithful servant—more faithful than his wife," she said with a smile, turning to the doctor, who stood behind. Lady Frogmore looked exactly as if she had come home from a visit as she said, a little troubled that she had not been sent for at once, yet scarcely anxious. Agnes even thought she looked younger, better, more self-possessed than of old.

"You were not aware he was ill, Lady Frogmore," said the doctor. "You must rest a little and get warmed, and take something—

a cup of tea, perhaps—before you go to his room. You must not take in too much cold air to the room of a patient with bronchitis. In the meantime I will go—shall I?—and bring you an exact report."

"Do!" said Mary, "that will be the kindest thing. I can trust to what you say. But it is cold this morning," she added, walking up to the fire. "I must not go and touch my dear old lord with cold hands. How are they at home, Agnes? and how long have you been here?"

"They are quite well," said Agnes, very tremulous. "My father begins to show signs of getting old——"

"I thought him very well indeed the last time I saw him," said Mary; "he can't have grown much older since then. I wonder," she added, "how Frogmore got this bad cold—it must have been the very night I went away. I think men cease taking care of themselves when they have a wife to do it for them. And Rogers used to coddle him so—I must blame Rogers. He ought to have returned to his old habits and watched him more carefully when I was away. What is this, Upjames? Tea?

Yes, give it me; it will warm me. I must be warm, you know, when I go to my lord."

"Yes, my lady," said Upjames, in a trembling voice. He was very pale and there was fright in his voice, though he was a large man, and his restored mistress so slim and little likely to harm any one. "I—I—am so happy, my lady—to see your ladyship so much better."

"Oh, there has been nothing the matter with me," said Mary quickly. "I am always well. But you should not have let my lord catch cold, Upjames, the moment my back was turned. How am I ever to go off on a visit again, however short it may be, when you take so little care of my lord?"

The big butler trembled like a leaf, a gasp came from his throat, his large cheeks hung pendulous with fright. "My lady, I—don't know how it happened," he stammered forth.

"Oh, I was only joking," said Mary. "I am sure it was no one's fault; only there should be double precautions taken about health—by every one—when the mistress of the house is away." She gave forth this maxim with a precision that had never been

usual with Mary. Altogether it seemed to her sister that Lady Frogmore had never been so sure of herself, so conscious of authority before. She drank her tea before the fire with evident comfort and pleasure in her home-coming. "After all," she said, "there is nothing like one's own house. What is that I see over there? A rocking-horse, is it? I suppose it's a present for one of the Greenpark children. Yes, Mr. Marsden? How do you find my lord?" Fortunately, as Agnes felt, though she scarcely knew why, the doctor came in at this juncture, and saved her all further trouble.

"Not so well as I could wish," said the doctor, "but very glad to hear that you have arrived, Lady Frogmore, and anxious to see you. You must not," he added, laying his hand on her arm, "look anxious, or as if you thought him very ill. His spirits must be kept up."

Mary rose and put down her teacup on the table. "I am afraid you find him worse than we thought."

"No" he said, "oh, no—but only to warn you. He does look a little ill; but he must

not see that you are anxious. You must make an effort, Lady Frogmore."

"I think I do nothing but make efforts," she said, with a cloud upon her face, standing with her hands clasped together. Then she added, smiling: "But of course I will do what you tell me. How can he have got so ill the little time I have been away?"

Agnes followed, with her heart beating tumultuously in her bosom. What did it all mean? The little time she had been away! What could it mean? Mary spoke as if she had been absent for three days or so—and it was five years! Oh, what could it mean? Agnes followed, not knowing what to do. On her way to the sick-room Mary took off her cloak and furs and her bonnet, which she piled upon a table in the corridor. "Tell Mason to take them," she said. Mason was the maid who had left the house when Mary had been taken away.

How strange it all was, and incomprehensible! This morning Agnes had trembled for the arrival of the letters, not knowing to what tragic tidings the agitating news of "a change" might have come—and had felt as

if the burden of anxiety on her was insupportable. Now—was it lifted from her shoulders, or had it become incalculably more heavy? She could not tell. She followed with tremulous steps to the door of Lord Frogmore's room, and then came back again, not venturing to enter. There was nothing for it but to wait till some further development should take place, till something should happen; she did not know what she hoped or feared. Lord Frogmore was very ill. Would the sight of him drive his wife back into the frenzy from which she seemed to have escaped? Would her bewildering appearance act favourably or unfavourably upon the old man, whose vitality had fallen so low? Would sorrow, if sorrow was coming, undo the astonishing advantage that had been gained? Of all these confusing questions the mind of Agnes was full to bursting. She went back to the morning-room, where she had been occupying herself as best she could, and keeping down her anxiety when Mary arrived. It was only an hour ago, but how everything had changed! And the boys? What could she say to the boys? how account to them for the strange events

that had taken place while they had been out with the forester watching him mark the trees? They were anxious to tell her all about this when they came in, little Mar echoing every word that Duke said, and striking in with little bits of observation of his own. Agnes, generally so admirable a listener, could scarcely hear what they said for the tumult in her own breast. What was she to tell the children? The meeting, when it came, what would it be? Mary, who thought she had been absent on a visit of a few days, what, oh, what would she say to her son? Poor Agnes was like a woman distracted. She trembled at every sound. And to think that she had to sit at table with those eager boys, and to give them their dinner, and talk to them, in terror every moment lest the door should be opened and Mary come in. For what would Mary say to her child?

Every torture comes to an end if we can but wait for it, and the children's dinner was ended at last; they were so eager about the forester and the trees he was marking to cut down, that to Agnes' intense relief they

hurried out again as soon as their food was swallowed. Fortunately nobody had told them of the arrival, or else they had been too much absorbed in their own exciting occupation to dwell upon it. Little Mar knew nothing of his mother. Even if he had heard that Lady Frogmore had come home, the child would probably, in the bustle of his childish excitement, have put no meaning to the words. And Duke, though he was older and had been Mary's favourite, yet had much forgotten her, and would think only of his grandmother, the dowager, if he heard that name. This gave poor Agnes a little comfort in the hurry of her thoughts. She sat alone all the day, very anxious. The doctor, Lord Frogmore's own doctor, came in for a moment to tell her that he found his patient a little better.

"What an astonishing recovery this is! It is the most wonderful thing I ever saw," he said. "She has taken her place by the bedside, as good a nurse as I ever met with. She seems to think of everything. And Lord Frogmore looks quite bright. The cure of one will be the cure of the other, I hope. But it is the most wonderful thing I ever saw."

"Do you think it will last, doctor?" cried Agnes.

"Well, one can never say," he replied oracularly. "Sometimes these things prove a success, sometimes—not. I could not give an opinion. To tell the truth, I would not trust Lady Frogmore with my patient if Marsden was not there. He keeps in the dressing-room out of sight—but he's there, and on the watch. These mad doctors have strange ways, but I dare say he's right. He has his eye on her all the time. He's not very sure about her, I suppose, or he would not do that; but you and I may make ourselves easy, Miss Hill. It is Lord Frogmore who is my affair—and he is better—certainly better. I will come in the evening and let you know how he is then."

Agnes, on whom the household affairs told heavily, and who had the anxious concern of a simple woman, to whom the provision of meals is one of the chief businesses of life, about regular food, here put in a troubled question about lunch. What should she do about lunch? She had given the boys their dinner, thinking it better not to disturb Lady

Frogmore. But Mary must have luncheon. What should she do about lunch? It was reassuring to know that a tray had been taken to the dressing-room, and that Lady Frogmore had been attended to by the watchful guardian who was sharing her vigil. It was very strange altogether. It disturbed Agnes in every possible way in which a quiet woman could be disturbed, but yet it was a relief. And Miss Hill sat down again with the needlework which was so poor a pastime in her hands to-day, thinking, wondering, questioning to herself till she could question no more. Many a broken prayer rose to heaven that afternoon for Lord Frogmore. Oh, that he might but live! Oh, that he might get better! His life was more valuable, Agnes thought, than it ever could have been before. It would be his business to clear up all this imbroglio, to make everything straight. He would have the responsibility, the power would be his alone. And surely, surely, all would go well. Agnes would not look upon the other side of the picture. There must be no other side to the picture. She could not allow herself to think of any darker prospect.

It was evening when Mary came into the drawing-room where Agnes was. The doctors were making their last examination of the patient for the night, and she came in to rest a little, to change the air as she said, to refresh herself. It was time for the boys to go to bed, but they had not paid much attention to Agnes' entreaties, and in the disorganisation of the house, which was full of consternation and inquiry, no authoritative messenger from the nursery had as yet come for little Mar. He was seated on his usual stool before the fire, which gave a ruddy colour to his rather pale little face, and sparkled in his dark eyes. Duke lay on the rug stretched out at full length at Agnes' feet. They were chattering still of their busy day. "I wouldn't let him mark that old bush," said little Mar, "it's like an old man. Not an old man like papa, but one I've seen with a long beard. Papa's an old gentleman, and they say I'm a little old man, and for love of us I wouldn't have him mark that tree. Oh! Aunt Agnes, here is a lady! Is it the lady that came with a post-chaise, and the marks are all over the grass? Is it——"

"Hush, oh, hush, Mar—don't say a word," cried Agnes, with her heart leaping in her throat.

Mary came in and sat down beside Agnes, a little behind her. "I will not come to the fire," she said, "for Frogmore's room is very warm. I prefer to get cooled a little. I think he is better, but we will see what the doctors say. They say I ought to lie down, but I don't think I shall want it to-night. I am quite fresh. One never wants to lie down one's first night."

"Oh, my dear, surely, surely they will not let you sit up?"

"Why not?" said Lady Frogmore. "I am quite fresh. I have had no fatigue as yet. And he was so pleased to see me. They all say it has done him good to have me back. What is that on the rug at your feet, Agnes? Why, it is a child! Why, it is —Duke, my dear boy! I didn't know you were here. Why, what a leap you have taken, what a huge great boy you have grown."

Duke had sprung to his feet in the surprise. There was little light but the light from the fire—and it was five years since he had seen

her. He came forward, hesitating a little, abashed and reluctant to be kissed. He was now twelve and big of his age, not apt to go through these salutations with strangers. Mary put her hands on his shoulders and held him from her to see him fully. "I can't believe my eyes: Duke—are you sure you are Duke? You are twice as big as you were the other day. Agnes, I can scarcely believe my eyes."

Agnes gave Duke a pull by the arm to stop his exclamation. "Yes," she said, "he has grown very fast."

"I never saw any child grow so fast," said Mary in a bewildered tone. "I should scarcely have known the child." She let him go with something of disappointment in her tone. "I can scarcely believe he is my little Duke," she said. And then, after a pause, there came the question which Agnes had been all this time trembling to hear. Mary recovered herself, putting away this touch of disappointment, and spoke again in the clear assured tones which were new to her sister.

"And who," she said, "is this other nice little boy?"

Agnes was overcome by the sufferings of

this long and agitating day. Her strength was exhausted. She could bear no more. Little Mar had turned round upon his stool and was gazing at the lady. And she with a smile, and the pleased half interest of a benevolent stranger, looked at him, holding out her hand. "Who," she said, "is this nice little boy?"

Agnes answered, she could not help it, with something more like a scream than an exclamation. "Oh, Mary! Oh, Mary!" she cried.

"What is the matter?" said Mary tranquilly. "I ought to know him, perhaps. He is one of Duke's little playfellows, I suppose. Who are you, my nice little boy?"

CHAPTER VIII

LADY FROGMORE was called to her husband before she had any answer to her question from little Mar. She had asked it with great kindness, with the sweetness of manner which Mary always had with children from the time of her early experiences in the parish with the sturdy little Yorkshire babies—but she had not, to tell the truth, been very deeply interested in the reply. Duke's little playmate had a certain interest because of Duke, that enormously grown, curiously developed boy, but otherwise——

"Good-bye, just now, my little man," she said, kissing her hand to him. "Lord Frogmore wants me. I shall hear all about it when I come back."

Little Mar crept to the knee of Agnes Hill when Mary went away. He clung to her

with a close childish pressure, rubbing his little head against her shoulder.

"Why does she call papa Lord Frogmore?" the boy said.

"I don't know, my dear. She has been gone a long time from home—and there are some things that she has forgotten."

"Who is the lady, Aunt Agnes?"

"Oh, Mar!" cried Agnes, with a tone of reproach.

"I know," said the little boy. "You told me; but even grown-up people, old people, make mistakes, don't they, sometimes? It must be—a mistake."

Agnes shook her head; but she could not find a word to say. Her heart was like a stone within her. Had such a thing ever been heard of as that a mother should forget her only child?

But Mary's heart was not heavy. She went away lightly through the long corridor to the old lord's room, and entered it like a sunbeam, smiling on every one. Mary had been a woman easily cast down in her old natural life, an anxious woman, a little apt to take a despondent view. But she was so far from

being despondent now that she scarcely showed gravity enough for a sick-room. She went in and took her place by the sick-bed where her old husband lay, shrunken and worn out, with fever in his eyes, and a painful cough that tore him in two.

"I think," she said, "that already you are looking a great deal better, Frogmore."

"I am afraid the doctors don't think me better," said the old lord, "and to be prepared in case of anything that may happen I want to have a very serious talk with you, my dear."

"Nay, Frogmore," she said, with a beaming smile, "not so very serious. The chief thing is to keep up your spirits. I know by experience that it is half the battle. We shall have plenty of time for serious talks."

"Well, my love, I am willing to hope so," said Lord Frogmore, with a faint smile. "But it can do us no harm to make sure. There are a few things I am very anxious to talk over with you. I shall be very sorry to leave you alone, my poor Mary, especially now when there are such good hopes. Our life together has not been so cloudless as I had hoped, but you have made me very happy all the

same, my dear love. You must never forget that."

"Dear Frogmore," said Mary, in a slightly injured tone, "I cannot imagine what you mean when you say our life has not been cloudless. It sounds as if you were disappointed in me—for to me it has been like one long summer day!"

"My poor dear—my poor dear!" he said, feebly caressing the hand that held his own.

"Not your poor dear! I have been a happy woman—far more happy than I could ever have looked for; and I mean to continue so," she added with a little nod of her head which was almost coquettish. "I haven't the least intention of talking of it as if it were in the past."

Behind Lady Frogmore in the distance of the large room was some one who looked little more than a shadow, but who took a step forward when the conversation came to this point, and made a warning gesture to the old lord over his wife's head. Lord Frogmore replied with an impatient twitch of his eyebrows and resumed:

"I don't want to vex you, my love—but

life's very uncertain for the best of us. It's hard to tell what a day is to bring forth. I never thought this morning that I should be so happy as to have you with me, Mary, to-night."

"No," she said, "how wrong it was of them not to tell me; of course, the moment I was told I came away at once. But you must have known that I would come as soon as I knew that you wanted me, Frogmore."

"Yes," he said, with his kind, indulgent smile. "I ought to have known that. At all events, my dear, here you are at last."

"At last! he talks," said Mary with a laugh, as if appealing to some one, "as if I had been years away."

The poor old lord patted her hand with his feverish fingers. There was something piteous in the contrast between his serious anxiety and the light-hearted confidence in her tone. "Well," he said after a time, "my love—to return to what we were saying. I needn't tell you, Mary, the chief subject I am concerned about—the bringing up of little Mar. You can't think," he said, after a pause, with a little fervour, "what that baby has been to me while you've been away."

"What baby?" she said, almost with a look of offence, drawing away her hand. "I am surprised, Frogmore, that you should want any one to take my place for—such a short time."

"To take your place?" he said. "Oh, no; but to wait for you along with me: for to whom else could it be of so much importance, next to me—and who could comfort me like him, Mary? You must be strong now for Mar's sake."

"I don't know what you mean, Frogmore," she said, her colour changing. "It is impossible to me to make out what you mean. You seem to speak in riddles. I don't know who this child is you have taken such a fancy to. But you mustn't expect me to follow you in that. I will do anything for your sake, dear, but to give myself up to a strange child whom I know nothing about——"

"Whom you know nothing about! Oh, Mary, my poor Mary!" he cried.

"Whom I know nothing at all about," she said with some vehemence. "The one, I suppose, that comes in to play with Duke. Frogmore, I hope you have not given Duke's

place in your heart to any stranger. Oh, I say nothing against the boy!"

"To a stranger!" cried the old man, with a piercing tone of pain.

"Oh, my dear Frogmore, oh, my dear! I would not for the world cross you, and if it is a little favourite—of course I shall take care of him, and love him—try to love him —for your sake; but you must not care for him too much on the other hand," she said playfully, though with an effort, lifting up her finger, "to interfere with me—or Duke."

The old gentleman looked at her with eyes full of pain. "Oh, my poor Mary," he said, "can you not remember—try and remember —what happened before you went away?"

"I remember very well, my dear," she said, "only it is strange that you should talk of my going away as if it had been something of the greatest importance. To hear you speak one would think I had deserted you— run away from you—left you alone for years."

"Dr. Marsden," said Lord Frogmore. He repeated the call impatiently in another minute, "Dr. Marsden!"

"Do you want to speak to Dr. Marsden?

I am sure he will be here directly. Oh, here he is," said Mary, looking round with a little surprise. "He must have been quite close by."

"Dr. Marsden," cried Frogmore, with a gasp for breath, "is this how it is always to be?"

"I hope not," said Dr. Marsden. "Things will arise naturally to awaken old recollections; but we must not force anything—we must not force anything. In that case we should only lose what we have gained."

"But I have no time to wait," cried the old lord; "I have no time to wait——"

As he spoke he was seized with one of the dreadful fits of coughing which shook his old frame. There is nothing more dreadful than to look on at one of those *accès* which threaten to shake the very life out of a worn and exhausted body, and to feel how utterly helpless we are, how incapable of doing anything to relieve or succour. Mary, though she was so placid and confident, so sure that all would be well, was greatly troubled by this attack. She had always been thought a good nurse, but for a good nurse in the uninstructed sense,

there is nothing so difficult, nothing so dreadful as to do nothing. She hurried to put her arm under the pillows to raise up the sufferer, to support him in her arms, and was altogether cast down when her trusted doctor put his hand upon her shoulder and drew her away.

"But something must be done; his head must be raised—he must be supported——"

"My dear lady, he must be left alone—you only disturb him," the doctor said.

She withdrew to a little distance and cast herself down in a chair, and covered her face; but it was not enough not to see, for she could still hear the spasm that shook his old frame. "He must be left alone—you only disturb him——" What terrible words were those to say! Was it, she wondered in her confused brain, because of the delusion in his that she had abandoned him? How could he think she had abandoned him? His head must have gone wrong, to think of her short visit to the Marsdens as if it had been a desertion. And this little boy who had been a comfort to him——! Mary could not understand it. The heart which had been so light to come

home, so sure that as soon as she was there to take care of him Frogmore would get well, began to sink. "You only disturb him!" Oh, was it possible that this was the sole issue of her nursing, she who had always been considered the best of nurses! Mary began to cry silently, under cover of the hands in which she had hidden her face, and despair stole into her heart. The sound of the coughing filled the room, persistently, going on and on. Now and then came a break and she thought it was over, but it only began again. And the doctor stood there, only looking on, doing nothing, and Rogers, who somehow stepped out of the shadow behind in anxious attendance too, was doing nothing. So many of them, with the command of everything that money could buy, and yet they could do nothing! The poorest tramp on the wayside could not have coughed more incessantly or with less help from anything that could be done for him than Lord Frogmore.

After this the evening seemed to speed away in an incoherent troubled blank, as it does when illness is present, absorbing every

interest. It seemed to be ten o'clock, then midnight, before any one was aware that the day was ended; and yet every minute was so long. Mary sat a little apart, with a strange pained sensation of reluctance to subject herself again to that reproach—*You disturb him*—which rankled in her mind; and vaguely, dimly, saw many things pass which she did not understand. The little boy, for instance, was brought in and flung himself upon Frogmore's bedside, the old lord turning his worn face to him, stroking the little pale cheeks with his trembling withered hands, and kissing the child again and again.

"Oh, father," the child said, "father!"

And Frogmore murmured: "My little boy, my little man!" in his feeble voice, again and again.

Mary sat bolt upright and looked on, with I cannot tell what wonder and wretchedness in her eyes. She was put away from her husband's side, and this little thing had his tenderest words. Where had he come home from, that little boy? and by what strange chance had he thus become the sweetest and dearest thing to Frogmore? Some time in

the middle of that long, feverish blank which was the night, Dr. Marsden came to her and insisted she should go to bed.

"He is a little quieter now, and there is nothing to be done—nothing; nothing that you or any one can do. You promised to do whatever I told you when I said I would bring you home, Lady Frogmore."

Mary made no answer to this voice which came to her in the long silence, and which she was not very sure was anything but a voice in a dream. She looked up into the face of her doctor with a dumb obstinacy which he did not attempt to overcome. For her only answer she crept back to the bedside and took her place again there, and watched and watched till a cold blue stole through the closed curtains and every crevice, and the candles and lamp seemed to grow sick and pale, and it was day again. Frogmore's face looked gray like the daylight when that pitiless, all-pervading light came in; but his eyes turned to her with wistful affection, and he put out his old, withered, aged hand. And then the light faded away.

When Lord Frogmore died his wife be-

haved like a woman whose sanity was completely restored. The mad doctor, who had proved himself both wise and kind in unexpected attendance at this deathbed, watched her with the most anxious care, but with great relief. She understood the blow that had fallen upon her, and her grief was great and natural, but self-controlled. She burst forth into no ravings, nor did she show any want of comprehension. She allowed herself to be taken away when all was over, and yielded to the directions of her physician with the old gentle docility. After an hour or two of quiet weeping she fell asleep with her hand in her sister's hand—a gentle woman stricken with deep loss, but very patient, giving no trouble, just what Mary would have been in other circumstances. Agnes Hill sat by her for hours, feeling as if in a sanctuary, while she listened to her sister's calm breathing and saw the soft tears steal from under her eyelids —a sanctuary of peaceful sorrow, of patience, not rebellious, not excessive, least of all mad. Agnes sat and cried with an ache in her breast which Mary did not know. The boy! What was to happen to the boy? When Mary woke

again, when she came out again into ordinary life—and if the amendment continued and her sanity was recognised, could it be that she would still ignore the boy?

CHAPTER IX

"THERE is no will but the early one made soon after the marriage," said Lord Frogmore's man of business on the morning of the second day. "No guardians appointed, no directions given. I have said as much as I could from time to time on this subject. Lord Frogmore always agreed but did nothing; and now here we have a long minority to face and nothing in order."

He was speaking in the most confidential circle of the family, addressing the old vicar, who had been summoned with his wife to the double crisis, the death of their son-in-law, the recovery of their daughter. Old Mr. Hill was standing up with his back to the fire, looking like a very solemn old sheep with his white beard. He had always the air of bearing the weight of the whole world on

his shoulders, and mumbled a little in his speech, half with nervousness, half with that weight of responsibility that bowed him down.

"It is a very great emergency," said the vicar. "Frogmore was very imprudent for a man of his time of life. He ought to have had it all made out very clear. He ought to have left nothing in any doubt. I have often said to him myself in my own small affairs——"

It was wrong of Mrs. Hill to interrupt, but she had a bad habit of doing this; her husband spoke so slowly.

"Now that my daughter is so well again," she said, with a voice in which there was a quiver in spite of herself, "it can't matter so much."

"Oh, mother!" cried Agnes.

The man of business shook his head.

"That is just the worst difficulty of all. If Lady Frogmore insists on this strange fancy of hers that the little lord is not her son—that she has no child——"

"Oh!" cried the mother in a tone of intolerable impatience, "that is nonsense, you know, Mr. Blotting. Why, I was there!

How can she persist when everybody knows to the contrary? My daughter Mary has been troubled in her mind, poor thing; but she never was idiotic, I hope; and when I speak to her—Agnes, what nonsense! I must speak to her! It is the most dreadful dereliction of duty to let things like this go on——"

"Dr. Marsden says she is going through a very important crisis," said Agnes; "and that her mind must not be disturbed——"

"Oh, Dr. Marsden!" cried Mrs. Hill; she did not say blank him, or dash him, or anything that a clergyman's wife ought not to say—but she meant it, as was very clear. "How should Mr. Marsden know better than her mother?" she inquired with dignity, as if to such a question there could be but one reply.

"I am of the same opinion as your mother," said the vicar. "I think you will find after I have had a conversation with her that there will be no further trouble. She will not stand out against me."

"Oh!" Mrs. Hill cried, and stopped again, for she had not the same faith in her husband's intervention. "But," she added quickly, "I am of opinion that when she is told

the facts calmly, with the proofs I can bring—for I saw everything with my own eyes—Mary, who was always a reasonable creature—you know," she cried, with a little laugh and toss of her head; "there never was such a thing known in this world as that a mother should disown her child."

"No doubt," said Mr. Blotting, "there will be no want of proof. The little lord's rights are safe enough. But who's to have the custody?—not a mad mother who disowns him——"

"Sir!" cried Mrs. Hill, springing to her feet.

"Mr. Blotting," said the vicar, "forgets, my dear—forgets of whom he's speaking. Such a phrase used of my daughter——"

"I beg your pardon," said the man of business. He looked at Agnes, who had said nothing, whose eyes were anxiously fixed upon him. "I mean no offence. I must face the facts. What would the Court of Chancery or any other authority think of a mother who denied that her child was hers? She says she knows nothing about it, that she never had a child. It's monstrous; it's incredible. She says the most astounding things."

"What, what?" cried the old people, both together. They were half reproachful of Mary, wholly impatient of her folly, yet half excusing and apologising all the time.

"She says it is quite impossible she could ever have done such a thing. I can only give you the poor lady's own words. She says she was bound in honour to some one—a woman's name—probably you will know. Poor soul! Bound in honour to Jane or Marjorie never to have a child! I don't want to hurt your feelings, but who do you think would give her the charge even of her own affairs after such a speech as that?"

"Who is Jane or Marjorie?" said the vicar, mouthing the words. "I don't know anybody of those names."

The mother and daughter looked at each other. They were under no difficulty in understanding. "Oh," said Mrs. Hill, "her worst enemy! Do you mean to say that after all my poor child has borne from that woman——"

"Dear mother!" said Agnes. "Oh, let us wait a little—let us do nothing in a hurry. I suppose it has been known before that a poor woman might be sane enough with one delusion.

That is Mary's case. She is sane, but she has forgotten. She never saw her baby. It seized her at once, that terrible trouble. She never knew. Don't you remember, mother, how she lay like a log, never caring, never looking at him? Oh, Mr. Blotting, don't let her be sent away again for that! In every other way she is sane, my poor sister is sane."

"I am sincerely sorry for you, Miss Hill," the lawyer said. But he gave no pledge, he made no promise. "It will depend chiefly upon John Parke," he said, "as one of the executors, and the child's uncle. He of course is the natural guardian. And he no doubt will hear what the doctors have to say, and decide what is best to be done with Lady Frogmore."

"John Parke!" both the old people cried again; Mrs. Hill adding in almost a shriek: "And Tisch—Tisch, who hates my poor Mary, who would like to kill her! Oh, you will never put the boy in her hands?"

"I fail to see," said the vicar, mumbling, "I fail to see what can be the need of John Parke when her parents are here."

"My dear sir," said the man of business, "John Parke is the nearest relation. He's an

executor. He's the heir, if anything should happen to the little boy—a very delicate little boy, I hear, like old men's children generally—and with insanity on one side. You really must forgive me if I speak my mind. I have been connected with the Parkes, I and my firm, for longer than any one can say; but I never knew such a sad conjunction of affairs."

The Hills, it was evident, were very much startled by this speech. The vicar stood before the fire swaying his heavy head, looking at the floor, while Mrs. Hill, who was more active of mind, made little starts as if to begin speaking, then stopped with the words on her lips.

"Do you mean to say," said Agnes, "that everything will be in — Mr. John Parke's hands?"

"I am the other executor," said the man of business, not without a little demonstration of the importance which these country people had seemed to ignore.

"But," said the vicar, "we are Lady Frogmore's parents—I am the child's grandfather, nearer than an uncle. Why, my wife was here when he was born."

"And we have no object to serve," cried Mrs. Hill, bursting forth, "none, none, but their good. It's for John Parke's advantage that—that harm should come. He can't be supposed to be fond of little Mar. And his wife—why, Tisch, Tisch, everybody knows!—she has her own boy that she thinks ought to be the heir. He's not safe, he's not safe if he's in Tisch Ravelstone's hands!"

"Mother, mother!" cried Agnes, in dismay.

"You will excuse me saying," said the lawyer, "that I can't listen to anything of this kind. Ladies go a long way, I know, in what they permit themselves to say of each other, but with men of the world, madam, libels can't be indulged in. Mrs. John Parke——"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Hill, breathing out fire and fury in the word, "what has Mrs. John Parke to do with my child—or with my grandchild, Mr. Blotting? We have no object but their good. We want nothing but their good. If anything were to happen to little Mar it would be my death. Oh, can't you see, can't you see the difference? I don't say she would poison him or throw him out of a window," cried the old lady, flushed and

trembling with her vehemence; "but it would be for her good that the child should die. Do you hear me, oh, do you hear me? It would be to her advantage that the child should die, the dear child, the apple of our eyes. It would give her husband the title—and herself, which is more—it would make her boy the heir. And you will put him in her hands, our little delicate boy, our little darling, poor Frogmore's little Mar! Oh, vicar, speak to him. Oh, Agnes, say something—don't let them throw little Mar's life away!"

"I can only say," said the vicar, shuffling about with his large feet, "that we're Lady Frogmore's parents, and the child's guardians by—by nature. I can't see what there's more to say."

"It's clear that I can hear no more," said the lawyer, "it's painful to see such animosity. Still we know what ladies are. Had anything been necessary to show how impossible—— But there never could have been any question of such a thing," he continued sharply. "Mr. Hill, you ought to be enough a man of the world to see that the mother's parents have nothing to do with the matter. Why, it's

ridiculous. The mother herself is no more than a sort of accident. What I've got to think of is the Parkes, the family. It is astonishing you don't understand."

"Mr. Blotting," said Agnes, "my mother, perhaps, went too far. We don't want to show prejudice. Still the child is a delicate child—and he's been used to us all his life—to me, at least—I've been the same as his mother," she said, with the tears in her eyes. "I know all he requires; their treatment might be dangerous for him. Don't take him from us until he's older and stronger. I don't ask anything unreasonable. Mrs. Parke, I don't doubt, would be—very kind; but she's used to robust children—and little Mar is so delicate."

"She is pleading as if it was a favour," cried Mrs. Hill, "as if we had no right——"

"You had better both of you leave it to me—leave it to me," said the vicar. "I'll talk it over with this gentleman, as a man of the world. My dear, you can go and look after Mary. That's your business. Leave me to talk it over, like a man of the world." The vicar was pleased with that appeal to

his superior wisdom. He wanted nothing so much as to get rid of the ladies and bring Mr. Blotting to a due sense of the situation, man to man.

"Sir——" Mrs. Hill began; but Agnes, too, was against her. She caught her mother by the arm.

"Oh, father is right," she said. "Let us go to Mary. I never know what she may be doing when we leave her too long alone. It is not good for her to be long alone."

The house through which these two ladies made their way upstairs had changed in the strangest way. It was not neglected or out of order, nor had it the deserted appearance, as if life had altogether ebbed away from the forsaken sitting-rooms, which often shows the presence of death, throned in a remote chamber, and making an end even of family meetings. Mr. Upjames at the head of affairs took care of that, and as John Parke and his wife were expected in the afternoon, there were fires in all the rooms, and everything ready for the visitors, who were felt by all the household instinctively to have so much risen in importance. The decorous silence, which was

proper to a house "in trouble," reigned, however, up and down. The servants glided about like mutes, stealing noiselessly out of sight, or flattening themselves against the wall when by chance they encountered "one of the family;" and the discipline was such that not a voice or a laugh betrayed from behind the swing doors the existence of a number of young servants, who, however impressed by the circumstances, could not be overcome with grief. The feeling in the house, it must be allowed, was in favour of the visitors who were expected rather than those who had arrived. The Hills were "the other side" to the retainers of the Parke faction. They saw through the vicar's bulk and solemnity, and they were aware by instinct that the old lady would be hard upon servants and keep an inquisitive eye upon their shortcomings. They were, therefore, though perfectly civil, not anxious in their service to my lady's people. My lady herself, poor thing, the servants were half afraid of, half sorry for. They thought she might have another attack at any moment. The women shrank back upon each other when they attended to her rooms or answered her

bell. The maid whom she had brought with her was even more alarming than herself, a mad nurse who knew all about the things that were done to lunatics, though she put on the aspect of an ordinary lady's maid. Thus poor Mary, who had been so kind to them all, who was so gentle and so soft-voiced, sympathetic with everybody, was a sort of bugbear in the house from which she had been banished so long, to which she had returned so strangely. And all through this great silent house there was a thrill of uncertainty,—nobody knowing what was to be done, or what the new *régime* would be. The little lord in the nursery, poor little delicate boy who would never be "rared," as all the country people said, who was a child of old age, with madness on one side of the house, whose father was dead, and whose mother denied his existence; and the poor lady shut up in her rooms, in her grief and widowhood, with the maid who was nurse, and the mad doctor hanging about, ever watchful, not leaving her long out of his sight; the troubled group who hung about her, and about the child, yet had no real right there, and might be put to the door by the executors any

day—made up a miserable family—a disturbed, uncertain, uncomfortable little community—not knowing what was to happen. The only one in the house who was calm, who feared nothing, was Mary herself in her retirement, half cured of her madness, full of gentle sorrow without anguish, and ignoring altogether, in a strange bewilderment of nature, all the dangers and miseries amid which, the most innocent of unconscious sufferers, she was about to take up without protection or support the strange story of her life.

CHAPTER X

LADY FROGMORE had not been much disturbed by any external interruption since she had been led away from her husband's room after his death. Poor Mary was very natural in all her ways. She took her sorrow sweetly like the gentle woman she was. There was an hour or two during which she lay weeping on the bed, saying now and then some broken words—how good he was, her dear old lord, how tender, how kind—and what was she to do without him who had been so good to his poor Mary! Agnes, not crying so much, feeling the dreadful blank and change perhaps more, sat by her sister's bedside and held her hand, and received her broken confidences. Poor Mary did not repine, she did not even grieve as at first that she had not been there when Frogmore was taken ill, that they did not send for

her soon enough. Even that had floated away from her mind. The tears came flowing from her eyes and the tender words from her lips. Dear Frogmore! There never had been any one like him, so kind! so kind! How was she to live without her old husband, her dear companion? In Mary's mind there was no consciousness that she had been absent from her husband for years; yet, perhaps, though she was not aware of it, this fact had something to do with the calm of her sorrow. There was no despair in her mourning. By-and-by she allowed herself to be undressed, to take the draught prepared for her and go to bed. Agnes still sat by her thinking of many things, but it did not occur to anybody that Agnes had anything but a very secondary part in the trouble. And Mary slept and woke again and shed more tears, and then rose up with a patient face and a quiver in her lip, and was very anxious that a black gown might be found somewhere in her wardrobe, turning with a shiver from the others she had been wearing. "I shall never more wear anything but black," she said. A little later she was able to think of her mourning and the mourning for the house:

both which had to be seen to without delay. Agnes was ready to write the necessary letters, but Lady Frogmore herself joined in the consultation about what would be wanted, and quietly put down Mrs. Hill's economical suggestions. There were a great many things to think of, and Mary was greatly disturbed to find that a small room which opened from her own was quite open, the sunshine coming in and the outer world visible.

"Oh, how is this?" she said; "the blinds are not down nor the shutters closed."

"They are over all the house, my lady," said the maid; "but I thought just this little room, which nobody can see, which is not seen from outside——"

"Oh, close it, close it at once," said Lady Frogmore. "I can't bear it—and my dear lord lying dead in the house." This made her tears flow again; but when the light was shut out she resumed with her mother and sister the consultation about the mourning. She thought of the paper with the deepest black border, and cards to be printed. It seemed to please her to have this occupation, these trifles which had to be attended to. "I suppose," she said, her

voice trembling, her eyes filling, "I must now call myself Dowager on my cards——"

"Oh, no, my dear Mary, no—why should you?—not for years and years."

"You must not think it will hurt me, mother. Oh, no, no! What do I care for anything but losing *him*? It will not vex me to call John by his name—or Letitia——" She stopped again, her voice failing her. "Oh, Letitia," she said, "cannot blame me now. She will have nothing, nothing to say against me now."

"Mary, for goodness' sake, do not speak to me of that woman. I can't bear to hear her name in your mouth," cried Mrs. Hill.

Agnes gave her mother a look, and laid her hand upon her sister's. "There is one other thing, Mary," she said, turning the talk to the mourning. There are times when that mourning is a great relief to the poor people who are shut up with their sorrow and can talk of nothing but the one dreadful subject which fills heaven and earth. Mary returned to the thought of all those necessary gowns for the housemaids with a sort of dismal relief. But when she was left to herself again, her thoughts

returned to Letitia—Letitia was coming in the afternoon. There was in Lady Frogmore's thoughts a faint terror of her former friend mingled with a sort of consolatory consciousness that Letitia could have nothing against her now. All must be right now. Mary's little superiority was over. She would not have been sorry had it not involved the loss of Frogmore, and now that he was gone it was a consolation to think that she no longer stood in anybody's way, that she could injure no one any more. Letitia would forgive her now; there had been no harm done. She could not regret—no, not even for Letitia, that she had married her dear old lord. It seemed to Mary that it had been a very short time, only a few months, since she married Frogmore. And it had done no harm. Letitia would have to acknowledge that now. They were none the worse for it. This gave her a little consolation in the midst of her tears.

Meanwhile John Parke and his wife were travelling gloomily towards Frogmore. It would be vain to say that even John, his brother, was deeply affected by the death of the old lord. That would have been too

much to expect in any case. Neither could it be said that during the five years past they had thought of nothing but the wrong inflicted upon them by Lord Frogmore's marriage, and the birth of the boy who stood between them and all their hopes of advancement in life. In five years the mind gets accustomed even to such a misfortune as that, and though they may not feel it less, people don't dwell upon a thing so far off as they did when it was fresh in their thoughts. The death of Lord Frogmore, however, brought it all back. But for Mary, but for that boy, what a changed world it would now have been for them! By this time it was they who would have been Lord and Lady Frogmore. They would have been going to take possession of their own great family house, to come into their fortune. Hope would by this time have become reality to them—if it had not been for Mary and that miserable, puny boy. Even John could not help thinking of this as he looked moodily out of the window of the railway carriage and plucked at his moustache. His servants would already have begun to "my lord" him. His difficulties

(for he had difficulties though his wife was so excellent a manager) would all have been over. Good God! and to think that a bit of a sickly child, a creature that nobody wanted, had done him out of all that! It was enough to distract the mind of a saint.

As for Letitia, all that and a great deal more was in her mind. She had not been at the Park since that dreadful day when she had discovered what had befallen Mary, and had known that it was she herself who had done it. Since then, though Duke had been a frequent visitor, his parents had never been invited by Frogmore, and Letitia knew why. And now she was going to see Mary, who it was said had recovered all at once and come home. This was a wonderful story, which it was almost impossible to believe; and Letitia, with her guilty conscience, could not but think there was some hidden meaning in it. Mary, suddenly well, returned all in a moment!—it did not seem credible. She set out to accompany John to the house of mourning with very mingled feelings — indignant to have to go there at all in a position which contrasted so cruelly with her hopes.

But also, in spite of all her self-command and capacity for excusing herself, Letitia was afraid in her heart of meeting Mary, terrified for her look, wondering how much she remembered, how much she knew. She could not form an idea to herself how she would be received by her old friend. She was afraid of Mary—afraid lest Lady Frogmore should betray her to John, and make her stolid but upright husband aware of the harm she had done. And also, if truth must be told, Mrs. Parke was afraid of the mad woman whom she had injured, and of whose cure she thought nobody could be certain. She was not a brave woman physically, though it is not necessary to be a coward to fear an insane person. The bravest may quail in such circumstances. An insane person whom you have wronged, who probably will remember the wrong; who will be cunning and vindictive, as mad people are known to be. Letitia's thoughts were not of a pleasant kind as she travelled towards the home of her husband's race. She dared not shrink or refuse to do the duty which was incumbent upon her. But she was white and trembling in her furs, quite unable to get warm

or to repress the shiver that ran over her from time to time. John observed this with the terror of a man who had never been apt to meet an emergency by himself. "For goodness' sake," he said, "take something! Have a glass of wine—have a little brandy. I can get you some brandy at the station. Don't get ill now, Letitia, for heaven's sake." She nodded her head at him with the best smile she could conjure up. She certainly was a faithful woman so far as that was concerned. She would not at such a crisis leave John to his own devices—not whatever might happen. Rather have the lunatic fly upon her than that—— But, all the same, she went on to the Park in terror of her life.

The great house standing all shadowed in the wintry sunshine, every shutter shut and every blind drawn down, was a dismal sight enough, not calculated to raise any one's spirits. The great door was standing open, and inside were several servants, Upjames in the foreground to receive the visitors and show his own pre-eminence. Behind stood the old vicar, with whom and his big head and his mumbling voice Letitia felt a sickening familiarity, as if he were

always there in the worst moments of her life. She remembered him just like that when she had made her assault in the vicarage in the vain endeavour to frighten Mary from marrying old Frogmore. She had seen him again before the birth of the child. And here he was once more as she came in cold and trembling, terrified for what was before her. Behind the vicar another man was hanging about, a tall man in a long coat, which swung behind him as he strolled about the hall, stooping, with his shoulders thrust up to his ears. She divined at once that this was the mad doctor not yet separated from his patient. Letitia let her fur cloak drop off her shoulders into the footman's hands, and appeared not to see the vicar's hand which was stretched out with the intention of giving her that silent clasp of sympathy which is the right thing in a house of mourning.

"Oh, how do you do?" she said. "I am going at once to Mary," and passed him quickly, leaving John to make the explanations. She felt that as far as she herself was concerned the worst must be got over at once. Upstairs in the corridor a woman was standing whom

Letitia did not know, too serious for a maid, too important for a servant of the house. "Are you Lady Frogmore's—attendant?" said Mrs. Parke. She was half afraid, as the servants were, of the woman, who, if not mad herself, was a mad nurse.

"Yes, my lady," said the stranger, a mode of address which made the heart burn in Letitia's bosom. Ah! but for that child, that wretched little boy, this would be her proper title now.

"I am Mrs. Parke," she said breathlessly. "How is Lady Frogmore?"

"Oh, my lady, she is wonderful," said the woman. Lady Frogmore's attendant knew what her mistress thought, and she believed like Mary that Mrs. Parke was now in reality Lady Frogmore, though good breeding prevented her from adopting the title until the old lord was buried. "She is as much herself as her dearest friend could wish her—she is as collected as you or me."

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Letitia. "Is it thought to be a complete cure?"

"Ah!" said the nurse, "that no man can

tell till time has proved it. Things that come of a sudden sometimes go off of a sudden, too. But in the meantime what a blessing, my lady! She was able to be with his lordship to the last. And as calm now, and as composed, though sorrowful, as a lady could be."

"Then she is quite—safe?" said Letitia with a slight shudder.

"My lady!" said the woman with indignation. "She was never but like a blessed lamb even at the worst."

"I know; I know. She was always gentle. Don't think badly of me," said Mrs. Parke, "but I've a great horror of—of that sort of thing. Would you mind coming in with me? And just be near me, please, whatever might happen. It would give me great confidence. If you only look at her, it's enough, isn't it? Oh! do stay by me when I go in, please."

"You are doing my poor lady great injustice," said the attendant with outraged dignity.

"Oh, no—not that—but you'll stand by me, won't you?" Letitia said. She went on towards Mary's door with a slackened step. Not even the assurance she had received, not

her conviction that what the nurse said was true, could stand against her conscience, and sense of what she deserved from Mary. She might be a lamb to others, but Letitia had no right to count upon her as a lamb. When she opened the door she looked back and beckoned to the attendant, who was slowly following. "You'll stand by me?" she said again, and eventually knocked at Mary's door.

Lady Frogmore and her sister were together in the room. Mary had been trying to read a little in a good book. To read anything that might amuse her, that would draw her thoughts from herself and her sorrow, would have been profane, almost wicked. Mary was far too dutiful to think of anything of the kind, but it was not wrong, it was indeed edifying, to read a little of a sermon about heaven. It conveyed, indeed, no idea at all to the poor lady's mind, and to think of Lord Frogmore as having been swept up among those abstractions was quite impossible: but still it was a right thing to do. She put it down, however, with alacrity when she heard Letitia's knock at the door, and came forward a step or two as much as was decorous to meet her sister-in-law. A newly-made

widow must not hurry forward with extended hands. It is her place to keep still, to have her visitors brought up to her. "Here I and sorrow sit." Mary was very observant of all the conventionalities; but when Letitia, trembling, came up to her and put her shaking arms around her, Mary responded with a cordiality which overwhelmed the visitor. She held Letitia close, and wept upon her shoulder, Mrs. Parke trembling all the time, restraining herself with an effort of horror from shrieking, and not at all sure that she might not be rent to pieces at the end of the embrace.

"Oh, Letitia! it is all over, all over. My poor old lord is gone," cried Mary, sobbing. She added, a moment after, in a voice that went through and through the hearts of the other listeners, but struck upon that of Mrs. John Parke like some strange chord of which she had no understanding: "And after all there is no harm done to you! It is my only consolation. After all there is no harm done to you!"

"Oh, Mary! It is a sad blow to us all, but we must bear it," said Letitia, disengaging herself from the embrace which she so feared.

She cast a glance round to see that the nurse was near, and strengthened by this, sat down at a little distance from the new-made widow. "It is a great loss," she said, putting up her handkerchief to her eyes; "so kind to us as he always was. But we must seek for resignation and strength to bear it."

"Indeed, he was kind to everybody," said Agnes, hoping to keep the strange interview upon safe ground.

"And what a good thing you were able to come back to be with him at the last!" said Mrs. John.

"My dear Letitia," said Mary, "I can't find words to tell you. You must not think I will feel it that you should have my name—or that Mr. Parke should have his name. Oh, no! I shall not. You must not put aside your rights out of any thought of me. I am only the Dowager now, and you are Lady Frogmore."

"Oh," cried Mrs. John, springing to her feet, "I knew all that was said was nonsense, and that there never would be a cure. Agnes Hill, you may risk your life, but I will not risk mine—at the mercy of a——"

She had sprung up from her chair with a

scared face, and hurried towards the door. As for Mary, she did not understand this recoil of her sister-in-law from her.

"What is it?" she said; "what is it? Why should she have any grudge against me? Tell her, Agnes, that I have no grudge; that I am glad. After all, though she was so frightened of me, I have done her no harm."

CHAPTER XI

LETITIA hurried along the passage to the room which she always occupied at the Park, and where Felicie was already arranging her "things" out of the box. She took refuge in this room as in a safe place, and locked the door behind her with an impulse of fright. When, however, she sat down, panting, to think it over, reassured by these walls and by the tranquil presence of her maid busied about ordinary concerns, and by the conviction that Mary was in the hands of the attendant and would not be allowed to follow her, Mrs. Parke began to perceive that her panic might be thought foolish, and that there was really nothing to be afraid of. "For they would never have allowed her to hurt me," she said to herself; "and she did not mean to hurt me, poor thing. She meant to be kind. She was

always silly," Letitia said to herself, her old contempt for Mary Hill beginning to get the better of her panic and terror of Lady Frogmore. But her heart again jumped to her mouth when the sound of some one running along the corridor ended in a thump upon the locked door.

"Oh, don't open it, don't open it, Felicie!" she said, springing up to hide herself. She was only stopped by the sound of a voice which came in along with the drumming.

"Mamma, mamma, open—mamma, let me in, I want mamma," said the intruder. Even then Letitia had horrible visions of the madwoman taking advantage of the opportunity, while Duke was admitted, to rush in upon her victim. But even the boy's presence was an additional protection. He would come between her and any assault. He was a big, strong boy. When John Parke came in just behind his son, Letitia felt almost at her ease. Between them, the man and the boy could surely deal with the maniac. She could not in their presence do any real harm. John Parke's face was covered with clouds; he was moody and serious, scarcely moving out of his absorbed

gravity to receive the eager salutations of Duke, who had been greatly subdued by the melancholy of the house, and delighted to find in the advent of his parents an opening out of the gloom. John went up scowling to his wife, and, standing over her, desired that Felicie might be sent away.

"I have something to say to you," he said.

Letitia made herself as comfortable as circumstances would permit. She took off her cloak and hat, and had an easy-chair drawn to the fire. Then she sent her maid away and turned to her husband, who had been looking on at these proceedings with impatience.

"Now, what is it?" she said.

"I am glad you can attend to me at last. I want to speak to you about that poor woman and the state of the house."

"What poor woman? Do you mean Mary Hill? You can't tell me much about her, for I have seen her. Talk of cures! She is as mad as a March hare. Duke, just lock the door."

"Why should he lock the door? What I've got to say is of importance. Don't let us have any nonsense!" said John Parke.

"She is as mad—as any one ever was. If

she came bursting into the room in that state—I should die. I know I should die."

"They said she was quite quiet," he cried.

"And so she is! very quiet. John, she said she was the Dowager and that I was Lady Frogmore."

"Then you know," said John, "though that was not how they told me. They say she remembers nothing about the little boy. She declares she never had any child; that he is a little boy who was invited to play with Duke; and that Frogmore took a fancy to him and adopted him. Letitia, it's the most wonderful thing I ever heard of, and very exciting to people in our position. Do you hear me? What do you think? Was such a thing ever heard of, that a woman should forget she had a child? I never heard of such a thing. Do you think——?" He looked at her with eyes full of excitement, full of awakened anxiety, and a hundred questions. John Parke was not a clever man; he had never pretended to be: but he had boundless faith in his wife's cleverness, and he brought her this extraordinary question with an unhesitating confidence in her power to draw something out of it that would

be somehow to his advantage and that of the family. He fixed his eyes upon her with all the fervour of a question of life and death.

"Oh, I know that," cried little Duke. "Aunt Mary is Mar's mother, ain't she, mamma? But she says she never heard of him. She says she don't know him. And she's his own mother! I laughed till I thought I should have dropped. Fancy, mamma; Aunt Mary! And Mar laughed too," the boy said; but added in another moment in a subdued tone: "He was going to cry, but I made him laugh. He's a very little thing; he doesn't always see the fun."

Neither of his parents paid any attention to Duke, though they let him have his say. But John Parke, who had never taken his eyes from his wife's face, standing over her waiting for her decision on the question he had put before her, now touched her on the shoulder, recalling her to herself and what he had asked. "Eh?" he said interrogatively. "Letitia—don't you think——"

"No!" she said suddenly, when this little by-play had been twice repeated, "I don't. Nothing can be made of it. The child was

born in this house in everybody's knowledge; put in the papers—as public as if he had been a prince. No.! Don't ask me what I think. There's nothing to be thought or said on the subject. She's mad; that is all."

"But they all say she is not mad—and she says she never had a child. She ought to know," said John. "Who should know if she doesn't? Letitia, when I think—if it hadn't been for her, you and I would have been coming home here; we should have had everything. And what if, after all, there's been some mistake, some delusion? Frogmore—poor old fellow, I wouldn't say a word against him; but he was prejudiced. If she says he adopted the boy—— Well! She ought to know——"

"Don't be a fool, John Parke," cried his wife. "Frogmore was proud of him, as you know. He hated me. He would never have married Mary Hill but to have his revenge on me. Do you think I don't feel it, her set up in my place? And wouldn't I turn that brat to the door if I could, oh! without a moment's thought. But I'm not a fool," said Letitia. "The woman's mad—she doesn't know what

she's saying. There's dozens of witnesses to prove it if she denies. The doctor and the nurse and all the servants in the house, and her mother, and—we needn't go further—myself. John Parke, don't be a fool. You'll never get the better of her in that way."

"All the same," said John, who had recovered the first dismay caused by her contradiction while she went on speaking, "all the same, I think it's worth fighting—with the mother at your back."

"The mother!" she said with contempt. "She'd go raving mad in the witness-box, and that would be fine proof for you. Why, the child was born before all the world, so to speak, like the heir to the crown. You might as well fight the one as the other. Oh, it is not from any love of them, you may be sure, that I speak!"

"I don't understand you, Letitia," said John. "I'd fight it to the last, if it was any good; but as for turning the child out of doors or so forth, as you talk in your wild way——"

"You would leave me to do that," said Letitia with a snarl, "and so I should, and

never think twice either of him or his mother. Duke, what do you mean staring at me like that? You don't understand what we're talking about. Run away and play. Go to the nursery or wherever you live when you're here."

"Mamma, Mar's quite a little fellow; he doesn't know very much: but he's a very nice little fellow. If it is Mar you and papa are going to turn out of the house——"

Letitia burst into a shrill laugh. She pushed her boy away from her.

"Go off to your play, you little — dunce," she said. "Mar! why, Mar's the master of the house, don't you know: he's Lord Frogmore. It's we that Mar will turn out of the house if we don't mind. You had better go and ask him to be kind to papa, and not send us away."

Father and son looked on with equally bewildered faces at this burst of merriment, which they could not understand.

"I am sure," said Duke, "that Mar would be very fond of papa if he'd let him, and never, never think of turning any one away. Mar is —why, Mar is—mamma! Mar's father's dead,

and his mother has forgotten him, and he's a very, very little boy."

Duke's eyes filled with tears, his lips began to quiver ; the thought of Mar's loneliness and a vague sense of unkindness and danger around him went to the child's heart. The effect of Duke's emotion on his two parents was very different. Letitia gave her son a look of exasperation, as if she would have liked to strike him ; but John's countenance melted, and his hand unconsciously placed itself with a caress on the boy's shoulder. John's obtuse mind had taken what he heard *au pied de la lettre*, and the idea that "the little boy" might after all be an impostor, and his own rights intact, had inflamed his mind. But he had no unkindly feeling to little Mar, and the tears in Duke's eyes were not only a reproach to his father, but melted at once the untimely, artificial frost in John's heart.

"God forgive me," he said, "I didn't think of the poor child at all. I was thinking only—— Poor little boy! Duke, my fine fellow, you're right to stand up for him. You make me ashamed of myself. We'll do what we can to make it up to the poor little fellow, Duke!"

"Yes, father!" cried Duke, putting his hand into John's hand.

Letitia looked from one to the other more exasperated than ever. Her lip curled, in spite of herself, over her set teeth like the snarl of a dog. Had there been a thunderbolt handy and within her reach, how unhesitatingly she would have aimed it at those two fools! "I think you'd better go and comfort your friend," she said. "Take care of him, Duke, he may be a good friend to you another time; for you're nobody, don't you know, and he is Lord Frogmore. For goodness' sake, John, send the boy off and lock the door after him. I've got a hundred things to say."

John did as he was told, with the clouds closing over his face again. He had fired his shot, so to speak, and having failed had nothing more on his side to suggest.

"It is a little difficult," said Letitia, "to know where to have you, when one moment you are ready to take on trust a madwoman's denial of a truth that is as well known as the Prince of Wales, and the next are shedding tears over the poor little boy."

"I don't see why one might not do both," said John.

"No; consistency doesn't matter much, does it? But putting sentiment aside, I should like to know what's going to be done."

"I haven't heard much—how could I?" said John. "There's no will but one made before the child was born—leaving the mother guardian. Of course if she's mad, as you say, she can't be that now, I suppose."

"What does the doctor say?"

"The doctor says two or three things—as they all do—that she's quite well, not mad at all, though of course it has a strange appearance that she should have forgotten her child, and would go against her in a court of law. But he thinks it is quite natural, by all kinds of reasons," said John hurriedly, perceiving, as so few speakers are clever enough to do, that he no longer had the ear of his audience. He gave Letitia a look half affronted, half anxious, and then began to walk up and down the room, awaiting her reply.

"Five years old," said Letitia, "a little puny thing with no stamina, and the mother out of the question, taking no interest——"

"Poor little thing!" said John.

"And after Mary—you are the guardian, I suppose."

"Letitia!" he cried. There was something in the tone with which she had said these words—something indescribable, hideous, which horrified him. He turned upon her with staring eyes.

"Well," she said calmly, "is there anything wonderful in that? I suppose you will be guardian as the next after her. He will be—in your hands——"

"Where he will be as safe," John cried, coming up to her almost as if he would have seized and shaken her, "as if he were my own."

"I never doubted it," Letitia said.

What did she mean? Her husband looking down upon her from where he stood could not accuse her of anything. The words had been simple enough. And she was now holding her foot to the fire, as if the only thing she cared for in the world was to get warm. She did not look at him. She yawned a little as if the conversation were getting tedious. "You see yourself," she went on, "that there's no use

trying to unseat the boy because of his mother's wild fancies. The thing you have to think of is how to do the best for him. And you'll have to take this into consideration at once. I should say we'd better come here and let Greenpark. It will be best for the boy; and as I suppose you will have a great deal to do with the property it will be better for you. There is a long minority to look forward to, and of course there must be a good allowance for the child. It would be better for Mary that she should have the Dower House. The boy can't be any pleasure to her, feeling as she does, and it will be good for him to have children about him instead of being brought up like a little old man."

"You seem to have got it all cut and dry," said John, astonished.

"Yes, I've been thinking about it," said Letitia. "You need not speak of it all, cut and dry as you call it, at once, but it's best to have a plan in our heads. That's what I advise. And as soon as the funeral is over the first thing to do is to get rid of Mary. I am very much frightened of mad people. I have always been so all my life."

"Well, perhaps it might be the best way. But there is Blotting to consult. Blotting has as much to say as I have. He's executor, too; and so is she for that matter."

"John," said Mrs. Parke, "she is much better out of the house; and all those Hills. I can't bear them. If she keeps on thinking it an interloper, only adopted by Frogmore, she might do some harm to the child. It's not consistent with your duty to keep her here."

She looked up as she said this and met his eyes. There was a half smile in hers, but Mrs. Parke's eyes were not expressive—they were dull eyes, and when Letitia chose they became duller still, with no meaning in them at all. Perhaps she had not any meaning. The tone which frightened her husband might have been an accidental change of her voice. He looked at her with all the penetration there was in his, but could make nothing of her. John had been very much frightened, he could not tell how; for, as a matter of fact, it was he who had entertained ideas prejudicial to little Mar, and not Letitia. What dreadful thing had he imagined about his wife? "You are

the guardian." There could not be simpler words. Was it some suggestion from the devil that had made him hear in them something —that was too dreadful to be spoken? John Parke, who was honest enough, and could not have harmed any one, though he would have fought tooth and nail for his rights, looked into his wife's face, and saw nothing there that gave any warrant for what he had imagined. But after the shock he had received it was not very easy for him to continue the conversation. He said, "I beg your pardon," thrusting one of his hands into his pocket, as if to find the solution of the mystery there. Letitia did not ask why he begged her pardon. She begged him to call Felicie, that she might get a cup of tea.

CHAPTER XII

It was said by everybody that nothing could be more pathetic than Lord Frogmore's funeral. When a man dies over seventy he is usually attended to his grave, if he has been a good man, by much respect and reverential seriousness, but not by any acute feeling; but there was something in the aspect of the little boy whom John Parke led by the hand after the old man's coffin which went to the hearts of the bystanders. Poor little boy! an interloper if ever there was one, a being unnecessary, who never ought to have been born. It is needless to say that this was not the popular sentiment. The village folks gaped after the little lord with a partiality and sympathy partly made up of compassion for him, and partly of admiration for his great good fortune. A little thing like that! and already a great lord.

People of another class, however, entertained different feelings. The man of business, who was his other guardian, looked at little Mar with a troubled pity that had a little impatience in it. Poor little man! Why on earth had he ever been born? Nobody wanted him. He stood horribly in the way of John Parke and all his sturdy children. It was not at all surprising if John felt it so, and certainly Mrs. John did. There could be no doubt on that subject. They had married on the strength of that inheritance, which nobody ever doubted, and he had been his brother's heir presumptive all his life. Who wanted this little thing? If even his mother had been fond of him, had taken some pride in him! But she threw him off altogether. The poor little forlorn creature with his little pale face! He was in everybody's way. But for him John Parke would have come tranquilly into his kingdom, the inheritance which he had expected all his life, which had been his right. There was scarcely anybody, Mr. Blotting thought, who would not be glad if the child were removed to a better world. "If the Lord would take him," that was what poor people said of their superfluous

children. The lawyer could not but think, with a feeling not so pious, that this would really be the best way. The event would break his aunt's heart, perhaps, but what does it matter if a middle-aged unmarried woman, an old maid, should chance to break her heart? And to everybody else it would be a relief. "They'll never rare him," was what the village gossips said. Mr. Blotting had not the slightest doubt that Mrs. John Parke would do the best she possibly could to "rare" Mar, though it would be much against her interest. But what a saving of trouble, what a clearing up of difficulties, if only the Lord would take him. Poor unnecessary child! the old man's plaything, now nothing but a trouble and hindrance, what to him were all the good things to which he had been born? Nobody wanted him to be born, not even his mother, it appeared; and the best thing for him would be to slip away out of life and be heard of no more.

Mar had a very white, serious little face, and watched every detail of the funeral service with a strange earnestness. He clutched fast hold of his uncle's hand as he stood gazing, wondering, not knowing what it was all about.

To associate the ominous blackness of that coffin, which was the central object in the dismal scene, with his old kind father, was beyond Mar's powers. He took a great interest in it, how it was to be got down into the hole, and even stepped forward eagerly, dragging John a step or two to see how it was done, which gave some of the bystanders the idea that the poor little precocious lad was about to throw himself into the grave of his father, and made several take a hasty step towards him to rescue the child. Poor little thing—and not such a bad business either if it could be done—if the Lord would take him. He never would be reared, they were sure; and what with his mother, poor lady, who was mad, and his father, who was dead, there was little prospect of any comfort or petting, such as his forlorn orphanhood required, for poor little Mar.

Mary went to the church, though it was considered by Mrs. Hill that it was more decorous that she should not be able to follow the mournful little procession to the grave, and it was not practicable to shut her out afterwards from the assembly of the mourners, before

whom the will was read. She came in looking perhaps better than she had ever looked in her life before, in the imposing black and white of her widow's weeds—that dress which it is so common to decry as hideous, but which is almost always advantageous to its wearer. She was pale and grave, but had that air of soft exhaustion and almost repose which so often follows a grief which is natural, but not impassioned or excessive. The tears came easily to her eyes, her lips occasionally trembled, and her voice broke; but she was quite composed and quiet, guilty of no exaggeration or extravagance of mourning. She came in with her own party surrounding and supporting her —the vicar first of the group, the doctor bringing up the rear with the apologetic air of a man who knows he is not wanted, yet is conscious of a certain right to come. The two factions, so to speak, kept instinctively on different sides of the room, and the vicar and John Parke had a momentary silent struggle for the commanding position in front of the fire which both aimed at. When the one saw the intention of the other he involuntarily hesitated and fell back a step, so

that there was first a mutual withdrawal from the coveted place; and then it came simultaneously into the minds of both that to give up this advantage out of mere politeness was unnecessary in the position in which they now stood to each other, so that both began to advance again, as if by word of command. But if John Parke was more nimble, being younger, the vicar carried more weight, and with a sweep of his large shoulder pushed on, before the other's attitude was secure. The result was therefore to the advantage of the vicar in this brief preliminary encounter. Mrs. John had placed herself in a comfortable chair near the fire, with her handkerchief and smelling-bottle ready. Mary was more in the open, so to speak, with her mother seated near; Agnes standing by her chair, and the doctor behind. There was little remark as Mr. Blotting read and expounded the will, to which, indeed, no one paid very much attention. They were all tolerably acquainted with its scope and conditions before.

"The chief point to be settled," said the man of business, "as circumstances may make certain of the late lord's stipulations impossible,

is the future custody and care of poor little Lord Frogmore. I think it may all be managed amicably among us, which would be so much better than any public interference with what the testator wished. I feel sure he would prefer that we should carry out the spirit of his instructions in good intelligence among ourselves."

"Mr. Blotting," said Lady Frogmore, "may I be allowed to speak?"

She was the only one to whom the will had been at all new, and she had received it with little gestures of assent and nods of her head.

"Surely, Lady Frogmore, whatever you may wish to say."

"It is just this," said Mary. "I agree in all my dear lord says. If there had been—a child. These things," she said, with an old maidenly blush dying her countenance for a moment, "have always, I believe, to be taken into consideration; but there was, you see, no child——"

"Not when the will was written; but a prospect of one, Lady Frogmore."

"People don't make settlements upon prospects," said Mary with a gleam of shrewd-

ness. "Do you think he would have left it like that if it had come to anything? My dear lord was far more careful of my comfort than that. It is clearly understood, then, that there was no child?"

"Not then," said Mr. Blotting.

"Not then," said Mary, "nor ever. Why, what time was that?"

The lawyer read out the date: "Nearly six years ago."

She had been unmoved by the figures, but started slightly at this.

"Six years! We have not been married —half that time——"

"Oh, yes, my dear Mary," said Mrs. Hill; "going on for seven years. You see you have been so long away, such a long time away—more than five years."

"My dear," said the vicar, "never mind about dates. Mary must be kept quite calm——"

She glanced round with a wondering, troubled look.

"Five years! Why!" She burst into a little laugh. "I to be away from my dear old lord for five years! Mother, you must be

dreaming. But let us return to the other subject. I have a statement to make, which is very serious. I think I have a right to be heard, for no one can know as well as me. I have always been disturbed ever since I was married by the thought of any harm that might happen to Letitia and her family through me. You all know that. Well! Please let everybody listen to me; it is very, very important. My great comfort in my dear lord's death is this: that everything of that kind has been mercifully averted. You may think me very calm, seeing how much I have lost. Oh, no one can tell what I have lost—the kindest, the dearest! He was old, but that only made us suit each other the better—for you know I was not young. But my comfort in it all is this—that no harm has been done. I don't understand your talk about a child. John Parke, my husband's brother, is, of course, Lord Frogmore; and Letitia is Lady Frogmore; and I am the Dowager; that is all as plain as daylight. And," said Mary, rising, her eyes full of tears, her gesture full of dignity, "if they think I grudge it they are very, very wrong. I wish them a happy life, and long, long years to bear

their new name; and my own comfort in losing my dear lord is that no harm has been done to them."

She made this long speech with the air of a queen giving up her throne, and with a smile through her tears turned away, taking her sister's arm, who stood crying silently, not saying a word. The doctor hastened forward from behind to offer his support, but Mary put him away. "No, thank you, doctor," she said, "I am quite well. I want no help." She turned to the audience, who were silent, struck dumb, not venturing even to look at each other in the awe of the strange communication she had made them. "I need not stay longer," she said. "No, I could not help to settle anything; but whatever you arrange I will do." It was John Parke who hurried forward to open the door for her. He took her hand as she passed him and gave it a close grasp. He was strangely disturbed and moved, in a way Mary was very far from understanding.

"Lady Frogmore," he said, "whether you know it or not, and however hard it may be, I'll do my duty all the same."

"I never doubted it," she said; "you were

always kind; and God bless you, Lord Frogmore."

John fell back as if he had received a blow. He went back slowly to the rest, who were all silent, not even Letitia finding courage enough to make any remark. John looked at the vicar again as if he would have liked to oust him from his place; but finally, finding that too much to undertake, flung himself down into a low but very comfortable chair by the fire.

"Well," he said, looking round, "here is just as strange a business as ever I met with. Blotting, what do you think?"

His voice broke the spell which had lain upon them all.

"I don't see what there is to think," said Letitia. "What did you expect? Sense from a woman who is as mad as a March hare!"

"It ill becomes you, Tisch," said Mrs. Hill, who had been gasping for an opportunity, "it ill becomes you, who drove her to it, to speak of my Mary in that way."

Mrs. John Parke gave a stare in the direction of the vicar's wife, and then, turning to the two gentlemen, shrugged her shoulders a little and elevated her eyebrows.

"It is in the family," she said.

Mr. Blotting, like most other men, feared a passage of arms between the two ladies, so he hastened to put himself in the breach.

"In ordinary circumstances," he said, "a statement of this kind from a mother would be considered conclusive. If she said, 'This child is not mine,' there would not be another word to say."

"But, I beg — I beg," said the vicar, wagging his white beard and see-sawing with his large hand. "Nothing of the sort—nothing of the sort! Lady Frogmore entertains an hallucination. Such a thing has happened to many at a delicate time of life. Where is Dr. Marsden? he will tell you. Why, the boy, sir, the boy—is undoubted—— Why, my wife was there!"

"I am ready," said Mrs. Hill, "to be examined before any court in England. I was present from the moment things began. Her mother! Of course, I was with her—I never left her. Why, it was I who received the child—I saw him born. I——"

"Spare us, please, the details. These gentlemen are not old women," said Letitia.

"We, who are most concerned, don't question the fact. We may have our own opinion; we may think that of all the base, foul designs, to marry an old doting fool of a——"

"Letitia!" said John, springing up (which was no small effort) from his low chair.

"And if she went wrong in her head," cried Mrs. Hill, with gleaming eyes, "who drove her to it? Oh, how dare you speak, you bad woman! You tried it first at home at Grocombe to drive her off the marriage—and then the day, the very day before the child was born. Oh, perhaps you don't think I remember—but I remember everything, everything! The very day, Mrs. Parke—the afternoon, and little Mar was born in the middle of the night, the same day, so to speak. She came pretending to see how Mary was—and, oh, what she did or what she said I can't tell, but my Mary never held up her head again. It is all her doing, all! I am ready to swear—before any court——"

"Ladies, ladies!" said Mr. Blotting. "When you begin to quarrel there's nothing can be done. Of course, you blame each other. It's always so—but what good does it do? Lady Frog-

more is quite well now, my dear madam—you must be thankful for it—except this hallucination."

"Which is a hallucineth — whatever you call it," cried the angry mother. "Though in one way it's the truth, poor lamb—for she never saw him, never looked at him, never knew she had a child. She was driven frantic before ever he was born, and that woman did it, and meant to do it, and came on purpose. She hoped to have killed the child—that is what she wanted—before he was born."

"Letitia!" cried John Parke again, looking at her with a white threatening face which cowed her spirit, though she despised him.

"Oh, if you choose to believe what they say." It was good for Mrs. John that she was cowed and sat motionless in the chair, which seemed to give her a sort of support and shelter, and an air of composure and self-command in which in reality for the moment she had failed. She was afraid of John, her docile husband, for the first time in her life; and she was afraid of this accusation which she knew to be true.

"We did not wish to say anything about

it," said the vicar, wagging his head. "I would not have it mentioned, being a member of the family; but that is the truth about Lady Frogmore."

"Come, come," said Mr. Blotting, "in families there are always these mutual recriminations. I say it's your fault and you say it's mine. Come, come! don't you think this has gone too far? Madness is a visitation of God. I don't ask if it's in the family, but a person must be much off their balance, my dear lady, that can be upset altogether by an angry visitor. We can't entertain that, you know! Come! what we have got to decide is what's to be done about this poor little boy."

Poor little Mar! If the Lord would take him. That would be so much the best solution of the question.

CHAPTER XIII

AGNES HILL had given herself entirely up to her sister in these latter days. There had been nothing at all remarkable about Miss Hill in the former portion of her life. She had never been so attractive as Mary, or so sweet: a good clergyman's daughter — very thoroughly acquainted with the needs of the parish, and ready at any moment to respond to the call of those who were in need—but no more. However, in her later development many new faculties had appeared in Agnes. She had become a mother to little Mar; a mother with all the devotion of maternity, but with something of the reason of the unmarried woman, whose instinct it is to keep in the background and not to show her feelings. She was, indeed, all the mother little Mar had ever known, but

she made no claim upon the first of his affections, always directing them, indeed, towards his adoring father, suppressing herself entirely in favour of Lord Frogmore as the most self-denying of mothers could not have done. And since Mary arrived, and the horror of the discovery that Mary, though sane, was unconscious of the great event of her life—the birth of her child—had burst upon the family, Agnes had devoted herself entirely to her sister. She had, perhaps, as most people have, a secret conviction that her own exertions might bring about that in which no one else had succeeded: that she would surely be able to seize the right moment to bring forgotten circumstances to Mary's mind, to convince her of that in which it was so strange to think she could require conviction—in the reality of her child's existence. Agnes had been accordingly her sister's anxious companion during these days; but she had as yet made no attempt to move her. She had quieted as much as she could Mrs. Hill's indiscreet remonstrances. She had watched over Mary's tranquillity and peace, saving her from every disturbance. But when she led Lady Frogmore away from that assemblage of the family,

it appeared to Agnes that her time had now come. An hour or two passed during which Mary was soothed and comforted in a natural paroxysm of grief by her anxious sister. But in the evening she was better, composed and ready to talk. The nurse of whom Agnes felt no need was sent away. Mrs. Hill had been persuaded that she was over-fatigued and had much better go to bed early after the great strain of the day. The vicar, on the other hand, had been recalled to the necessity of looking over his sermon, as he had to return to his parish before the next Sunday. Thus the two sisters were left alone.

"You will make Mary go to bed," was Mrs. Hill's last charge.

"Oh, yes, I will make her go to bed," said Agnes—but in reality her mind was full of other things.

"There is one thing," said Lady Frogmore, "that we must settle soon, and that is where we are to live. It is wonderful how little familiar it feels to me here. Now that my dear lord is gone I don't seem as if I know this place. He was all that made it feel like home."

"It is not wonderful you should think so," said Agnes, "you have been so little here."

"Only all the time I have been married," said Mary, with a faint, uneasy smile.

"No, my dear, only a year and a half, at first. It is five years and more since you were taken away."

"I don't know what you mean," said Mary; "but I am not able to argue, and you are all in a story, as if you wanted to make me believe —— You think I will feel it so much—I know that is your motive. You think that to give up my house and be only the Dowager, while Letitia is here——"

"Mary, you must try to open your eyes to the real state of affairs. Why shouldn't you stay here—with your boy? He ought to be brought up in his own house."

"Agnes, will you torment me too? Did Frogmore say that? Did he want me to pretend—oh, no! no! My dear old lord would never have done so—for he was true, as true as steel."

"My poor dear, it is you who are not true —you have been so ill, Mary—you have been

away for a long, long time. You were driven into it at the time you were so weak, just before the baby was born. Try and throw back your mind, oh, Mary, dear. Don't you recollect when the baby was coming? when you were all so happy, dear Frogmore the most of all? Mary, think! when the baby was coming——"

Mary's pale face flushed. She shook her head.

"I never wished it," she said. "Oh, no, I never wished it—to ruin little Duke and do Letitia all that harm——"

"Letitia! who did her best to kill you—who came when you were weak and reproached you, and said—horrible things. Mary, Mary, rouse yourself! Do not let her succeed in her bad, bad intent. She hoped the baby would die. And almost as well if he had, poor child," cried Agnes, in the petulance of her misery, "when his mother disowns him. His father is dead, and his mother has forgotten him. Oh! poor child, poor child!"

This did not move Mary as she had hoped. She said sadly: "Yes, I know, Letitia was not very kind. But it was not wonderful. If I

had been the means of keeping her husband and her children out of the title—out of their inheritance—— Would you have taken it better, Agnes? I should not. If I had had children——" Her voice shook a little. "I do remember a time when I suppose there were hopes—and I felt very happy for a moment—and dear Frogmore——"

"Yes," said Agnes anxiously.

"But it all went off. I have been thinking of that all the time, while you have been saying such strange things. I fainted or something, and there was an end of it. I think I was sorry after: but I'm glad now not to have done any harm to Letitia and her boy."

"Oh, Mary! if you were to see your boy, your own boy! and hear him call you mother, don't you think that would bring things back to your mind?"

"If I had a boy, Agnes," said Lady Frogmore with a faint, half-reproachful smile, "I should not want that; but you know I never had a child."

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" cried Agnes, wringing her hands.

"You may be sorry, but that doesn't make any difference. If we could change things by being sorry——! Not that I am sorry," said Lady Frogmore; "my only comfort is that my marriage and all that which she disliked so has done Letitia no harm."

"She disliked it very much. Oh, that is far too gentle a way of putting it: she said dreadful things to you, Mary."

"Did she? Don't make me think of them. I am quite in charity with her now. Poor Letitia, she needn't look reproachful any longer, she has got all she wanted now."

"Mary," said Agnes, "you are mistaken. It is your little boy that is Lord Frogmore."

"Tut, tut," said Mary, with an impatient movement of her hands, "you go on like that only to worry me. Of course, I should always be kind to him if my dear lord adopted him. But adoption can't go so far as that. No, no. I am tired of hearing of this child. Let's speak of him no more."

"Mary, if it were to be proved to you—by eye-witnesses—that he was your child?"

"Proved to me!" cried Lady Frogmore. "Should not I myself be the chief witness?"

Her smile was so perfectly satisfied in its faint indulgent compassion for her sister's folly, and the look of uneasiness with which she turned from this perpetual repetition of a disagreeable subject was so natural that Agnes' heart sank.

"I think I must go to bed," she added. "It has been a hard day, and even though one does not sleep, lying down is always a rest."

"Shall I read to you, Mary, till you go to sleep?"

"No, my dear. Go to sleep yourself, Agnes. We shall both be better quiet. It will be another life to-morrow," said Mary, dismissing her sister with a kiss. Poor Agnes went away with a heart almost too sick and sad for thought. She had failed more miserably than the rest. And she did not know now what to say or do; or whether it was best to make no further attempt, to leave everything to the action of time and the guidance of events. It is more easy to adopt the most laborious or heroic measures than to take up this passive plan of operation, and it cost Agnes a great deal to relinquish the

effort to set her sister right. Would she ever learn what was right? Would she ever come to a true knowledge of what had passed? or if she did, would the discovery be accompanied by a convulsion which would again rend her life in pieces. That possibility must always be taken into consideration. At present Mary was perfectly sane, and as composed in her gentle thoughts as any one could be. But if she were urged beyond measure; if this great fact which she ignored were to be rudely pressed upon her, what might happen? Her recovery was still new, her mind fresh fledged, so to speak; too feeble to take many flights. But how to be patient and bear with this Agnes did not know. Those who have to deal with a persistent delusion have need for double patience. It is so difficult not to think that there is perversity in it, or that the deceived person could understand if he would.

Agnes went up to the nursery and bent over Mar's little crib, and dropped a kiss upon his forehead as soft as the touch of any mother. The child opened his eyes without anything of the startled effect of sudden

waking, as if he had only shut his eyes in play.

"Why do you say poor child?" he asked in his little soft voice.

"Oh, my little Mar, my little Mar!" cried Agnes; and then she scolded him a little for being awake, and bade him shut those big eyes directly and go to sleep.

This visit did not dry her tears, or make it more easy to think what she was to do. Indeed, Agnes was less and less reconciled to the idea of submitting to Mary's delusion as she thought it over. It would all have been so very easy otherwise! They might have lived, the two together, mother and aunt, in the familiar house of which she had grown so fond during these five years, taking care of the little heir until he was old enough to go to school. His mother was his natural guardian, and so she would have been had it not been for this. It would almost have been better, Agnes thought with bitterness, if she had not recovered at all—if she had still remained with Dr. Marsden. For who could tell what the Parkes might do? They would have the power in their hands. They

might insist on having her removed again. They might say that still she was not sane; and to prove that a woman was sane who had forgotten the very existence of her child, how difficult would that be! Agnes was the only one in the great house who could not sleep that night. She was sorry, very sorry, too, for the loss of old Frogmore. He had been to her a kind companion, a confiding and respectful brother, and she missed him—more than any one else who mourned for him. The thought that he was gone and taken away, and that now there would be a clearing out of all his drawers, a searching into all his secrets, his papers examined, his very wardrobe turned inside out, brought tears of sorrow, mingled with a sort of angry dismay, to her eyes. That, too, if Mary had but been well, would have been spared. She would have kept the old man's house sacred. Sorrow and contrariety and care, all the exasperating and irritating elements which make a position intolerable, mingled in the mind of Agnes; and she knew that she could not throw it off as intolerable, but must somehow support everything for the sake of Mary and of the

poor little boy. Poor little boy! To think that he was Lord Frogmore, and that after his long minority was over he would be one of the wealthiest peers in England, the poor, little, forlorn child for whom nobody cared, was enough to make any kind woman's heart overflow with the piteousness of the contrast: and he was dear and precious to Agnes as the apple of her eye.

That day she had him carefully dressed, and led him with her to Mary to make one last attempt. She had taught him with the tenderest exactitude what he was to say. It was not very much, only "Mamma, speak to Mar; dear mamma, speak to father's little boy." Mar said it very prettily after Agnes. His great eyes, which were so large and so sad, looked wistfully into the very heart of the woman who loved him. "Speak to father's little boy." She cried herself when she heard him, and did not think that any heart could resist it. She led him into Mary's room, holding his little hand very fast to give him courage, and brought him to the side of the bed where Lady Frogmore was lying very patient and quiet, with tears in her eyes, but a

faint smile upon her patient mouth. "Mary," said Agnes, "I have brought your little Mar to see you. Your own little boy. You have never given him a kiss, not since he was a baby in the cradle." She led him to his mother's side, and pulled his arm to remind him of what he had to say. But Mar had forgotten, or else he was too much overawed by the sight of this strange lady who was his mother. He gazed at her with his big melancholy eyes, but he could not find a word to say. Mary did not turn her head away. She looked at him not without a little emotion.

"Is this the little boy," she said, "that my dear old lord was fond of? That should always give him a claim upon me."

"Oh, he has a claim. He has a first claim," cried Agnes, "on his own account."

Mary did not risk any reply, but she put her hand upon his head and smoothed his hair, and said:

"Poor little boy."

And Mar did not say a word. Not though Agnes pulled his sleeve, and touched his elbow, and did everything that was possible to jog his memory. "Mar!" she said in an emphatic

and significant whisper. But not a syllable did Mar say, not even "mamma," which would have been so natural. He only stood and gazed with those large eyes that looked doubly large in his small pale face—till there remained nothing for Agnes to do but to take him away again, and to acknowledge to herself that she had failed.

"Oh, Mar, Mar!" she cried, when she had taken him back to his nursery; "why didn't you speak? Why didn't you say what I told you?" But even then Mar had not found his tongue, and he made her no reply.

After this there ensued a strange confused interval, during which the two executors were continually meeting to consult on what was to be done. They had no right to consult without including the third most important of all in their deliberations. But how were they to consult with Lady Frogmore, who ignored the very first particular of their trust? Nothing could be more strange than the position altogether. The vicar and his wife, who would not be shut out, and whose self-importance as her parents was so very much greater than any claimed by Mary, fought stoutly for what

they considered their daughter's "rights." But Mary put in no claim of right, and was only anxious that John Parke and his wife should, as she thought, succeed to everything and take their right place. She did not ask either the custody or guardianship of the child. He had a disturbing influence upon her, confident though she was that he was none of hers, and after a while she showed a restlessness to get away, to which the doctor, who was still always in attendance, would not allow any opposition. He would not answer for the consequences, he said, if she were opposed. And thus it happened that, to the extreme discomfiture and dismay of the vicar and his wife, and the despair of Agnes, the matter was settled at last. Mary left the Park, leaving behind almost with relief the forlorn little Lord Frogmore, who was her only child. She left him in the keeping of the woman who tried her best to extinguish his little life before it began, carrying away from him in her train the only creature in the world that had been to him as a mother. Alas for little Mar! But so it had to be.

CHAPTER XIV

LITTLE Mar said nothing at any time about this shock to his being, which occurred when he was so very young that his after recollection of it was of the most imperfect kind—a confused memory of pain rather than any definite recollection of facts. But there was no doubt that it had a very serious effect upon him. Such a change, from the supremacy of an only child, monarch of all he surveyed, the idol of his father and of his aunt, to whom Mar was everything, into a mere indefinite member of a large nursery party, nobody's favourite, a little stranger whose tastes were not consulted, nor his fancies thought of—is more tremendous than anything that can happen to a man. How good for him, people said, instead of being petted and spoiled as an only child is so apt to be, to have the advantage of a wholesome

nursery life with other children round him, and all the natural give and take of a large family! But such a revolution is a terrible experiment. I have known it drive a delicate child into a sort of temporary imbecility. This could not be said of Mar, for, amid all the criticisms to which he was subject, it was never alleged of him that he was without intelligence. But a great many other things were said which, whether they were true or not, had a great effect upon his after career.

For one thing, Mrs. John Parke intimated to all her friends with great regret that the little lord was exceedingly delicate, which was a thing not to be wondered at considering the age of his parents, the unfortunate tendency to nervous and mental disease in his mother's family, and the extremely injudicious way in which he had been brought up until the time when he came under her care. He was so delicate that when Mar reached the age at which other boys go to school, his aunt did not feel that she could take the responsibility of permitting him to go. She said it was his uncle who was afraid to take this step, but most people knew that Mrs. John Parke had the

reigning will in the house. The situation altogether was one which the outer world did not very well understand. Lady Frogmore lived at the Dower House, which was quite on the other side of the county, and very difficult to get at from the Park, being out of the way of railways, and requiring a very long and roundabout journey by various junctions. She was well enough to see her friends, to take a little mild share in what was going on, but her son was never with her. It was vaguely rumoured that she had taken an aversion to him during the time of the insanity, from which, as a matter of fact, most people were doubtful if she had ever recovered, while many continued to regard her with a little alarm, her sister-in-law being the chief of these. Mrs. John Parke never hesitated to express this feeling with lamentations over her own weakness.

"Poor Mary," she said, "is quite well now: I know she is quite well—just as clear in her head as any of us, except that unfortunate delusion about the boy. I know it is very bad of me, but one can't help one's nature; and I cannot get over it. She always frightens me.

I keep thinking perhaps something may be said that will set her off—or something happen. I know I am very wrong, but I have such a horror of mad people. Oh, yes, I know she is quite well *now*; but when that is in your nature how can one ever be sure?" Most people sympathised with Mrs. John, who betrayed to her intimates with bated breath the state of affairs between Mary and her child. "Greenpark was in many ways more convenient to us," she said, "but what could we do? We could not abandon the poor child. John was his natural guardian, and of course we all felt that wholesome, quiet family life, when he would simply be one of many, was the best thing for him—the only thing to neutralise all those other dreadful influences. He is always called by his Christian name, not Frogmore, as would naturally be the case, for the same reason. It is so much better, with such an excitable, feeble child, not to surround him with any sort of special distinction—time enough for that when he is a man."

"If he ever lives to be a man," Mrs. Parke's confidants would say, shaking their heads.

"Oh, for heaven's sake don't say such a dreadful thing. What should I do if he did not live to be a man? I think I should kill myself! We his next heirs, and acting as father and mother to him— oh, no, no. If I did not believe that under all his delicacy he had a tough, wiry constitution, I should never have consented to take such a charge."

But notwithstanding the tough, wiry constitution in which she believed, Mrs. Parke was too anxious about her nephew to allow him to go to school. It was too exciting for him, it was too exhausting for him. With the germs, perhaps—who could tell?—of madness in him. It was altogether too dangerous. And Mar accordingly grew up at home under the charge of successive tutors, who rarely managed to please Mrs. Parke, or to please themselves under her roof, for long together. Either they had theories as to what was good for their pupil which did not agree with hers, or they found the life so deadly dull which they were expected to spend with Mar in seclusion, shut out from everything that might be going on, that it soon became insufferable to them. They formed quite a procession coming and going,

one following the other, and as each man had, more or less, a different system, it may be supposed that poor little Mar's education did not advance in any remarkable way. What they all agreed in was a desire to get the boy into the open air, to give him the advantage of a country life, to make him hardy and active. But to this Mrs. Parke maintained a constant opposition. He was not strong enough, she said; his lungs were delicate; he could not bear the exposure and exercise which were good for the others. In summer she was obliged to relax her rules, but in winter she was obdurate, with the natural consequence that Mar caught cold more readily than any one else in the house.

This was the position of affairs when Duke, John Parke's eldest son, came of age. Duke's majority was celebrated as if indeed it was he who was the heir. The family had by this time been so long established in the chief house of the race that they were scarcely conscious that it was not theirs by full right of possession. Letty, the eldest girl, was nineteen; she was not quite three years older than Mar, and his champion and supporter in the family. There

were two boys younger than she, and a little girl who brought up the rear—all of whom were stronger, noisier, more assuredly at home, masters and mistresses of the position, than the quiet, slim, pale boy, too long, too slight, too grave for his years, who had the habit of being pushed into the background, and never asserted himself, or took any distinctive place in the family party. The younger ones, indeed, were a little contemptuous of Mar. His delicacy, of which so much was made, his perpetual staying at home, his supposed incapacity for their sports, and indifference to their pleasures, had been part of their code all their life. There were so many things that Mar could not do. "Oh, he can't come. He'll catch cold," Reginald, who was seventeen, said scornfully when there was any question of Mar sharing their pleasures. The members of the family who stood by Mar were the two eldest, and little Mary, the youngest girl, whom her mother called Tiny, in order not to use poor Lady Frogmore's name, which John had insisted upon giving her —who made a slave of the quiet boy and found him very serviceable. The girls made Mar's life a little brighter than it would otherwise

have been, and Duke, when he was at home, which was not very often, was always good to his old playfellow, who looked up to him, as a youth of sixteen does to one of twenty-one, with admiration and devotion.

And thus the time drew on to Duke's majority. The preparations for it caused a little scandal in the neighbourhood. The good people about protested to each other that it was for all the world as if John Parke's son was the heir; but they accepted with alacrity all the same the invitations which Letitia sent forth in so liberal a way. There was to be a dinner for the farmers, who had known Master Duke all his life. There was to be a great ball to which all the county was invited, and there was a fête in the Park for the village folk and all the poor neighbours, and also for the "smart" people whose revels were of a less noisy kind. It is so much the fashion nowadays to put the poor neighbours in the foreground that this fête was Letitia's *chef-d'œuvre*. The programme altogether was one by which she felt she was to distinguish herself in the county, and which would mark Duke's birthday as nothing else could do. Mrs. Parke, indeed,

spoke of her son exactly as if he were the heir. She spoke of her humble guests as having seen him grow up, as taking *such* an interest in him. All the connections of the family were collected to celebrate this great event, and what was the most extraordinary of all, Lady Frogmore, who went out so little, and to whom this was in some sort a hostile demonstration, was one of the guests. There was nothing in the whole programme about which the county neighbours, the spectators who watched and criticised Letitia, were so much interested as the demeanour of Lady Frogmore. She had not appeared among them for years, her story was full of mystery, she was said to be indifferent to, if not possessed by an aversion for her own son, her only child, who lived neglected in his uncle's family. All these things gave excitement to the reappearance of the poor lady, whose pleasant ways so many remembered with kindness, and whose life had been so strangely and so terribly overcast.

By this time the vicar of Grocombe and his wife were both dead. That Mary had been a dreadful disappointment to them, and that they had not at all approved of her

conduct at the time of Lord Frogmore's death, they had not hesitated to say, and Mrs. Hill had indeed been heard to declare that it gave her husband his death-blow. He had been so much disappointed in Mary! He had felt it such a dereliction of duty on her part to leave her son in the hands of the Parkes, people about whose religious principles there was no certainty; and it had helped him to his grave to think of little Mar being brought up perhaps in the most careless way, while his grandfather was a clergyman. Whether it was this mental trouble or bronchitis that removed the vicar at the ripe age of seventy-five, it is at all events certain that he did succumb, and that his wife did not long survive him. When the new vicar was appointed, Mrs. Hill came to her daughters at the Dower House, but she never was happy there. She kept asking daily why was Mary there and not at the Park? Why had she abandoned her child?—it was nonsense to say she had forgotten her child! Why, why had she left Mar? which, indeed, were very reasonable questions, but did not promote the happiness of the house.

After her death the two sisters continued as before each other's closest companions, and now with no divided duty, save that Mary was very tranquil in her secluded life, and that Agnes' heart was racked with anxiety. She kept up a little correspondence with Mar, exchanging letters full of love and longing for his schoolboy epistles, in which there was not even the animation of a schoolboy, which poor Agnes looked for with the wildest anxiety, and cried over with the deepest disappointment when they came. How should he be able to respond — that undeveloped, heart-stunned boy — to her tenderness, the tenderness of an old mother, not even young to gain his sympathy? Agnes was the one who suffered amid all these differing interests and feelings. Now and then, at long intervals, she had a glimpse of her boy, a privilege which generally left her sadder than ever.

"He looks so delicate," she was even forced to allow to Letitia, who surprised her in tears after she had taken farewell of the boy.

"Yes, he is very delicate," said Letitia with a grave face. "I take a hundred precautions with him which I should laugh at for my own

children. But if anything were to happen to Mar in my house I should die."

"Oh, God forbid that anything should happen!" cried poor Agnes.

"I am sure I hope so sincerely," cried Letitia, but still shaking her head.

And the same impression was universal. The old women in the village whom Agnes went to see on her visit, old pensioners, shook their heads, too, and said, "Ma'am, you'll never rare him." And the tutor who was leaving seized upon the owner of the sympathetic face and discoursed to her largely of the false system on which Mar was being trained.

"He's like a flower growing in a prison —that flower, you know, that some man wrote a book about, all running to seed, and not a bit of colour for want of air and sun."

"Oh, if it was only air and sun that were wanted," cried Agnes.

"It is, it is!" said the young man. "I hear his mother's living; why don't she send and take him away? To be with you, now, who would pet him and study him, would make all the difference in the world."

"Oh, don't say so," said Agnes with tears, "for it cannot be, I fear it cannot be."

"Well," said the young man, "I would not leave the boy here if I had anything to do with him; but then perhaps I'm prejudiced, for I hate—Mrs. Parke." He was going to say "the woman here," but paused in time.

"You must not speak so," said Agnes.

"No, I suppose I ought to keep it to myself," said the tutor.

She said to herself afterwards that no doubt it was because he was going to leave, because he had been dismissed. People said you must never trust discharged servants. To be sure he was not a servant, he was a gentleman; but still—Agnes tried a little to comfort herself in this way; but Mrs. Parke's pious hope that nothing might happen and the tutor's bold criticisms rankled in her mind. It was she that decided Lady Frogmore to accept the invitation to all the rejoicings over Duke's majority, though it was not Agnes but Mary that was fond of Duke.

"It is right that you should show yourself," she said to her sister.

Mary did not perceive what good showing

herself would do, and feared the great dinner, and the return to a place which had so many sad associations, she said. But Agnes pressed so much that her sister, always gentle and so seldom asserting her own will against any one else's, at last consented. A visit to the Park was a great step. It was always on the cards that something might awaken smouldering recollections, or throw a new light upon that mystery of the past. At all events, it was with the stirrings of a new hope that Agnes, who managed everything, got her sister afloat on the day before Duke's birthday, and steered her by the many junctions through half-a-dozen different trains across country to the Park. It was a troublesome journey, and took the greater part of the day, what with the difficulty of connecting trains, and long waiting at various stations. These delays and waitings were, however, rather good for Mary, who began to be roused out of her usual quiescence, and to ask questions about when they should arrive, and what company they would be likely to find there. "Duke was always my boy," poor Mary said. A little cloud passed over her face as she spoke, as though a consciousness

of something that had interfered between Duke and her had floated across her thoughts. Agnes did not burst out as she would have liked to do into a blast of sentiment in respect to Duke, which was perfectly uncalled for. But she looked disappointed though she did not say it.

CHAPTER XV

It was June, the brightest weather, and everything at the Park was bright. A family of five children, of whom the eldest had just attained his majority, while the others were old enough to throw themselves into the festivities with devotion, is perhaps the best background that could be supposed for any rejoicing. They all enjoyed it, and the preparations for it, and the general commotion as much, nay, more, than the boy himself, who was much troubled in his mind about the speech he was told he would have to make, and still more with a vague uneasiness about the position he was made to occupy. He was, it was true, the eldest son of the family which occupied the Park, the heir and representative of his own branch, but Duke had an uncomfortable feeling about all the "fuss," as he called it, which

was evidently too much. "It seems as if I were taking Mar's place," he said to his father. "Your mother thinks not," said John; but John was a little cloudy too. For one thing, however, Duke had a certain right to the commotion made about his majority. He was not in the same position as the other young Parkes. Lord Frogmore had made special provision for him when it was known that he was no longer to be the heir. Greenpark and the little estate surrounding it had been settled upon Duke. He was a squire in his way, not merely the son of a younger son. Lord Frogmore had been exceedingly liberal to the boy who had irritated the old lord in spite of himself by his little childish brag about being the heir. These favours had been entirely for Mary's sake, whose conscience had suffered so acutely in the prospect of displacing Duke. But no one knew of that in the strange imbroglio that followed. He went now to meet the ladies at the station, a fine young fellow, with a soldierly air, for he had got his commission a couple of years before and now was quite a young man of the world, conversant with all the experiences, which are so

profound and varied, of military youth. Duke was not fond of Miss Hill, nor she, he was aware, of him; but he was really attached to Mary, who had been so tender to him in his childhood. He took charge of her in the most affectionate way, leaving the less important matters of the boxes, etc., to Agnes and the maid, while he took Lady Frogmore to the carriage which was waiting.

"They are going to make a dreadful fuss about me," he said; "I think a great deal too much."

"How can that be, Duke, when you are the eldest son, the future head of the family?"

"Of the younger branch, if you like, Aunt Mary — which doesn't mean much. What I dislike is, that it's like putting me in Mar's place."

At this Mary said nothing; but the smile died off her face, and a cloud came over her eyes, which was generally the effect of anything said on this subject.

"He's pretty well," said Duke hastily, "and as much interested as any one. You can't think what a generous, dear little fellow he is."

"Ah!" said Lady Frogmore. She brightened up, however, and added immediately: "I hear there is to be a tenants' dinner and a ball. It will be a strange thing to me to find myself at a ball."

"No one there will look nicer," said Duke, with filial flattery. "I don't mind the ball," he added. "That's natural. Now that Letty's out and me at home, and the others all old enough to like the fuss, a ball's the best thing to have. It's the tenants' dinner that bothers me, Aunt Mary. Why should the tenants mind me? I'm nothing to them, only their landlord's cousin. And I'm sure my father thinks so too, only he will not say it."

"It is quite right," said Lady Frogmore.

"Oh, no, it is not quite right. I'm twenty-one and qualified to have an opinion. Oh, here's Miss Hill. I hope you hadn't any bother with the luggage, Miss Hill. I thought I'd better take care of Aunt Mary, and that you would rather the maid did it."

"You are quite right," said Agnes a little stiffly. "We have managed everything, and Mary always likes to have you to herself."

"Dear Aunt Mary," said Duke, squeezing

her hand. "She has always been too good to me all my life."

Agnes Hill had by this time got something of the grim aspect which procures for a woman even in these enlightened days the title of an old maid. She was taller and thinner than her sister, less soft of aspect and of tone than Mary, as indeed she always had been; and the sense of wrong that had overclouded her mind for so many years, the separation from the child to whom she had given all the love of her heart, and who needed her, she felt, as much as she longed for him, had given her a look of protest and almost defiance, as of a woman injured by the world, which is the aspect associated by a world full of levity with that title. "A sour old maid," Duke thought her, and he liked to get what he called "a rise" out of old Agnes. What a rise is is imperfectly known to the present writer, or the etymology of the phrase, but at least it was not anything respectful. So that in this trio who now drove off to the Park there were two who loved each other dearly, and two who loved each other so little that it might be said by a little strain that they hated each other—

notwithstanding that they had between them one bond of sympathy, which was certainly wanting between Duke and the relation whom he loved.

The Park was looking its best, the fresh foliage heavy as midsummer, yet still retaining some tints of spring green in the brilliant afternoon sunshine which swept in low lines under the trees. And Duke, though he objected to the fuss, could not refrain from stopping the carriage to show the ladies the great marquee prepared for the dinner next day. The workmen were busy with it, but it was sufficiently advanced to be exhibited, and Duke could not but be a little proud of the great erection, and the way everything was being done. He dragged Lady Frogmore all over it, while Miss Hill stood with an unconcealed look of indifference, if not hostility, taking no notice of anything outside. "Old Agnes's" opposition almost reconciled Duke to the "fuss" he disliked, and cleared all his objections away.

They were received by Letitia at the door, which was a great mark of honour to her sister-in-law; but she too gave Agnes the slightest of welcomes, letting her hand drop as soon as

she had touched it, and turning away to conduct Lady Frogmore upstairs, as if she had no other guest. The whole family, indeed, clustered about Mary, conveying her in triumph to the room where tea awaited her, and leaving Miss Hill, as if she had been the maid, in the hall, to follow at her leisure. Perhaps Duke, though he supposed himself to hate Agnes, was moved by a sense at least of the rudeness of his family, for he separated himself from the little crowd and hung about as if waiting for the unwelcome visitor who was left out.

"You don't need," he said, with an uneasy laugh, "to be shown the way?"

"No," said Agnes. "I once knew it well enough, but a visitor whom nobody wants always requires to be shown the way. Oh, never mind. I don't care. Tell me where I shall find Mar."

"He was not with the rest?" said Duke, uneasy still.

"No, he was not with the rest. Do you know," said Agnes Hill, "it would be better taste in your position not to count him up with the rest, and to call him by his proper name—Frogmore."

"He is one of the family," said Duke, reddening. "We never think of him as anything else."

"All the same," said Miss Hill, "though he may be one of the family, he's not the last or the youngest, but the chief person in the house; and his proper name is Frogmore."

"I knew," cried Duke, "as soon as I heard you were coming, that you'd try to sow discord between Mar and the rest! Not with me," the young man added proudly. "Nobody could make Mar think that I didn't give him his due. Thank heaven he knows me!"

Agnes's gray eyes, which were full of fire, softened in spite of her.

"I couldn't do you wrong, Duke," she said, "though you're too much in my boy's place to please me. I believe you've always been good to him. Yes, I do: though it was a bad day for him when he was left here."

"You've no right to say so," said Duke, who had been half softened too, and now flashed up again in wrath with the moisture still in his eyes.

"We needn't quarrel," said Miss Hill. "Can you tell me where I shall find him? Your mother's tea would choke me. I want to see my boy."

"I don't know why he didn't come," said Duke, confused. "He will be in the old school-room as he wasn't here."

"Oh, I know very well why he didn't come! It needs no wizard to tell that. Poor child, poor child! He will scarcely know even me," said Agnes, as if that were the climax of all misery.

She gave Duke a little nod, in which there was some anxiety, notwithstanding the opposition, and went hurriedly upstairs. The children's apartments were on the second floor, and Agnes, who was spare and slight as a girl, ran up the long staircase as if she had been sixteen. The old school-room was at the end of the corridor, a long bright room which overlooked the park. Agnes knocked at the door, her heart beating with many emotions.

"Come in," said the broken voice, a little hoarse and uncertain, of a boy who had lost the angelical *timbre* of childhood.

He was sitting, a long, slim figure, slight as

could be, a mere sheath for the spirit, as some boys who grow very fast appear, huddled up in an easy-chair and bent over a table. A long window behind him made his form at first invisible to his anxious visitor; he was nothing but a dark silhouette against the light; and when he sprang up, surprised to see a lady enter, the slightness and angularity of the long, straight, yet stooping figure without shape save that most undesirable one given by the contraction of the shoulders and the stoop of the head, made the heart of Agnes sink in her breast. He stood swaying from one foot to another, shy and doubtful. He did not know her at first, which she had anticipated, but which chilled her no less.

"Mar!" she said, rushing forward.

He stammered and hesitated, she did not know with what feeling—and looked behind as if expecting some one beside. It was not till long after that Agnes realised what the boy had thought.

"Aunt Agnes!" he said, with an almost shrill tone in his broken voice.

"Oh, Mar, you know me still, God be thanked for that! I thought you must have

forgotten me altogether. But, dear, why are you up here, when everybody but you goes to welcome the guests? You are the head of the house, Mar. Nobody can be welcome here that is not welcome to you."

"Do you think so?" he said with a laugh. "No, no, that would be foolish at my age. I have no visitors — they are all for the others; who should come to visit me?" he said again.

"Your mother, Mar," said Miss Hill, "and an old aunt that perhaps you don't make much account of, but who thinks constantly of you."

"Oh, as for you, Aunt Agnes!" cried the boy; "but my mother—what do I know of my mother? Will she look at me when she sees me? I suppose she must see me while she is here?"

"Mar," cried Agnes, "there is a change coming in your mother. I am sure of it. She is beginning to think of things. She knows now that there is something wrong. We must be patient, my dear, and keep on the watch. It has been a long, long time coming; but I am sure she begins to feel that something is wrong."

"It is a long time coming, as you say; and it does not seem very much when it comes," said the boy. "One only gets to understand the strangeness of it as one grows older; but never mind, I have got on very well without her hitherto, and I need not trouble myself about it, need I, now?"

"I don't like you to say so, Mar."

"I am sorry myself, but it can't be helped," said the boy. "I form very different ideas in myself now and then. But the philosophical thing is never to mind. It's a little peculiar to be as I am, no one to care particularly about me, isn't it? Generally a fellow at my age has rather too much caring for, to judge by Duke. But he's exceptional. Oh, don't think I'm not cared for; I am too much cared for: Uncle John is the kindest man in the world, and as for my aunt—she kills me with kindness. Yes, that's what she does. She's far more careful about me than about the rest. I wish sometimes that my health was of no importance, like Reggie's. Well, that's what she says—'Oh, Reggie! He's of no consequence; he has the health of a pig. But Mar!' And then I have gruel, and my feet in hot water, and

must not go out. It's rather tiresome," the boy said with a yawn. "I did want to go out to-day, to see all the things, how they are getting on. Did you think there was an east wind to-day?"

"East wind! and what would it matter if there were—in June?" said Agnes Hill.

"What a revolutionary you are!" said Mar. "But it's a great refreshment to hear of some one who despises the east wind. I have to watch it; I can't help myself. Do you see that weathercock, Aunt Agnes? I look at it the first thing in the morning, for I know if it turns to the east I mustn't go out, even if the Queen were coming. It's veering round, don't you see? I've done nothing but watch it all day."

"And what does she mean by that?" cried Agnes; "what does that matter in summer, the east wind?"

"Oh, my aunt means only care and kindness —perhaps a little more; but this you must never repeat, for it sounds hard, and I don't know whether I am right. She is dreadfully frightened lest something should happen to me in her house and she should be blamed ——"

"In her house—it is your house!" said Agnes vehemently.

"Oh, no! not while I am so young. Uncle John is my guardian, and lives here for me, and it is a great sacrifice to him. But, of course, while he is here, and I am under age, it is his house. I wish they would let me take my chance, though," said Mar, "like the rest. Do you think it matters? If a fellow is going to die, he'll die whatever you do, and in the meantime he might as well have some good of his life."

"Do you mean yourself, Mar? Why should it be thought of, that a young creature is going to die? We must all die some time. What you have to do is to live, and to grow up a very important man, with a great deal to do in the world."

"Aunt Letitia does not think I shall ever do that. But she does not want anything to happen to me in her house. Don't you know what that means? But don't think I care," said the boy with a pale smile. "I've thought it all over, and I believe in Christianity and I don't mind dying a bit. I hate being ill, and I hate being kept in like this and made different

from the rest; but why should one mind dying? One will get into a better place; one will be saved from all possibility of going to the bad. I don't see why there should be any fuss about it, especially as there is nobody in particular to care—— Yes, I know there's you; but you see so little of me. And the girls would be very sorry. Letty, I shouldn't wonder if Letty—— But that's a poor sort of talk to amuse you with."

"Dear Mar, you break my heart."

"Why?" said the boy. "I should think you would be glad to know that whatever happens I don't mind. But Aunt Letitia," he said with a laugh, "would be in a dreadful state of mind if anything should happen—in her house."

CHAPTER XVI

THE next morning rose in a blaze of sunshine as though everything in heaven and earth conjoined to make Duke's day of rejoicing brilliant and happy. It was the day of all others for a fête out of doors, and the hero of the occasion greatly regretted the marquee in which the dinner was to take place, and where, no doubt, the heat would be suffocating. That, and the still more terrible fact that he would have to make a speech, were the only clouds upon Duke's firmament. They kept him in a subdued state of felicity during the morning, in the course of which he retired often into private corners, both indoors and out of doors, to study a small manuscript which had been concocted in the school-room with the help of Letty and Mar, and therefore was the result of the joint youthful genius of the house. Letitia had on

several occasions indicated to her son what he ought to say, and would have written his speech for him with more or less success, as she was in the habit of doing for John. But Duke had not relished his mother's aid. He had told her with great dignity that there were some things which a man ought to do for himself, and that his speech at his birthday dinner was certainly one of them—a general proposition which could not be opposed in the abstract, and to which the fear of raising a still stronger opposition prevented Letitia from replying that in her son's special circumstances a birthday speech was a very difficult business, and required most wary walking. Nothing could be more true, or more impossible to say to a hot-headed boy, who was utterly unconscious of the schemes and hopes for his aggrandisement which filled his mother's brain. And had she suggested to him the management of that difficult subject which would have satisfied herself, Duke she knew was capable of rushing wildly to the other side and contradicting everything she wished. The young trio in the school-room were quite unconscious of these wishes—even Mar, though he would betray occasionally, as he had done to

Agnes, the instinct which revealed to him the precariousness of his own position, and the foregone conclusion in respect to him which existed in so many minds, was not always under the weight of that thought—and the boy did not think of himself at all when he helped in the concoction of Duke's speech. All the most eloquent sentences were Mar's—that one in particular about the attractions of the world, and the spirit of adventure, and how, though there was so much that drove him to more exciting pursuits, the needle in his heart (which was an uncomfortable way of putting this well-worn metaphor, but did not trouble these young critics) always pointed to home. Mar's pale face flushed with pleasure when he read out this paragraph, the last words of which were drowned in the applauses of his companions.

"Why, that's poetry," said Letty, with a tear in her eye.

"It's much too grand for me," said Duke; "it's splendid, old fellow!" and the mingled pleasure of the author applauded, and of the excitement of composition, brought a flush all over the delicate boy, and forced the water to his eyes too. Mar was very manly, and

would rather have died than cried like a girl —but it was too easy to bring the water to his eyes.

And who can describe the excitement which was in all their minds when the moment of fate arrived? There were some parts of Duke's speech which had been added in secret conclave between him and his sister, and of which even Mar knew nothing. The full brightness of the afternoon was still shining outside when the ladies of the family and their guests came into the marquee to hear the speeches, and the climax of the festivities was reached. When Mary came in, wearing, as she always did in a modified form, the dress of her widowhood, there was a breath of something like applause—a cheer subdued into a sort of sigh of sympathy and regard; for Mary was one of those women who are always popular, however little or much they may do to deserve it. It was perhaps only natural that Mrs. John, who had reigned at the Park for eleven years, whereas Mary's interrupted sovereignty, during most part of which she was absent, scarcely exceeded half that period, should not like this expression of preference. But she did the wisest thing she

could do in the circumstances, and appropriated as much as she could of it by drawing Mary's arm through her own, and leading her up to the chief place. Lady Frogmore nodded and smiled to all her old acquaintances, the tenants whom she knew, as she walked up through the subdued light of the tent to the head of the table; and she touched Duke on the shoulder as she passed him with a caressing and encouraging gesture. Agnes, who came after, with a poignant sense of the boy's trouble, and of the wrong he suffered, and of the strange position altogether, laid her hand on Mar's shoulder as she passed with a consolatory touch. To Agnes it seemed all one gigantic wrong—the event and the occasion, the presence of these men, as ready to cheer one as another, to applaud whoever came before them. What right had Duke to come of age? What right had he to have a dinner given for him, to receive congratulations, as if he were a prince? Nothing satisfied Agnes, not even the natural fact of his twenty-first birthday! He seemed to take something from Mar even in reaching the age of twenty-one.

And to see him on his feet returning thanks

with a flush which was half panic and half excitement, the first immense internal commotion of a boy joining the world of men, which so far as he knew was all sympathy, and taking his place as a man among the rest for the first time! Every eye was turned towards Duke, every ear intent on what was really the event of the evening, the manner in which the young master should acquit himself. Duke was undeniably the young master to all there. They knew little or nothing of the young Frogmore. He was never seen either at meet or coverside —a delicate boy fond of his book, it was said, half with respect, half with contempt, when he was spoken of at all. John and his sturdy boys filled a large place in the county, and nobody thought of the young heir. So that Duke held by a sort of prescriptive right the place and title of the young master. And he was a favourite. The farmers' faces responded. They turned to him with the pleasure which men have in seeing a young fellow appear and take up the lines which, had they been consulted, they would have marked out for him. He was altogether of their own kind, and known to every one. It had even been murmured

among the better informed what a pity it was that Master Duke was not in fact the heir! But a number more did not even think of this, and took him for granted easily. And how he did talk to be sure! About the world being all open to a young man, and full of attractions; how he himself would like to go to Africa after big game, and to India like the young princes, and in a general way everywhere to see the world, but how the needle in his heart (it was thought quite novel, and a wonderful metaphor among the country people) always turned trembling to home. Duke gave Mar, who sat by him, a little slap on the shoulder when he brought out this fine sentiment, which was received with deafening applause.

He wandered a little (it was thought by Letty, who was especially watchful, as this was the part where her own composition came in) after this, forgetting the connection of the sentences, which Letty longed to be near enough to suggest to him. But suddenly there came a change in Duke's voice. He had become aware that he had lost the thread, and that as he stumbled about among the half-

forgotten words he was losing the attention of his auditors also. And with a wisdom worthy of a more experienced orator, Duke sacrificed a part of his discourse bravely to the success of the rest. There was something that must be said. With a thrill of alarm lest he should not recollect exactly how Letty had put it, yet with an exhilarating consciousness that he knew at heart the sense of what he had to say, Duke flung back his head and plunged into that most important subject of all.

"There is one thing, however, gentlemen, that I must say." ("Before I conclude," murmured Letty, under her breath.) "You have all given me the most glorious reception (received me with an enthusiasm I can never forget), and I must thank you for it with all my heart. But at the same time I must remind all my friends that after all I am not the true Simon Pure." ("Hear, hear," said Letty—he had remembered the words.) "You congratulate me, and you cheer what I say to you, and you look all so friendly and so kind that I — I could almost cry if I were not ashamed," said Duke, with an outburst which was certainly his own, and which brought a storm of applause,

"but at the same time, gentlemen, I must remind you," he resumed, "that all the honour you do me is mine at second-hand"—(Letty clapped her hands noiselessly to encourage and reward her brother)—"and that the real person who is the principal among us is my cousin, Marmaduke, Lord Frogmore. He mustn't think, and nobody must think, that I am thrusting myself into his place. He is a great deal younger than I am, and he doesn't show so much as he ought. But I can tell you," cried Duke, once more abandoning Letty, and bursting into original composition, "that if ever there was a little brick in the world, it's Mar—I mean Frogmore. And, gentlemen, now you've done me all the honours, I want you to drink his health and a happy coming of age to him. I give you Lord Frogmore."

The rest of his speech was almost lost in the roar of the cheers which so many robust pairs of lungs sent forth that the marquee trembled as in a gale of wind. The farmers got up on their feet, they held up their glasses. They shouted, "Bravo, Mr. Duke," along with the unaccustomed name that he had put into their lips. Some one burst out into "For he's

a jolly good fellow," which rang out like a storm, with renewed cries of "Master Duke." Duke himself was still more near crying than he had represented himself as being—far more near crying than was at all becoming to a man of one-and-twenty. He laughed instead to save himself, and almost roughly turning to his cousin, forced Mar upon his feet to reply. The faces of the three ladies at the head of the table were at this moment the strangest study. Letitia was almost green with passion and vexation, affecting to smile, but producing only the most galvanised and affected contortion which ever moved human lips. Mary leant back in her chair, white as alabaster, her breath coming with difficulty. Agnes was crimson with excitement, happiness, and unexpected pride, mingled with shame. She had grudged that boy his coming of age—*that* boy, God bless him! so generous, so genuine, so true in his impulse of justice and right dealing. It has been whispered that she took up that foolish chorus, and sang with the men, "He's a jolly good fellow," she the primmest and gravest of old maids. She forgot even Mar and the position into which the boy was thus placed

in her gratitude and enthusiasm for Duke—Duke, to whom she, for her part, had not done justice, whom she had not esteemed as she ought.

Mar, however, was forced on his feet, and stood up supporting himself on the table, his weakly length, notwithstanding the stoop in his shoulders, giving him a sort of ascendancy over all around him. Mar's pale countenance was flushed, he was so moved by the strange commotion in his veins and the unlooked-for position into which he was thrust, and this first demand ever made on his boyish courage and powers, that for a moment he could not open his mouth, but looked dumbly round upon the great circle of encouraging faces like an affrighted animal, a large-eyed deer or dog, not knowing what was going to be done to him. His large eyes were full of tears, through which he saw the people round him as through a mist, yet took in everything, his uncle's look of sympathy, Letty's anxious face, who sat with her hands clasped together and her lips moving, as if she would breathe into him what to say. It passed through his mind that this was so like Letty, always wanting to tell you what to say; and in

the dizzy height of his excitement he half laughed at it within himself. And then he felt Duke hurting his hand, crushing it as he leant upon the table. The boy woke up and began, with a voice so seldom accustomed to hear itself speak:

"You are very, very good to drink my health. I haven't very much health of my own; perhaps wishing for it will make it better. Thank you very much for that. I never knew that Duke meant to mention me. I am nobody beside him. He is a man, and as strong as a horse, and can do anything. I wish with all my heart I was only his little brother, and that he was Lord Frogmore. You may laugh," cried the boy, warming at the sound, "but it is true. I have often thought, when they said I would not live, that I wished it, for then Duke would have all——"

"One moment, my lord," said one of the listeners; "if some one laughed it was to hear you call yourself his little brother—and you so tall; but there's nobody here but hopes you will live and be like your father before you—the best landlord that ever was."

"I will, if I live," cried Mar, swinging out

his long, thin arm with the eloquence of nature, in the midst of the quick, loud chorus of assent that burst from everybody near. "I will! If there is one thing I care for in the world it's that. If I live I will; and if I don't live Duke will, so that, anyhow, this family will do its best, and God will help us. I thank you all very much," he said, after a pause. "I don't know how to say it. I thank you for being kind to me for my father's sake——" He made another pause. "And for Duke's sake, who has spoken up for me more than himself. And if he turns out your landlord after all, I shan't grudge it him for one." Mar stood still a moment, wavering upon his long, feeble limbs, and then, with a smile, burst out into the foolish chorus, that imbecility of shy enthusiasm which is all that an English crowd can find to say. There was an effort made to take it up, hindered by something in the throats of the performers at first, then bursting out into a hoarse roar, mingled with broken laughter and blowing of noses and some unconcealed tears.

When in the general excitement it was possible to think of anything else than the speeches and the very unusual entertainment

provided for the Frogmore tenantry by the Frogmore boys, there was a little stir at the head of the table, and it became apparent that Lady Frogmore had fainted. She was scarcely paler than she had been before, scarcely more motionless, but her sister, who had forgotten Mary for the moment, when she turned to her had found her unconscious. Indeed, for the first moment, Agnes had believed that she had lain back and died in the extraordinary sensation of this first revelation of her son. But this was not so.

CHAPTER XVII

MARY was carried to her own room, where she came to herself without agitation or apparent disturbance, asking only, "Where am I?" when she recovered her consciousness and looked vaguely round, requiring to have it explained to her that she was at the Park and not at her own house, which for the moment seemed the only thing that perplexed her. Agnes, in high excitement, hoping and fearing she knew not what, but something at least which should change and reconstitute life, watched her with an anxiety scarcely more strong than the disappointment with which she became aware that nothing was going to happen. Towards night Mary informed her sister that she had been dreaming a very strange dream, something about drinking toasts. "And there was one to my dear old lord. I think it must

have been Duke's birthday party that was in my head," she said. Agnes did not venture to inquire further, or to suggest that Duke's party was a reality and not a dream; but trembling with anxiety, with eagerness, with deep disappointment, had to compel herself to silence and allow her sister to rest. There is a period at which we all arrive in our deepest troubles, when we shrink from effort, when even to try to set matters right becomes too much, and to remain quiet always, to ignore one's misery, seems the best. Agnes had come to this point. Even her prayers made her heart sick. She had waited so long and nothing had come—perhaps to leave off, to try no more, to be still, was after all the best.

This explains how it was that she said nothing to Lady Frogmore—not a word concerning the scene at the dinner, or the generous speech of Duke, or that improvised address of Mar. Some emotion must have come into Mary's mind, or she would not have fainted. But what was it? And how had the sight of her boy, and the hearing of him, and all that had been said about his father, affected her spirit? She gave no clue to this mystery.

She was very quiet and feeble all the evening; would not go down again, and sent a message that she would see no one that night, but hoped to be quite well and strong for to-morrow. She sent her love to Duke, but mentioned no other name. Why her love to Duke? Was it because of what he had said? Was it for that generous setting forth of the other claims? Agnes shook her head sadly as she pondered in herself this mysterious question. But Mary threw no light upon it. She was more quiet even than usual, making little remark after that strange speech about her dream; and she said not a word of the incident of the day—the one point which everybody was discussing. Was she pondering it silently, feeling more than she said? Was her mind blank altogether to any light on that question? or was the light beginning to force itself upon her, to be painful and importunate?

These mysteries perplexed and troubled Agnes beyond measure; but she could not answer them. When she went downstairs into the house all full and overflowing with youthful life, the contrast with the calm to which she was accustomed, the extreme quiet—like a

cloister—of the atmosphere which surrounded Mary was wonderful. They were all discussing what had happened, in every way, from every point of view. The dinner was over, the farmers driving away in their dog-carts and shandrydans — a few gentlemen, neighbours, the vicar of the parish, Mr. Blotting, the man of business, and one or two others, were waiting for the late and informal meal which was the end of the day. John Parke stood between his son and his nephew in the great drawing-room where they were all assembled, standing against the window and the clear evening sky. He had a hand on the shoulder of each, and his air was that of a man satisfied with his boys, making no difference between them, as if both were his own. Mar, the long boy, tallest of all the party, looked almost grotesque in his thinness and precocious height against the light. In the corner of the room, where her face was half visible in the twilight, not lost like the others against the background of light, Letitia was talking to the lawyer. She was talking quickly, her countenance agitated with feelings very unlike those which united her husband and the boys.

"I disapprove of it altogether," she said; "it was a great mistake. Mar never ought to have been brought forward at his age, and in his state of health. I am very angry with Duke. He knows how particular I have been to keep the boy out of everything that is agitating and exciting, and now to spring this upon us in a moment, upsetting everybody. Letty, you are always in the plot with those boys. I am sure you knew."

"I knew that Duke meant to say something about Mar, if that is what you mean, mamma."

"And you took good care not to tell me," said her mother. Letitia's eyes, though they were dull by nature, gave forth a sort of green light. "A boy of his age," she said, "to be brought forward in this way, and got up to make such a ridiculous speech and talk such childish nonsense. At all events Duke should have had more sense. Everybody knows how careful I have been about Mar, to keep him out of all excitement. He is not fit for it. If he had not been kept in cotton wool all his life I don't believe he would have been alive now."

"I think you are too anxious, my dear lady," said Mr. Blotting; "it will do the boy no harm. He is not a child. He'll have to take his part in life sooner or later. Perhaps you would find it wiser to let him accustom himself a little——"

"His part in life at sixteen!" said Letitia. "What is that? The school-room and his lessons——"

"I should have said a public school, if you and John had listened to me."

"He is not fit for a public school any more than he is for the affairs of life," cried Letitia. "Look at him! He's like a skeleton already. That boy never could hold his own at school. Oh, yes, Duke got on very well, and so did Jack and Reggie. They are not at all delicate, but Mar—so long as I have charge of him he shall be taken every care of," Mrs. Parke said with decision. "There must be no more of this. I shall not sleep a wink all night in the fear that something may happen to him, either brain—and that's most trying, you know, on one side of the house, Mr. Blotting — or heart."

"There's nothing wrong with Lady Frog-

more now? I hear she has never gone back but maintained the improvement. I don't think it is like a family tendency, that sort of thing. Many ladies, they tell me——"

"Oh, Mr. Blotting, they tell you gentlemen a number of foolish things where women are concerned. I have had six children, and did I ever go off my head on any occasion? No. Poor Mary must have had a tendency—and when I think of that, and what a dreadful thing it would be if anything should happen to the boy under my roof——"

"You are very much afraid of anything happening to my nephew Frogmore, Letitia."

"There it is," said Letitia. "I knew how it would be—Frogmore! To give him a false idea of his position when he is not old enough to understand. Yes, Agnes Hill; I am very much afraid. I know what all of you would say if anything happened to the boy while he was with me. You would put your heads together, and you would whisper how much it was to my interest. Oh, I know very well all the attacks that would be made upon us. You would not say anything clear out, but you would insinuate the most horrible things.

You know very well yourself that that is what you would do."

Miss Hill was not insensible to her own imperfections. She did not contradict Letitia. She even understood the anxiety which was not dictated by love or any concern for Mar, which was simply self-regard—a terror for blame. It was not unnatural, and she did not believe that Mrs. Parke would do anything to harm the boy. She said no more. She did not offer to take the responsibility upon herself, and how could she criticise the woman who had it laid upon her, whether she would or no?

"The boy has clearly something in him," said Mr. Blotting; "he's not stupid. What he said was very well said, and so evidently genuine and unprepared. It's a pity he is not more forward in his education. I don't blame you, Mrs. Parke, nor your husband. I understand your feeling. Still, if you could have made up your mind to the risk—— The last man, Brownlow, don't you know, the tutor, thought——"

"The last man was an impertinent cad," said Letitia. "Oh, yes, I pick up the boys'

words as everybody does. He was always unpleasant. His principle was to contradict me whatever was settled on. I wish you would not quote a man like that to me. We have done the best we could for the boy, John and I—— I wish his mother would take him; that would be the natural arrangement. I assure you we would jump at anything that would free us from the responsibility. Well, what is it now?"

"Mother, Mar is to sit up for supper? He couldn't be sent upstairs at this hour, a day like this?"

"Papa says he may," said Letty, coming forward a step, dragging her father to the front with her arm through his arm.

"I don't say anything, Letitia," said John, alarmed, "except with your approval. But I think you may relax your care a little for once, for Duke's sake. I don't think it will do the boy any harm."

Letitia threw up her arms with a gesture of despair.

"You must have it your own way, of course," she said. "I can't oppose you; and if Mar is laid up to-morrow it will be his

own fault, or it will be your fault, and much good that will do him. You can put him in the way of having a headache, but you can't bear it for him; but I wash my hands of it," Mrs. Parke said.

The supper was very gay. The few guests were all old friends. The youngest members of the family were all there, and the license of a family domestic festival prevailed. The one spectator who did not unbend was Agnes, whose heart was so full of anxieties that her countenance could not lose their trace. She sat by John's side, however, which was the most favourable place, and listened to all the chatter of the children, who had perfect confidence in their father, and felt in spite of herself a confidence in the eventual fate of Mar which she had never felt before. John Parke was but a stupid man, and he had not been without a feeling that to sweep the little interloper out of his way, if it could be done, was desirable; but that had long died away, and John had come to regard Mar as one of his family, with a little special pity for the delicacy upon which his wife dwelt so much, acquiescing in all her measures of special care

for the weakly boy with a more generous and kind motive than hers. John was heartily pleased that Mar had distinguished himself, that it was he almost more than Duke who was the hero of the day. He was pleased with his son's generosity, and with his nephew's affection, and with the clamour and pleasure of all the young ones ranged near him, leaving the strangers to be entertained by the mother. Tiny was at her father's elbow, the youngest of all, the privileged member of the party, at whose sallies everybody laughed, though perhaps they were not very witty. By one of those curious confusions of nature which occur in families, Tiny, who was like her mother—not a Parke at all, as good-natured friends said—had also, in certain aspects of her lively little countenance, a resemblance to Mar, who was a Parke all over except in the point of height. And it had been very agreeable to Mar to find in the baby of his aunt's nursery a something more feeble, more easily tired, less capable of fatigue than even he himself was considered to be ; from which circumstance, and from the fact that the little one had become the playmate of the delicate boy when all the

other boys had gone to school, there was a special tie between them. Mar himself was a totally different being here from the mild and sad boy whom Agnes had found alone in the school-room accepting his solitary fate with precocious philosophy. Very different dreams were now before his eyes. He had forgotten how likely it was that "something should happen." The gravest impressions disappear like a passing breath from the consciousness of sixteen. Mar had made a great step in advance by his first appearance in public. He felt himself almost a man, with fortune before him. He no longer looked on Reggie and Jack with the uneasy sense of superiority, yet inferiority, which is so bitter at all ages. The sense that he was more advanced than they, of a different kind of being in his boyish premature thoughtfulness, but, oh, so far behind the public schoolboy in everything that is most prized at that age, passed from his mind in the happier consciousness of personal importance, of being in himself something that Reggie and Jack could never be. This made the boy happier with them all, with the two boys who were least his friends and did not conceal their contempt of

him, as well as with the others who patronised and pitied Mar. Neither of these conditions, which were both humiliating, were visible this evening. Duke did not patronise nor Reggie contradict. They were all, to say the truth, a good deal startled, even those who had brought that happy accident about, by the unexpected response of Mar to the call of circumstances. There is no English boy or man who does not feel the advantage of being able to make a speech. And though Mar might be a milksop, unfit for football, and unable to be out in all weathers, yet it was a tremendous revolution to find that he could stand up before a crowd and not be afraid to speak. Even Duke had learned off by heart a speech which had been prepared for him beforehand, the boys knew. But Mar said it straight off out of his head.

All this change of feeling Agnes perceived with an absorbed attention which in no way changed the grimness of her aspect as she sat at table. She listened to all the young clamour about her with a yielding heart but an unyielding face.

"You are not used to a noisy party, and I

am afraid they worry you," said John Parke, whose attention was suddenly called from his own placid enjoyment of his children's gaiety —which he pretended to hush by times with a raised finger and a "Don't let your mother hear you making such a row"—to the aspect of the "old lady," as he called her, though Agnes was younger than himself, by his side. "You see," he added, "it makes a difference, I suppose, when they are one's own—otherwise I object as much as you to the young ones taking the lead. It's one of those American fashions we are all getting infested with."

"It is an exceptional day," said Agnes stiffly, as if she disapproved. She was not able to change the fashion of her countenance, notwithstanding the sympathy of her heart.

"That's it," said John. "Your eldest boy can't come of age but once in your life"—he laughed at this wise speech as he made it —"and then," he added, caressing his big moustache, "the boys acquitted themselves so well. That's what I look at. A boy mayn't be strong, but as long as he knows how to take his part in life——"

"Papa," said Tiny, "do you call a tenants' dinner life?"

"It's life in a kind of way," said Duke, whose attention had been attracted from more mirthful matters by that sound which would catch the ear through a bombardment or a cyclone—the sound of praise.

"They have all votes for the county," said Mar, whose ear had been drawn in the same magical way.

"That's a very good answer, Mar," said John. "Life's whatever you have to do with, in the condition you are in. And I can tell you that to make such a speech when you're suddenly called upon is one of the things—— I can tell you this. It makes my heart sink down into my boots. I'd rather meet a mad dog any day——"

"It's not so hard, Uncle John," said Mar, unable altogether to suppress the instinctive desire of youth to instruct its elders, "when you have no time to think at all, but must just carry on."

John shook his head.

"When you have to tell them you can't take ten per cent. off their rent—it's not so easy,"

he said. "They don't sing 'He's a jolly good fellow,' then."

"It wasn't Mar that was the jolly good fellow, it was Duke," said Tiny.

"It was both of them," cried Jack from across the table.

"I started it myself," cried Reggie; "I know who I meant."

"It was Duke," said Miss Hill, to the great astonishment of the young ones. "It is not a thing I would ever sing—but I started it too. And, Duke, if I ever was unkind to you——"

"You—unkind!" said the young man with his laughing voice, in which the tears he was ashamed of were half audible. "But look here. I thought of what you said, Aunt Agnes. Now, father, listen; that boy's not to be Mar any longer. He's to be Frogmore."

"Oh, Froggy—that is what I shall call him," said the little girl.

"What are you all saying?" cried Letty, who was making conversation for the vicar at the other end of the table, but who could bear it no longer. "What are you saying? You are keeping all the fun to yourselves, and I can't hear a word you say."

The boys began to sing, drowning her voice—the two schoolboys who had lost their heads altogether. Reggie "started" again, as he said, the chorus of the day; but as Jack began a different performance altogether to the strain of "Froggy, he would a-wooing go," the two tunes clashed for a moment; until, attracted by the superior appropriateness of the new ditty, Reggie abandoned his first inspiration and chimed in, while Duke, rising up, cried:

"We'll drink his health again, and christen him for the family, Frogmore!"

That moment, however, an electric shock ran down the table, the song died off into silence. Letitia rose from her place pale with wrath.

"How can you permit such a Babel?" she cried. "I am ashamed of you, John. If it goes on another moment I shall have to leave the room. Let me hear no more of this nonsense and childish folly here."

END OF VOL. II

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