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A MAIDEN'S MIND.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT.

CHAPTER I.

HE had been away for five years. This is a very long time to look forward to, but often it seems like no more than a few days to look back. The years had passed over Helen, in the quiet calm of village life, without any marked incident to distinguish the passage of time, or to mark the difference of one period of her life and another. She had been twenty when he went away; she was twenty-five now—but she did not feel with any sharpness the distinction between the two. A girl who lives at home, in all the natural subjection of youth, grows into a full maturity of years sometimes without knowing that she has become a different being from the little girl of some ten years before. When something occurs to bring the passage of time to her notice, she is astonished by it, and finds out her advance in life with a surprise which has almost a touch of shame in it. She is ashamed to feel herself still a girl, and yet she is so, as truly as when she was sixteen. This, perhaps, does not happen so often now when young women are hustled forth into life, or hustle themselves forth, crowding and pushing, as they so often do; but

still it does occur, in a great many cases, in the quiet of common life. Helen woke up with a little start, when she received Harry Mortimer's letter saying he was coming home, to a curious doubt and wonder which had not dawned upon her the day before. He was coming home. It had seemed when he went away as if it would be a long, long, almost impossible, time till he should come home. They had parted most sadly, two young creatures very fond of each other, feeling as if this terrible time would never come to an end. And lo! it was over, and he was on his way home.

Of course, she was very glad: how could there be any doubt on that subject? unfeignedly, delightedly glad. When she woke in the morning it was the first thing that came into her mind—Harry is coming home! She traced him, in her imagination, all through his journey: now he would be at Suez, now at Alexandria, now at Marseilles. From that point he was coming on by land as fast as the mail train could carry him. On Wednesday he would be with them. Some changes had occurred since he went away. His relations who lived in the White House, and who had been the first to bring him to the Rectory,

had broken up their household. The parents had died, and the family was scattered. So that instead of going there, which had been a kind of home to him, he would come to the Rectory direct, which, of course, through Helen, was still more his home. That of itself would be a little strange, for he had always stayed at the White House, and not at the Rectory. This was what Mrs. Huntingtower, Helen's mother, had thought of at once. "Of course he will come here," she said, "now that the Wests are no longer at the White House. Of course, you are the first person he will want to see, and he must come here." Helen acquiesced without making any objection; but it was a little startling to her. Of course, she was the first person he would wish to see; but the statement of that fact seemed to bring it within the range of things controvertible: and to think of him in the blue room, which was the guest chamber, gave her a little shock. He had never stayed in the Rectory before, and now he was to come here "of course," as if it were his home. It would be actually his home, though it would also be, in another sense, a strange house to him; for he had no natural home, no father's or mother's house. The Wests had been his nearest relatives. Now it was a little bewildering to Helen to think that she was, so to speak, his nearest relative, and that the Rectory was the place he naturally belonged to, where his letters would be addressed, and his friends would come to see him. The idea was strange to her. She had a momentary feeling as if it was not quite the right thing; as if there ought to be a little decent space between them—a little veil; something on his side that he belonged to; not a swallowing up of his individuality in her home. But that was only one of her fantastic ways of thinking. She rarely spoke of them because she knew they were fantastic. The whole matter was a matter of course.

Helen Huntingtower lived in a village, but it was a village not very far out of London. A number of the men who lived there, especially those who occupied what were called the Villas, went up to town every day: and even the most

Conservative of the *real* village people, those who lived on the Green, and might be said almost to disapprove of London except during the season, were rather contemptuous of the Villas; but society in Highfield had been lately much affected, if not demoralised, by the advent into the very Green itself, and to one of the largest and oldest of the houses, of a gentleman who—from its very bosom as it were—went to town daily like the City men, by the nine o'clock train. It was always explained to strangers that Mr. Shipley was of the Merchant Prince order, and not what should be called a City man. His firm was one of those great firms which are known all over the world, and it was understood that he did not go to the City to work, but to sit in a very handsome room, more like a library than an office, and to receive people, often quite distinguished people, who came to consult him on various subjects. He was more like a great consulting barrister than a man of business in the ordinary sense of the word. The Prime Minister, it was said, had once come to ask Mr. Shipley's advice about the Bourses in the other capitals, and how certain public events were likely to affect them. Society in Highfield was not quite clear as to what the Bourses were; but they had a great respect, almost awe, of them, and felt a certain reflected dignity upon themselves who knew *him*, because Mr. Shipley knew them so intimately. Society, to tell the truth, had rather set itself against the Shipleys at first. But this story about the Bourses gave it a thrill of admiration and repentance. And then their house was much the gayest house in the neighbourhood. There was always "something going on" there. Tennis parties, croquet parties, garden parties of all kinds all the summer, and more serious entertainments all the year through. By the time at which this story opens it had become a usual thing to say on the Green that the coming of the Shipleys was the most fortunate thing that had happened "for the young people" since Highfield had begun to be.

I am obliged to explain all this because Helen, when she came out of the Rectory with

her head in the clouds, very much occupied with this event that was going to happen in her life, and not quite sure how she felt about it, met, a few steps from her own gate, the only daughter of these rich people, Nora Shipley, who was a sort of mistress of the revels in Highfield, and much more familiar with everything and everybody about it than the oldest inhabitant. She had become, by a sort of witchcraft or legerdemain, which was always a surprise to Helen, who had never been able quite to explain to herself how it came about, the dearest friend of the Rector's daughter: and she immediately linked her arm in Helen's, and began to pour forth a stream of communications on every subject, as was her way. Helen thought the girl much younger than herself, and a chatterbox whose flow of conversation was pure nature and gaiety, which no doubt was partly the case; but she was not, perhaps, of quite such a simple character as Helen supposed her. She was tall as girls are nowadays, very fluffy as to hair, long and strong of limb, with hands a little out of order by doing every sort of thing that came in her way. She was exceedingly well dressed in that manner of perfect simplicity which it costs so much to keep up. Her dresses and blouses were the despair of the village: and yet what were they after all? mere cottons: the most innocent inexpensive things: but our old silks and satins in the old days were not half so expensive, nor, I must say, half so nice. She was a picture of a summer morning, as she came along with a little swing in her movements, which was precisely the right kind of swing for the moment, and her head held high, with indeed a faint suspicion of being too high, as if some muscle was a little loose in front.

"Here you are, Nelly," she said, "I was going to look for you, not just in the usual way, to torment you out of your life, but because I really have got something to say to you, for once in a way. What do you think it is? But if I were to give you a hundred chances, you would never guess."

"Tell me then," said Helen; "I never was

good at guessing. It is about some of your 'social duties,' I suppose."

"You are insufferable with your social duties, Nell! when you know I hate all that sort of thing, and like only friendship, and to have people I love round me, and conversation and pleasant things generally. But this time it is something very important, and has only to do with myself—and one person more."

"One person more?" said Helen. "I hope that does not mean that you are engaged to Horace Standish, Nora? for that would never, never do——"

"Why should it never, never do?" said Nora with a laugh. "You are speaking the very truth, but you don't, in the least, know how very very true you are speaking. Poor Horace, I have not seen him for a week, and I don't, in the least, mind if I never saw him again. No, Nelly, you don't know anything about this, and it is, if you only knew, far the most important thing in my life."

"Tell me then," said Helen, very calmly. She had been told of several things before this which were the most important in Nora's life, and, consequently, was not so much excited as it was her rôle, as confidant, to be.

"I often wonder if you are a real kindred soul after all," Nora said, and she made a momentary pause. "But, whether you are or not, you are the only one," she added, "and I must tell somebody. Nelly, there was some one—whom I met, it is nearly five years ago——"

Helen started a little, but she did not lose her self-possession. "You must have been in short frocks, and it can't have mattered," she said.

"Nonsense! I am as old as you are. You always will take me for a chit, but I am not. I met him first at Dulverton. He is the sort of man, don't you know, that you see at the first glance is far too good for you, and that draws you on. And at last we got engaged. I always thought he was making a mistake; but that, of course, made it all the nicer for me. They would not hear of it at home, and that made it nicer still. But he was likely to be very well off, and he was going out to

India. They were so relieved to find that I didn't want to get married there and then, that they gave in."

"Yes?" said Helen interrogatively, for Nora here stopped short, and broke off her discourse suddenly. There was a musing in her eyes, as if there was a great deal more to say; but for a full minute she did not utter a word.

"That's all," she said in a low voice: and then gripping Helen's arm tightly, almost furiously, with her hand—"He's coming back to-morrow," she said.

Helen gave a little jump and cry in her surprise. "To-morrow!" with a quiver in her voice: she felt that her own story had been quite forestalled, and the words taken from her mouth. It was very, very unlikely indeed that she would have told her own story to Nora; still, it was very startling to have the cat turned in the pan like this, and the words taken from her mouth.

"Well!" said Nora, "I suppose he may come to-morrow if he likes: there is no law against it." And then Helen became aware that she had been thinking of to-morrow as hers, and felt as if she were deeply injured when someone came thus in, with a dart and a shout, to interfere with her climax of being. She gave a little laugh, the best she could produce, and said: "Of course, to-morrow if he likes—of course, it is no affair of mine."

"But I want you to make it your affair, Nelly! You see you are my only friend—and if you are not faithful to me, what shall I do? Nelly, I told you he was a great deal too good for me. He is the kind of man that never does anything wrong; since he was born he never did a silly thing. He is as serious as a—mustard pot. Once he had given his promise, and what he would call his heart, to a girl, he never could think of anyone else. Fancy that! He has almost said his prayers to Nora ever since that day—and, goodness gracious me, here he is coming home."

"Well!" said Helen, after a little pause—"for anything I can see you should be very glad, Nora. How do you know? If you are afraid of his goodness, perhaps he is not so

very good as you think. People say that, whatever men may tell you—and, then, five years is a very long time." She did not know how to put forth this accusation against human nature: she neither believed in, nor wished to believe in it; but to think of a poor man, who had, as the girl said, almost said his prayers to Nora, was almost an offence to Helen, as well as being so very, very ridiculous. That was not Harry's way. She thought that either Nora was very much self-deceived, or else the man must be a fool.

"Don't ask me how I know!" said Nora, "I know: and I am not at all like that. I have a great mind to go off to-morrow on a round of visits; but that would not do much good; for, as papa says, however long you may put off the evil day, you have to pay up at the end. I have a little plan, however, if you will only stand by me, Nell."

"If I were to stand by you for ever and ever, I don't see what good I could do," said Helen, hastily; and then she added, with a faint apology, "I have so many things to do of my own."

"What things of your own have you got to do? Nothing half so important as this. For don't you see how much it means, Nelly? It would stop all my fun. I shouldn't dare to speak to anyone, to look at anyone, except —, and talk sense to him, Nelly! and read improving books, and behave simply like—like what you call a rational creature. Now you do all these things by nature, Nell."

"Do I?" Helen said, more and more annoyed. For, to be sure, to-morrow was her own turning-point, and she was angry that it should be taken from her, and another person's interest thrust before hers, when she had been inclined to call heaven and earth to witness the solemnity of her own.

Nora went on for some time with that sound of babble in her friend's ears, which a persistent prayer—which we don't want to grant, or even hear—takes to our ears when it goes on too long. Nora's little chorus, "Oh do, Nelly!" "If you will only stand by me, Nelly!" "Nobody but you can do anything for me, Nell!" broke in by intervals through

this sing-song of talk, which Helen did everything she could to break away from, but in vain. Nora had drawn her in, much against her will, through the great gates of The Place, which is what the Shipleys' house was called, and into the quiet of the avenue, where no one was to be seen, nor any possible interruption to be hoped for; not even a tradesman's cart, for the time of their visitation was over. "Why should you be so very determined against me?" Nora said. "It is not as if I wanted you to do any great thing!"

"I cannot imagine what sort of thing you want me to do!" Helen said at last. "What does standing by you mean? It means nothing at all. If it is always to be beside you, that's impossible, you know! You speak as if you thought I never had anything to take up my thoughts, of my very own!"

This was what made her so angry: to think of how much importance to herself to-morrow might be, and to be treated as if she had nothing to think of but the affairs of her friend.

"Dear Nell, if you would ask him to the Rectory, that would be still better, and no trouble to you, and a great help to me. Oh hear me, Nelly! If he only saw as much of you as he means to see of me, he would soon find out that it was you who were the right person. He would, indeed! I am certain he would. Nelly, don't throw me off like that. He is as nice as can be; he will have a quantity of money; he is really quite good-looking; and he has the nicest way of talking. Nelly! why you are in a passion! Not many girls would ask you to take such a present; oh, very, very few. A man that would exactly suit you, down to the ground. Why, you would fall in love with him, I know you would—especially as there is not anyone—else—"

"How do you know there is not anyone else?" cried Helen, in high indignation, and, having loosened her arm from Nora's, she turned her back upon her, and hurried away with an indignation which was raised to boiling point by that last suggestion—"especially as there is not anyone else." How disdainful, how impertinent this assumption was!

How did she dare to foist her own rejected lover upon Helen, as if she was a girl to accept such a bargain? The blood boiled in Helen's veins. She was so angry, and so determined, that even Nora, who never could consent that anything she wished for was impossible, was reduced to silence, and flung herself down on the grass, a heap of frills and whiteness, and even cried in a bewildered way, as people cry, not even yet believing in it, who have never been accustomed to be crossed in all their life.

CHAPTER II.

THE chief sensation in Helen's mind after Nora Shipley's undesired revelation, was annoyance and impatience. There was something at once ridiculous and irritating in having a travesty of her own position thrust before her eyes, just at the moment when she was so fully occupied with the situation and might have been seeking sympathy in her own person, had she been given that way. To be sure, it was not in her to put the state of her mind before Nora Shipley or anyone else in the world; but all the same she was angry with the girl who claimed her sympathy with an egoistical indifference to any possible dilemma of Helen's own. She felt prostrated, the wind taken out of her sails: and, of course, Nora's circumstances were more natural, more distinct and better defined than her own. Nora knew her own mind, and was eager to shuffle off the bond she had rashly made, even to the ridiculous point of imploring her friend to take her lover off her hands. But Helen had no certainty at all in her mind. She did not want to get rid of her Harry: her trouble rather was that she might disappoint him; that the shock of reality after the visionary romantic bond of a five years' engagement at such a distance might be too much for him—or perhaps for herself. She would not, for the world, have thrown over Harry for anyone. The thought gave her a keen pang, which was jealousy, for anything she knew. No, no, the thought of casting Harry off had never entered her mind. She

was excited, and a little afraid of the meeting. Should she prove to be what he had imagined her to be all this time? Would he prove to be what she had imagined him? A little shiver of alarm, a little foreboding of evil, an indignant denial to herself of both these feelings was in her mind. And that Nora should way-lay her, and pour out her much more common love-tale of shallow certainties and resolutions was intolerable. The resemblance between the two situations was more than ridiculous, it was insufferable. There was no resemblance! Nora was a fickle, silly girl, who had changed her mind. Helen, to her own thinking, was a delicate-minded woman, feeling the great importance of a crisis, doubting, pausing, hoping, in the exquisite dilemma common to all superior minds.

I need not say that she did not, even in the most secret corners of her being, put this into words. It is almost as intolerable to confess yourself a superior being as a silly girl who has changed her mind. And, indeed, she had not changed her mind: she rejected this hypothesis violently. She was only frightened and nervous at the thought of this great crisis. Would she perhaps disappoint him? Would he perhaps disappoint her?

"You will go and meet him at the station, I suppose, Helen?" her mother said.

"Do you think I should, mamma? do you not think that—?" But Helen hesitated. To express herself plainly would be half a confession; and she would not, for the world, have anyone suppose that there was any doubt in her mind. There was no doubt in her mind! Only perhaps would he be—would she be—? "It is such a long time," she said, with an attempt at a laugh. "Suppose I should not know him, or he should not know me! It would be so—absurd."

"Helen is quite right," said the Rector. (Papa was a treasure! sometimes he would understand without a word said.) "A railway platform is not a place for a meeting. I'll go to the station for Harry. It will be much better he should find her at home."

"Well, perhaps," said Mrs. Huntingtower, with a little shake of her head; "I think that's

very cold for my part: but you may be right, you two. Everything is different since my time. I suppose, at least, you'll like to have him all to yourself, Helen? I'll go up to the Shipleys' as usual, as it is their tennis day, and you had better come too, Robert. They will have a great deal to say to each other the first day."

Helen looked half angrily, half deprecating, at her mother. She did not feel that she wished to be left to herself. She thought that the support of knowing her people to be in the house, and within call, would be a great thing; but, at the same time, to ask for this would be impossible. The mother could not quite understand that doubtful look. Was it possible that Helen?—but no, no, it was not possible. It was merely a nervous fright at the happiness so long looked for, now that it had come to hand. And Helen would have seized upon the words with delight if they had been spoken aloud. A nervous fright! that was precisely what it was.

The hours were intolerably long till it was time for the Rector to go to the station. And, in the meantime, Mrs. Huntingtower had been putting on a pretty dress for the Shipleys' garden party, which was one of the first functions held in the neighbourhood. She was as slim as Helen, and did not look much older. Decorum prevented her from playing tennis, which, I have no doubt, she would have done admirably. "But when one has a grown-up daughter!" she said. This did not, however, prevent her from making a point of being well-dressed. And the same argument did not apply to croquet. She called Helen to help her to arrange her ribbons and pin her veil, and then gave her a kiss, and said, "Don't look so pale, dear. You have got a fit of nervous fright."

The very word. "I should not wonder if I had!" said Helen, with a faint smile.

"Don't! The sight of him will bring back your colour: and in everything else, you are looking very well: come, Robert," said Mrs. Huntingtower. He was to escort her to the Shipleys' before he went to the station, and there was just time. Helen watched them

from her window upstairs, as they walked off together. Was it possible that she ever would walk by Harry's side like that in the careless calm of common life, so used to being happy with her husband that she had ceased to think of it? There could not be a happier couple than the Rector and his wife. They walked off side by side in the most delightful easy way, not thinking in the least about each other, at peace on that subject, and with all the world. "Don't poke my hat with your parasol," said the Rector, and "Don't niggle about your gloves, Robert—you will be late," said his wife. Would Helen ever be on such terms with Harry Mortimer? She thought she heard the sound of the distant train puffing and shrieking, and Helen's heart began to pound like a great steam-hammer on the drum of her ears. She was not pale any longer. She gave a glance at herself in the glass, and her cheeks were purple rather than pale.

It was considered very cheerful that, from the upper windows of the Rectory, you commanded the Green. The big ornamental gates of The Place were almost opposite. The post-office was at the corner of the road, which led down to the station; you could see everybody coming, from visitors arriving by railway to the telegraph boy starting from the post-office. Helen stood at her window and watched through the white curtains within, and the great bush of Travellers' joy (the sweet scented kind) outside. She saw the Rector leave his wife hurriedly half-way across, and turn down the road to the station: the train was signalled, it was coming. A boy with a telegram crossed the Rector as he came along, and paused a minute as if he would have given him that yellow envelope. Was it to say that something had happened—that Harry could not come? But the boy thought better of it, and came across the Green, trending his course straight for the Rectory. Straight? oh no! He came upon some small fellows playing marbles, and stopped to superintend the game. He met a nurse-girl with a baby in a perambulator. Helen's throat was so parched that she could not say to herself the remarks she would certainly make to both of them at the Sunday

School next week. Her whole attention was fixed on this boy. She was certain that the telegram was from Harry, and that something had occurred to keep him back. Her eyes followed him, through one delay after another: then he suddenly woke up, shook himself, spied her at the window, and, with a sudden demonstration of hot haste, ran on—but not to the Rectory. The sensation in Helen's mind was indescribable—was she sorry or was she glad? To have had it put off now would have been a relief—and yet it would surely have prolonged these crowding sensations and nervous frights! That was it! That was——

Oh, heaven and earth! There was the Rector coming back round the post-office corner, talking cheerfully, walking fast, and yes, there was another with him! Helen's heart gave such a leap that she thought it had fairly jumped from her mouth, and then suddenly fell quite quiet. Yes, there he was: Harry—yes, Harry—tall, straight, skimming along, as she now remembered was his way. She had forgotten how quickly he walked. He was putting the Rector on his mettle, who had grown a little stout, but was not to be outdone. Then there seemed to arise a slight controversy between them, the one evidently persuading the other to come no further: and then the Rector, with a wave of his hand, went on to The Place, and Harry came on straight as an arrow across the Green, alone.

Helen believed that she went down to the door to meet him, as it was certainly her duty to do. She knew for certain that she was standing with him in the drawing-room with the full light from the huge window in her face, when she, so to speak, came to herself, and was fully aware what was happening. He had his hands upon her shoulders, and was holding her at arms' length that he might see her face the better, and he was nodding to himself with satisfaction, saying to himself: "Just the same! Exactly my Helen as I left her. To think I should have been gone these five years, and that now I am here again!"

"You had always made up your mind," she said, with a happy quaver in her voice, "to be back in seven years."

"Yes, I had made up my mind : but things do not always come off because a man has made up his mind. It has been a horrible time ; some days have looked like years, and some years— Never mind, it is all over now, and here I am at home."

What did he mean by that expression—some years like—days? Was that what he meant to say? and what was it that made him say that? The thought darted through Helen's mind like an arrow. "I will not say so much as that," she said, "but many of the days have been very long ; and I am glad, oh, very glad to have you back again, Harry."

"Yes, here I am, back again. After all, you are a little bit different, Helen. You were such a little thing when I went away. I do believe you have grown—"

"I am so much older," she said.

"Older ! There is nothing older about you. You must have been a baby when I went away. Are you quite sure you knew your own mind that time? Perhaps you would have had nothing to say to me if I had come for the first time now."

"Perhaps you are talking nonsense," said Helen. "Tell me what sort of a voyage you have had, and if you were pleased to leave that India of yours, where you always seem to enjoy yourself so much."

"Do I enjoy myself? I make the best of it without you. One can't always be happy, but one can always amuse one's self—which is a very different thing," he said.

"Tell me about your voyage. Had you good weather? Were there nice people on board? Were you glad when it was over? or sorry to break off with all the new acquaintances? Come, tell me ; tell me ! I have been wondering every day whom you found to talk to on deck, and who sat next to you, and all about it."

"You would like to find out? There were some very nice girls on board," he said with a laugh ; "but don't be afraid, dear, not one of whom you need have been jealous."

"Jealous !" cried Helen, with a sudden flush, "you may be sure I never should be jealous, whatever happened."

"Who is talking nonsense now? There is always a little jealousy, Helen, when there's love."

"Not from my point of view," she said quickly.

"Oh, your point of view ! Have you grown a philosopher, Helen? None of the higher education, I hope. I like my little girl as she was ; don't talk about points of view. Well, then, about the voyage. It was just like other voyages. I told the Captain I was going home to get married, and it crept about, as things do, and that was a great protection to me. There was only one little thing—a girl who was going back again, after having been out for a visit—that would have anything to say to me. Perhaps she was a little disappointed at going back. She wanted me to show her your photograph, and said she saw me taking it out to have a private look at it."

"How could you allow such conversation, Harry? You ought not to discuss me with—your ladies."

"My ladies ! now that is a good one—after you have forced me to talk. No, it was nothing of the kind, Helen. I never talked of you to anybody. I wouldn't satisfy their curiosity. It was none of their business. Now let us hear about you. Are there many new people on the Green? You must take me to those Shipleys, where your father was going. I should like to see the inside of The Place. Don't you remember we used to say, if we could only have The Place and a thousand a year? that sounded like a great fortune in those days."

Helen shook her head with a laugh. "I know better now," she said ; "a thousand a year would not go far in The Place."

"Well, never mind. We shall not have The Place, but we'll do very well. What do you do with yourself in the afternoon, nowadays? Do you play a great deal of tennis—I don't see any net up?"

"No ; I was never very fond of it, and I have no one to play with," Helen said.

"We must have it put up again," said he. "Let's go out for a stroll round the old garden, Helen, and see all the old places."

This was a thing she consented to gladly, remembering with a thrill of pleasure how many spots there were which she had wandered about during these five years, saying to herself, "This was exactly where he stood when first—" and "this was where we sat on the last night," and many more such fragmentary speeches. It seemed a fitting climax to the reunion to go all by themselves and visit all these places. Had it been later, in the still evening with the moon shining, it would have been still more appropriate—but it was a pretty and tender thought even at this hour. It was very quiet, with the hush of the warm summer atmosphere and the solitude of the afternoon.

They walked round and round the garden, she with her arm in his, and looked very much like the pair of happy lovers they were; but it startled her a little that he did not seem to remember any of those spots full of memories which he had come out to see. She made hardly the slightest pause at that bosquet where he had first—but he did not seem to remember anything about it, and went straight on; and even the seat under the cedar where they had once quarrelled, and the summer-house where they had sat together holding each other tight all the last evening, seemed to awaken no recollections in his mind. He led her round and round, talking on, but not of these dear recollections. It troubled Helen a little, but she was shy and did not like to put him in mind. When the tea-tray was seen, through the drawing-room window, being carried in, he made a pause and looked at it with pleasure. "Here's tea," he said; "the first tea at home. That's something to see. Come and make me some tea, Helen. It will seem as if the wedding and all the bother was over, and you and I were in our own house together."

"Harry, what a stupid person I am," she said; "I should have asked you if you would have anything to eat—after your journey."

"As if I had come twenty miles or so—after my journey," he said with a laugh. "No thank you, dear, I had my lunch quite com-

fortably in town. I had to go to my club when passing through town."

"Then you might have been here earlier, Harry!"

"Hungry and travel-soiled. I should not have appeared before you like that. This is jolly," he said, "the cake, and the cream, and everything. Another cup, Helen, please. This makes one feel thoroughly at home." And he seemed to luxuriate in it. He ate a great deal of cake, and drank a great deal of tea, and talked a great deal of what was not shining sense, perhaps, but was agreeable enough. When this was finished, however, he jumped up and proposed a walk. "Let's go round and see all the old places," he said again. And, though Helen was rather disappointed at the result of his visit to the other old places, she consented willingly enough, and ran upstairs to get her hat, saying to herself that it was so like Harry, that he was always eager to be doing something—a peculiarity which she had perhaps forgotten. "The poor White House looks so forlorn," she said, as they went out. "Let's go and see the White House," he immediately suggested. But when they reached it he scarcely looked at it. "Ah, yes," he said, "the poor old house," and drew her on. After they had left that desolate dwelling they arrived, Helen did not exactly know how, at the Shipleys' gate. "Why, this is The Place," he said. "This is where your new friends live, and where your father and mother are. I suppose you were asked, too?"

"Oh, yes, I was asked, too—and so were you for that matter," said Helen, "for everybody knew you were coming. It is their day."

"It was very kind to ask me as well, Helen; since we're here, let us go."

CHAPTER III.

HELEN never quite knew how it was; but in a very short time after she and her Harry had arrived at the gates of the Place, which her sole intention was to pass on their stroll, she found herself with a racket in her hand

upon one side of a tennis net while he was facing her on the other in somebody's shoes, hurriedly appropriated, his coat and waistcoat taken off, and his white linen gleaming. It was like a transformation scene. The whole matter was so sudden that she did not know how it had come about. Was it only the other moment that she was standing at the window, her heart thumping, her breast panting, watching the telegraph boy, then seeing *him* part from her father and come across the Green; and now he and she were both playing lawn tennis to the admiration of the little crowd of society in Highfield, many of whom knew him before. She could not play any more than a baby. On other occasions she was a tolerable, if not a remarkable, player; but to-day she could do nothing. She could only stand and wonder to find herself there, and let her partner take every ball for her. Fortunately, he was a very active partner, and did not mind it at all. Harry was playing against them, snatched up in a moment by Nora Shipley, who cried—these words only were clear to Helen in the confusion—"Oh, I can't let you play with Helen, that wouldn't be fair; besides, you can look at her better from this side." Harry took it all beautifully, far better than she did. He played as well as possible; he never missed a ball, nor did anything he ought not to have done; and kept up with Nora in her talk as well as in her play. Helen was scarcely awake enough in the chaos of her mind to be aware that she herself neither talked nor played, but moved mechanically from one side to the other, and allowed Horace Standish, who was her partner, to take every ball. It was only when her mother, under cover of a desire to know how the game was, came up as they changed sides, that Helen began dimly to realise the position. "Helen," said Mrs. Huntingtower, at her shoulder, "what's the matter? has anything happened? have you quarrelled with Harry? you look as if you had fallen from the clouds."

"Quarrelled with Harry?" she said blankly, gazing in her mother's face.

"Well, well, I did not mean that: but you

do look quite unlike yourself. Remember, dear, everybody is looking at you, and wondering. You don't seem to take a single ball."

"I don't want to take any balls," said Helen; "I don't want to be here. It is all a mistake."

"Why did you bring him here then?" said Mrs. Huntingtower, almost sharply. "It's your service, they are saying, Helen. For goodness sake, dear, do wake up!"

She stared at her mother again, but she did wake up a little, and made as many faults as are permitted before she gave place again to her active partner. Why had she brought him here? That was the question. Why had he—brought her here? He was laughing at her bad strokes. He was in the highest spirits, calling to Miss Shipley as if he had known her all her life. It was of no use for Helen to pretend to play. As soon as the game was over, in which her side was preposterously beaten, she retired to a seat beside her mother, and watched what was going on. And Harry gripped his coat with the apparent design of following her, but was arrested by Nora, who cried in her high voice, audible over all the grounds, "Oh, you are too good to be let go, Mr. Mortimer. Do stay and win me another game. Oh, Helen is sitting down! she is tired, she will not mind a bit. Do you mind, Helen?"

Harry stood, it must be said, for a moment irresolute, looking first at her, then at Nora. "You are sure you don't mind?" he said. "Well, Miss Shipley, one set—just one set more."

"Helen," whispered Mrs. Huntingtower, "for goodness sake don't look like a tragedy queen. What is the matter? You look as if you had tumbled down——"

"From the clouds," said Helen; "you said that before, mamma. Well, perhaps, I have fallen from the clouds."

"Don't be fantastic, dear," said the Rector's wife, giving her daughter a soft little pinch in the arm. She said aloud, "You need not have come in an old frock, Helen, to Mrs. Shipley's party."

"Dear child," said Mrs. Shipley, who was fat and gracious, "I daresay she never thought what frock she had on—and it is a very pretty frock, and very becoming to her. I like to see her in that frock."

Helen looked down at her sleeve when her mother had given her that pinch, with an inclination to laugh and then with an inclination to cry, though she did not yield to either. It was a colour that was becoming to her, and that Harry liked. She had put it on on purpose for him, thinking he would remember and say something pretty about it, or else laugh, which would have been quite as nice, and ask, "Have you been wearing that frock all the time I have been away?" As a matter of fact he had said nothing about it at all, but had brought her here to make an exhibition of herself in an old gown.

The whole afternoon seemed to glide away like this, the gay scene on the lawn going on endlessly before her—the figures shifting, the balls flying through the air. The next act in the play seemed to be an effusive parting with Nora, and an eager entreaty to come back to-morrow, "when we can have a good single, and none of these tiresome people will be about. Won't you bring him, Nell? in the morning, and stay to lunch? Do come in the morning, Mr. Mortimer, and stay to lunch."

"I am not my own man," said Harry, "I am under orders"; and he took Helen's little cape from her arm to carry it, as if to demonstrate whose servant he was.

"Then bring him, Nelly; please bring him," Nora cried. Then there was another interruption as the two young people followed the two old people, the Rector and his wife, to the gate. A man who had been standing about, not apparently knowing anybody—quite alone in the gay little crowd—came up to Harry, and there was a great shaking of hands. "Hallo," cried Harry, "you here? I did not think we should have met so soon again. Why didn't you say you were coming to High-field, old man?"

"Why didn't you say so?" said the other. He took off his hat in a sort of reverential old-fashioned way to Miss Huntingtower.

"Oh, well!—who would have supposed that two of us were coming to this little pokey place?" said Harry: and then they continued their walk home. It all came in to the phantasmagoria—these strange interruptions—and then the wonderful tranquil calm of the evening when they came out into the open of the Green. It was too early yet for the village lads to have come out to their cricket, but yet something of the evening was in the air, a coolness and freshness in which the grass of the Green seemed to revive and take a higher tone. The sunset was beginning to flame in the south-west, behind the Rectory, which stood up almost black against the glowing sky. It was the time in the year when the sun goes almost round the horizon between his rising and his setting, and the day had been hot, but had now cooled delightfully down. Helen began to come to herself a little as she found herself walking by Harry's side through the soft and charmed air, across the Green.

"You never told me The Place had grown into such a jolly house as that," said Harry. "Jolly girl, too, and apparently a great friend of yours. I should think, if one may judge from a first glance, that there never will be any want of something to do, so long as she is there."

"Do you mean something to play at?" said Helen.

He laughed, and said she was just the same little Puritan as ever. "But you could not expect me to begin to do something serious," he said, "the very day I have come home."

"No, indeed; I did not expect it," said Helen, speaking with an emphasis which she found, as soon as she had said the words, must sound excessive. But Harry took no notice.

"It is a good thing to stretch one's limbs," he said. "You get to feel as stiff as an old beggar of fifty after three weeks aboard ship. By-the-by, what brings Bernard here, I wonder? he's always as sober as a judge, that fellow. Is he something to these people—nephew or cousin, or something? He looked dreadfully out of it, as if he knew nobody."

"He is—a friend, I think," said Helen.

"He ought to have known everybody; but it was you who seemed to do that."

"Yes, by Jove," said Harry, with a laugh. "I could not have supposed so many people would remember me, or the poor old folks at the White House. But that was chiefly on your account, Helen. You were the chief favourite, and they knew how I stood to you."

He gave her a look full of affection at this point, which went to Helen's heart; but her mind lingered on the words altogether independent of their meaning. "They knew how I stood to you." How did he stand to her? Did he know? Did she know? It seemed to Helen as if that was a question which went flying all round the Green, and to which nobody could reply.

She got a little lecture from her mother when the party went upstairs to dress for dinner. "I hope you will make yourself look nice," she said; "and I hope you will take care to *be* nice, Helen. I am sure I hope that you are glad to see Harry again; but if there were only your looks to speak for you, and if I was he, I don't think I should feel very sure."

"He is not so particular as you are, mamma," said Helen, with a smile. Her mother put her hand on her shoulder and gave her something, which was only a flutter of her light garments, but which Helen said was a shake—half in vexation, half in sport.

"Be a little like other people," she said, in a warning tone.

They were a very lively party at dinner, and Helen began to feel a little "like other people," as her mother said. Harry was certainly a great addition to their staid little party—he was gay himself, and he was the means of making the others gay. He made a little gentle fun of the gathering at The Place and all the people, which had the pleasant result of making them feel superior to the others, without really speaking ill of anybody. Even those whom he admired and praised seemed to grow just the least in the world absurd to Helen's eyes.

"Capital jolly girl," he said, "up to anything—and a little more; but I wish somebody would tell me what Bernard was doing there,

and what was his *rôle*, among all those people he didn't know?"

"Mr. Bernard?" said Mrs. Huntingtower. "Oh, he has a very important *rôle* indeed; and if it was not that we were preoccupied with our own affairs, we should have talked of nothing but him. Don't you know who that was, Helen? But I suppose you had no eyes for anything but—That is no less than the young man whom Nora Shipley met somewhere or other—don't you remember?—and engaged—yes, really—though they thought it was all a piece of nonsense—engaged herself to. It might be fun to her, but he sees no fun in it. And now he has come to claim her, and they know nothing about him, and don't know what to do with him. Poor Mrs. Shipley is in a great state. She questioned me about Harry, and what he was doing, and his prospects, and all that. And, poor thing, I thought she would have cried. 'Oh, how lucky you are,' she said, 'Mrs. Huntingtower! with a well-considered, well-chosen young man like that!—whereas we don't know where to turn or what to do.'"

"It's quite true," said the Rector, shaking his head, "Shipley said the very same to me. They never know what is going to happen about Nora. She is one moment here, another there, committing herself all over the place. This was all settled behind their backs; but now here comes the man, as serious as can be, seeing no joke in it, and determined to be attended to."

"If that's all," said Harry, "perhaps I can be of some use. Bernard's not a nobody, as you seem to think. He's very well considered, as you say. Fred Bernard, so far as *that* goes, might have had his pick of all the girls in India. Don't let anybody hear you comparing Fred Bernard to a one horse sort of fellow like me. Why, it's a sort of blasphemy, don't you know. There's no telling what he may rise to. I don't suppose he'll ever be Governor-General, for it takes a swell from home to do that; but I shouldn't a bit wonder at anything else. When we go over there to-morrow, Helen, you take me to the old lady, and I'll ease her mind about that."

"Oh," said the Rector's wife; "is that the case? Are you quite sure?" She did not, perhaps, feel so very happy that Nora's chosen husband should be somebody with whom her own future son-in-law was not to be compared. "They are not what you would call worldly people," she said, "to do them justice. If they were set at rest that he was quite respectable and all that——"

Here Harry laughed so long and loud that Mrs. Huntingtower was quite put out. "I do not pretend to know anything about position in India," she said, nettled; "but he does not look much like it, I am bound to say. He is not the sort of man I should ever have cared to give my daughter to."

Harry jumped up to his feet, and made her a bow. "Thank you," he said; "that's the finest compliment I have ever had. But there is nothing wrong about Fred Bernard, who is no end of a swell, and a very good fellow besides. Perhaps I may be able to set that right if you will bring me to speech of the old lady, Nell."

Nell! Helen had been thinking to herself, with a little pleasure, that this generous speech became him very well, and that he looked more like himself than she had yet seen him—but this syllable at the end spoiled all. "Why do you call me 'Nell?'" she said, in an undertone, while her mother went on:

"Oh, you need not be so very ready to elevate other people at your own expense! They were delighted with all I told them of you—how well you had got on, and what excellent prospects you had. There is no need of making such a fuss about this Mr. Bernard, either one way or another. I daresay it will all come right in time."

"If Harry knows the rights of the matter, certainly he ought to disclose them," said the Rector, from behind his newspaper.

"Oh, yes, if it was necessary, John; but, of course, this young man will be able to get people to speak to his character, and——"

"Why do I call you Nell? I like a monosyllable; and, besides, I heard them calling you Nell, and thought you liked it."

"You heard Nora calling me Nell; and I don't like it a bit."

"Well, well," he said, spreading out his hands in deprecation, "that's easily mended, Madam Helen. You shall have the full glories of your name. Oh, he'll get plenty of people to speak to his character. Bernard! Why the most rising fellow! I can't help laughing at such a mistake, and I ought to set it right."

"Of course, you must set it right," said the Rector.

"Well, if you are so very sure," said Mrs. Huntingtower, reluctantly. She had been flattered and pleased to think that the rich Shipleys, with all their wealth, were so much less well off than herself in the matter of a probable son-in-law, and it disturbed her to think of being brought down from that superiority. Still, of course, if Harry knew so much better—"Are you really going to The Place to lunch?" she said; "you don't mean to indulge us with too much of your company, you two."

Helen made no response to her mother's look. She was a little out of temper, if truth must be told, disappointed and twisted the wrong way.

"We were invited," said Harry, after a pause, "and I thought we accepted: but I, of course, am altogether at Helen's orders, either to go or stay."

"Oh, go by all means," Mrs. Huntingtower said; "it will be more lively for you. They are all very fond of Helen, and naturally they will like to see as much as possible of you. And it is really a pretty place, and the best tennis ground in the neighbourhood. Besides that, you can take them good news about that Mr. Bernard," she added, after a pause. If this must be done, and the stranger's position rectified, even at the expense of Harry's, it was a fine thing, at least, that it should be Harry that did it: this was the conclusion to which she had come in the multitude of her thoughts.

CHAPTER IV.

It seemed to Helen, after this, as if there was but one thing she ever did in the twenty-

four hours, and that was to go to The Place in the morning, and play tennis with Nora Shipley, and stay to lunch; or else to go in the afternoon and play tennis, and stay to tea. Sometimes the programme was modified. Mr. Bernard was not always there; but when he was there it was a double game that was played, and sometimes it would be a single with Helen sitting by Mrs. Shipley and looking on. On the latter occasions Nora's mother was always full of compliments about Harry: "What a very nice young man Mr. Mortimer is, Helen. We think you such a lucky girl, we all do, even papa. Papa thinks it was so nice and honourable of Mr. Mortimer to come forward in that way and tell us all about Mr. Bernard, who, it appears, is much higher up than himself in the Civil Service, which is a thing these young men don't much like to talk about."

"Dear Mrs. Shipley," cried Helen, "what does it matter who is above and who is below? Of course, naturally, Harry was bound to tell you all he knew as soon as he was aware that there was any doubt."

"Ah, my dear, every young man would not have done that," said Mrs. Shipley, shaking her head; "and just look how good natured he is with Nora, playing and doing whatever she wishes, whether it is a stroll in the garden, or picking gooseberries, or a love-game at tennis, or—, when all the time he must be longing to get back to you."

This, for the first time, called Helen's attention to the fact that the game was over, and that the figures of Harry and Nora were to be seen disappearing along the slope that led to the kitchen garden, while she sat by Mrs. Shipley's side, and the good lady talked and nodded her head as if they had been two elderly persons together; it would be vain to say that Helen was not much surprised; but she seemed to herself to raise some sort of sudden shield against the blow that struck her, and she said carelessly:

"Oh, you must not be surprised at what Harry does. He would go with any old lady to the garden for gooseberries, and carry them all back in her basket." She was not quite sure what she was saying, or why she

said it; but the sight of the two figures disappearing under the trees gave her the most curious sensation as if somebody had given her a blow. Presently, however, Harry was seen coming back with a cabbage-leaf full of ripe fruit, in his hands.

"I have brought you these, Helen," he said. "Will you have some, Mrs. Shipley? they are so beautifully ripe, it is a shame not to eat them. Won't you come down to the garden and gather some for yourself?"

"I!" said Mrs. Shipley, dropping her work in her astonishment; "do you really think I am out of my senses, Mr. Mortimer? Oh, of course, it was Helen you meant. Yes, Helen, darling, go—never mind me: I am quite happy, and here is Mr. Bernard, who will keep me company: for he is too hot to go any further, I am sure, after his walk."

"Oh, I hope you don't think we call this hot," said Harry. "Bernard will tell you what hot means. Are you coming, Helen? I have left Miss Shipley all by herself."

"I'll go and look after Miss Shipley," said Bernard, who was warm and dusty with his walk. Harry looked at him with a half angry air, and Helen looked at him a little scared, as if she felt that something must be going to happen—while he made a step forward towards the garden, waving his hat to Mrs. Shipley, and telling her he should be back presently. Then Helen and Harry looked at each other: and what was there to say? Assuredly, Bernard had the best right to go, to keep Nora company; and the other young man, who was owned by another young woman, had no right to interfere. Harry gave a short laugh, and said—but whether to himself or Helen no one could tell:—"Of course, he has the best right"—and made a sort of effort to clear his face. But it is not an easy matter to clear a face from a sudden cloud of perplexity and self consciousness and surprise and annoyance. He let his cabbage-leaf fall with the gooseberries in it, and turned away to follow the other man down the slope.

Then Mrs. Shipley gave a tug at Helen's gown. "Go with him—go with him," she said.

"Nora is at it again, and there will be trouble if you don't go."

Helen felt herself obey in a mechanical way; she got up from her seat, and then she seemed moved "by the spirit in her feet," and almost unconsciously, quite involuntarily, she went along by Harry's side without saying a word. It was quite a natural innocent expedition to gather gooseberries in the garden. Nora had sent Harry to bring her, and on the way they had picked up Mr. Bernard. The most censorious of critics could not have found any harm in that; but still, it was an uncomfortable sort of walk. Harry was whistling a tune, and Helen walked silently by his side. Before them, a few steps in advance, was Bernard. It was thus that Nora saw them bearing down upon her in the rich hollow of the kitchen garden, where the trees hung heavy with green apples and pale pears, and the prickly gooseberry bushes hung heavy with fruit. At the sight of the three figures each following the other, and looking anything but joyful, Nora sent up a great shout of amusement, and clapped her hands.

"Are you people out of work; or have you come to hold a penitential meeting?" she said. "I never saw anything so doleful. Gardener boy, bring me those baskets as quick as lightning. Look here, as you've all come, and as you all look lugubrious, let us try to do something useful. You fill that basket, Helen and Fred; and, Mr. Mortimer, you come and help me. You can eat as many as you like, so long as you fill your basket. It is for the school treat to-morrow," she cried.

Helen found herself standing by Mr. Bernard with a basket between them, and the ripe red and yellow globes hanging on the branches as high up as her shoulders. He was a grave young man, dark complexioned, more deeply browned with the Indian sun than Harry was, dressed in a very sedate, well-regulated way, in a frock coat, which looked so unnecessarily formal in the country, and a tall hat—which, it is true, was white, the one redeeming quality it had. Helen's thoughts were not so entirely at leisure as such a subject would imply; but the chief thing she was thinking of was, Why

did he dress like that? Was it old-fashioned? Was it the formality of his character? He gave no indication, but proceeded very gravely to take off his gloves, that he might begin his appointed work.

"Is there a school treat to-morrow?" he said. "They would certainly enjoy gathering them themselves, rather than that you and I should prick our fingers, Miss Huntingtower."

"That is true," said Helen; "but Nora may think they would clear the bushes and leave nothing behind them—which is also true."

"I am rebuked by your superior sense," said Bernard; "perhaps one always needs one woman to interpret another. Nothing so simple, yet so profound, would have occurred to me."

"I should not have said there was anything to interpret," said Helen.

"No, nor should I," he said, "on the surface of affairs." Then, after a minute of silence, during which the gay chatter of Nora, with a word or two and a laugh or two from Harry thrown in, had filled the atmosphere with sound, "It appears we are a little left out of it, Miss Huntingtower," he said.

"I am not at all left out of it," said Helen, in self-defence. "If you mean me to understand that I am poor company, Mr. Bernard, then it is your part to take up the talk, and I shall follow."

"That is not what I mean, at all. You are excellent company—too good company for me, who never have, as people say, a word to throw at a dog. Do you know anything more dreadful for a man, Miss Huntingtower, than to be dumb among lively people; and, when his mind is brimming over with matter, to find nothing to say?"

"It must be very hard," said Helen. "I have not met with it much; for most people talk more than I do, and that takes away the responsibility."

"Curious," he said; "that, I suppose, is why I feel stirred up in your presence—as if I ought to explain myself. I daresay Mortimer has told you what a bore I generally am. He, now—I should suppose he is never a bore?"

Helen felt her cheeks grow warm. She gave

a glance at her questioner, to investigate what he meant; but he was going on very seriously with his business, picking the gooseberries as if his life depended upon it—with an earnest devotion which made his frock coat and his tall hat look more absurd than ever.

"No," she said, "I do not think that Harry is a bore; but he is very often bored, and that is still worse for himself."

"Bored with—this sort of thing," said Mr. Bernard, with a wave of his hand towards the other row of bushes. "I don't wonder. He came here to be with you, and I came here——"

"To be with Nora," said Helen rapidly; "and it amuses Nora very much, don't you know, to get a little fun out of you both."

"Is that her notion?" said Bernard. "I said before, that to have a woman to interpret a woman makes many things clear. But I don't think you interpret me quite justly, Miss Huntingtower. I came here with a more complicated motive than that. I don't say it was not part of it, but the chief part was a different thing, and one you might, perhaps, help me in—to know what she means by it. Does that come at all within your philosophy?"

Then Harry came from behind the other row of bushes with a sombre and guilty look, glancing up at Helen under his eyebrows, as if to see how she was taking matters. "Our basket is quite full," he said; "and Miss Shipley sends me to suggest that if you others had been working as you ought, we might go and have tea."

"Our basket is not nearly full," said Bernard, "and I cannot be stopped in the middle of my work now that a definite job has been given me. I also protest, in the most formal manner, against having Miss Huntingtower taken away from me. She is the partner of my task. Go and have tea yourselves, *you others*, and we will come when we have done."

"Oh, that is what they say!" said Nora, over the bushes. "I hear every word. If that is their state of mind, don't trouble any more with them, Mr. Mortimer. Come along, and carry the basket to the fruit-room, and then we shall proceed to enjoy ourselves just as things may turn up; and if we are in the

middle of a game before they have done, why they will have themselves to thank for it. I thought we might have had a double—but no matter," she said.

"Does she mean just that, Miss Huntingtower, or does she mean something quite different?" Mr. Bernard said. He did not trouble Helen by looking at her; but kept his eyes and his mind upon the gooseberries, which, by this time, he had found out how to gather very quickly and systematically. At first he had pricked his fingers very much.

"I am not really Nora's interpreter," Helen said, a little sharply. She was truly quite languid about her picking, having fallen out of it to watch the little group which went past—Harry and Nora, carrying between them the big red ripe gooseberries, her slight willowy figure bending and swaying towards him with the weight of the burden. Harry laughed and talked with a touch of excitement in his kindled eyes and animated face. He was evidently very fully occupied, not staring about him and wondering what there was to do, as he often did when with Helen herself. She thought it very strange that Harry should speak to any party of which she formed part as "*you others*." It was one of the moments when, in the giddy queer confusion she was in—a confusion in which she seemed to float and glide on—until, without any will of her own, she came down suddenly sharp upon her heels upon the solid and resistant ground. The little shock when it came, as it did occasionally, made her feel a little faint.

"So much the worse for me," Bernard said, "for it is a very important investigation in which I am engaged. If I had you in India, Miss Huntingtower, I should subpoena you, and you would be obliged to tell me the truth."

But Helen was not able to carry on this conversation because of the faintness which had overpowered her. "The heat is too much," she said, "and I am full in the sun. You must let me rest in the shade a little before I can either work or speak."

He left the gooseberries in a moment, and turned over a large basket in a shady corner to make her a seat. "I shall go on," he said,

"that you may recover a little; otherwise I don't feel that it is my duty to be picking gooseberries. It is not either your rôle or mine—however—" After a little while, during which Helen had come to herself, and he had almost filled the basket, he came back. "I wish very much," he said, "you would help me in my investigations. I am like an explorer in an undiscovered country. I must repeat my question. Do you happen to know what Miss Shipley means by this sort of thing, Miss Huntingtower? I am an explorer, but, as you see, perfectly self-possessed and equal to all emergencies."

"I do not know," said Helen, with a clear coldness, which quite recently, and to her surprise, she had discovered herself to possess, "what emergencies could arise. Nora means nothing, if that is what you wish to know. She is very fond of—fun: and she thinks it fun to do—I don't really know how to describe it—"

"What she is doing. That's enough, I quite understand what you mean," he said.

"Perhaps you understand more than I mean, or something quite different. She has no meaning," said Helen, rising, with the blood coming warmly to her cheeks. "I hope you do quite—understand me. She means nothing—except fun," Helen said.

"Life does not always lend itself to—fun, Miss Huntingtower."

"No," she said. "Shall I help you to carry the basket? But Nora will make it do so, if she can; or if she can't, she has not yet found that out."

CHAPTER V.

THAT evening it turned out that Harry Mortimer was asked, by himself, to dinner at The Place. This was a thing that happened from time to time, with full consent of all concerned. There were a great many dinnerparties at The Place, and sometimes it so happened that there was a place for a man urgently calling for some one to fill it, but no corresponding place for his womankind—supposing

him to possess any: in which case the ladies quite cheerfully came "afterwards." It was a very usual arrangement, and, except in the case of very young girls, who found it a bore, was generally not objected to by Society on the Green. But it was generally the Rector who was asked to supply the vacancy, and that it should be Harry was a little startling; while, on the other hand, the invitation through him to come "afterwards" had an informality which confused even Mrs. Huntingtower, who was generally very indulgent in respect to the form of invitations to The Place. "They know no better," she would say, "and the intention is always kind and neighbourly. It would look as if we were standing up for punctilio if we did not go, Helen." And Helen, whose chief entertainment was these parties, generally consented willingly enough. But things were a little different to-night. The Rector, for one, had no idea whatever of being invited "afterwards." He was faintly glum not to be asked himself, but almost violently cordial about Harry going, warning him that the Burgundy was excellent, but not the claret, and one or two other fatherly hints of that description. When Harry was gone, however, there was a visible shade upon the dinner-table at the Rectory. Mrs. Huntingtower had put on, almost ostentatiously, her plainest gown—one which she had turned into an evening gown from a walking dress as a piece of economy, and only wore in the deepest depths of the family circle, when not even a churchwarden was likely to appear: and Helen, if not so conspicuously, had followed her example. The ladies each remarked the dress of the other in a moment, and drew the inevitable conclusion. But the Rector was only a man, and had to go into details.

"My dear," he said, "I hope you won't mind if I let you go to this function at The Place alone. It's silly, you know, to see one man alone among the ladies before the men come into the drawing-room; and it's absurd to be sent in to join them at their wine, as if one was a small boy. It's a long time since I've had a comfortable snooze over my paper. You must really forgive me to-night."

"I am not going, John," said Mrs. Hun-

tingtower, calmly: "I think it's too much. Helen is always there every day, and she can have nothing more to say to Nora; and it is always a bore going out after dinner."

"So I think," said the Rector, surprised; "but I imagined you did not agree with me. You used always to say——"

"I don't say so now, then," she answered, with a sharp note. "Helen and I are of the same opinion. It has been a very warm day, and we don't feel disposed to move."

But the evening was not a very pleasant evening, such as the evenings at the Rectory often were, when they did not go out and looked for no interruption. To be sure it was summer, and a summer evening, though so beautiful, is often an unmanageable thing. The Rector was not sure that, as the daylight lasted so long, he ought not to go out again and see what was being done at an evening school which an enthusiast had started in the village. He did not go eventually, but he felt a certain guiltiness in not going, and his comfort was spoiled. Mrs. Huntingtower and Helen went out into the garden and talked to each other about the flowers, and how certain beds ought to be arranged for next year; but Mrs. Huntingtower did not say, "You will not be here to see them, Helen," as she had been in the habit of doing, and as Helen expected her to do, and keenly marked that she did not; while Mrs. Huntingtower, on her side, remarked how languid Helen's interest was in the flowers, as if she already felt at a distance from them. They had reached the moment at which a great subject was about to force itself into discussion, but nobody liked to begin.

When Harry returned later—much later than the usual ending of parties at The Place—he was very full of indignation that they had not come. "You spoiled the evening for all of us," he said.

Helen said, "All of whom?" with a faint satire in her tone. However he made no reply, but only wondered, still in tones of indignation, that as they did not come they should have taken the trouble to sit up for him. Mr. Huntingtower explained mildly that they had

not sat up beyond their usual hour, though Harry was certainly late; but hoped that it had been a nice party, and that he had enjoyed himself.

"I enjoyed myself as well as I could under the circumstances," he said. Then, changing into a lighter tone: "See what it is to leave a man unprotected. The *père* Shipley asked me to go to the Highlands with them for the 12th—and I—consented."

He turned to Helen, holding up his clasped hands deprecatingly. She had not been looking at him, but she saw every movement he made, and at this turned away so quickly that he thought she could not have noticed at all.

"For the 12th! and you—consented?" It was Mrs. Huntingtower who spoke: Helen was doing something with the flowers at one of the tables, with her shoulder turned; and as for the Rector, an unready man, he stood with rather a staring, startled look on his face, and said nothing at all.

"Yes; I hope I didn't interfere with any arrangement. It is a great chance for a fellow with only one year in England. I thought I had better take advantage of it while I had the chance."

"Certainly, certainly," said the Rector. "You were quite right—very good thing to take advantage of any chance."

"And I can join you at the end of the month wherever you are going," Harry said; "Lochaber is quite handy for everywhere, they tell me—half-a-dozen railways; and once you are on a railway what does it matter whether you are fifty or five hundred miles from home?"

"To be sure, to be sure," the Rector said.

Nevertheless, Harry did not feel happy when he went upstairs that night. Something uncomfortable seemed to have got into the house.

"I wish I knew the meaning of it," the Rector said to his wife the same night as these excellent people took counsel with each other in the small hours, wakeful and disturbed. It was a very warm night, and nobody was disposed to sleep. "Is he trying to shirk off? Do the Shipleys want to get hold of him?"

"Robert, how can you say such abominable

things? Harry is quite honourable; and, as for the Shipleys, good people——"

"He may be quite honourable—I believe he is; but it's very queer all the same. To be married in October, and packing off, with new people he has taken up on the spur of the moment, to the depths of the Highlands in August. I think it is very queer."

"Dear, you must consider, as he says he has only a year at home, and a chance of a moor is a great thing for a young man. None of Harry's relations are well enough off to take shootings in the Highlands. I think that, perhaps, there is——every excuse for him," Mrs. Huntingtower said. She was a peacemaker, not so much by instinct as by profession, if that may be said, firmly believing that her duty lay that way—yet sometimes fulfilling it without very much heart.

"That's all very well," the Rector said, unsatisfied; "but it seems to me very queer." He was not prepared with anything more to say.

His wife could have said a great deal more, but she held her tongue, though it was pain and grief to her. She said, somewhat reluctantly, after a pause: "Perhaps they intend to ask Helen to go to the Highlands with them;" and he answered, saying "that no doubt that must be what they intended; so that, after all, it would not be so queer."

But the Shipleys did not ask Helen to go with them to the Highlands; and Helen, herself, said that Lochaber was at the very end of the world, and she would not go on any account. For a long time back it had been arranged that the Rector was to take his annual holiday in the English lake country that year, instead of going to Switzerland, which he loved, on account of Helen's marriage, and because it would not be so much out of the way. August was the month in which all the preliminaries were to have been settled; so that nothing but the mere marriage ceremony and "the clothes" (which were already in hand) should remain to be looked after when they all returned. But, strangely enough, of all those preliminaries, not one was mentioned during the short time that remained before Harry set

out for Scotland. He went up to town to his gunmaker to see about guns, and on each occasion he brought Helen back a little present, which she accepted. But the state of things in the Rectory, and among these people generally, was more curious than could be described. Everybody was discontented, the atmosphere of the house was like that of a volcano, and any day threatened to burst into great storms and disturbances of nature. "Has he said anything to you?" Mrs. Huntingtower asked of her husband when he came upstairs, bidding Harry audibly good-night at his bedroom door. "Have you said anything to him?" she asked, more imperatively, when they went out for their usual walk together in the afternoon. One day she added: "I must, Robert, if you will say nothing;" and the Rector said, vehemently, "I wish to goodness you would!" but still nothing was said.

As for Helen, who was the person most chiefly concerned, it was still more extraordinary the manner in which she let these weeks and days glide on. She could not break off, in the midst of so small a community, her visits to The Place where her betrothed spent almost every day, without much and unpleasant notice, and she continued to go, often with him, sometimes alone, adapting herself curiously to what her pride, perhaps, more than any nobler part in her, considered a necessity. She was foolishly anxious for the break-up, for the departure of the party, with a bewildered idea that everything might thus be staved over without any guard, without any visible breach. Notwithstanding her assurances to Mr. Bernard that Nora meant nothing, she was by this time fully persuaded that Nora intended to take her lover from her, having very liberally offered her own to Helen beforehand. But she had come to this state of mind that she only wished the transfer to be accomplished and the matter done with, without being called upon herself to enter the arena as if she wanted to fight for him, or to claim back the allegiance which had so very evidently been given to another. Helen had not, perhaps, been in a very settled mind, as the reader has seen, on the

day of Harry's return. She had always been a little uneasy as to whether he would turn out the real Harry, the ideal Harry, whom she had loved romantically in his absence for five years. During these years, when his letters came, she had often had chills of doubt as to whether the person who wrote these letters was the real, the only Harry. On the eve of his arrival, that doubt had been heavy on her soul. Then there had come the moment of meeting, when his form and voice had bewildered her back into a conviction, anxious but firm, that it was he. And then? Well, then it had all begun again. He yawned, and wanted "something to do" the first day. He had taken her out, because a walk was something to do—rather than the recollections of the garden and all its sacred spots, of which Harry remembered nothing; he had made her take him to The Place, to the garden party, to the tennis, the first day of his return. After this, everything had seemed natural to Helen—his gradual absorption by the others, his gradual separation from herself. The strange little story had gone on with something of the usual vicissitudes that mark a waning interest, the heats and colds, the moments when love for a time seemed to come back, and all the possibilities to come into being again: but all like a dream. And now any day the climax might come, the settlement which would end this bewildering business, and restore Helen to the sober, common life, without any expectation or probability of change, which was the lot of so many women. She longed for that moment to come; but she did not want to be the chief actor in it. Sometimes, indeed most generally, a woman's pride is to be at least the active party in a final severance—to have it known that it is she who rejects, and not she who is the rejected. But Helen, somehow, was prouder than this. She wanted it all to end silently without one word said. She held her mother in, lest she should "speak to" Harry, as Mrs. Huntingtower was bound to do. Helen would not have a word said. She wanted the thing to die a natural death, she said. She accepted, as has been said,

the little presents he brought her, without a word, with a smile which was a great wonder to Harry, and made a little shiver run over him, even in one of these very hot days. What did she mean? It was a greater wonder than what Nora meant, which to him at least was clear enough.

CHAPTER VI.

THE party from The Place went off to Scotland at last. They went, on the 10th of August, to leave London by the night train; but Harry had, he said, many things to do in town, and preferred to start in the morning, long before his triumphant fellow-travellers found it necessary to set out. The last days had been distinguished by many breaks, and were of a tension almost unsupportable. The most ordinary allusion, either to the future or the past, was so big with meaning, that nothing perhaps but Helen's unrelenting vigilance would have kept it from bursting out. "I really must say something," the Rector said two or three times a day; and his wife answered fiercely, "If you do not, Robert, I must." But that gave him always a sense that he was let off, for he would much rather know she did it than do it himself. Harry started by so early a train that Helen, who was in attendance upon her mother, who slept badly, was not ready in time to bid him good-bye; and the tremulous Rector was the only member of the household to pour out his tea for him, and see him eat his breakfast. Harry was very glib in his talk that morning with the Rector, begging him not to apologise. "We shall meet so soon again," he said, with what Mr. Huntingtower noticed as a curious colour in his face. But he did not ask where they were going, nor did the Rector furnish him with any address. This, in fact, was a detail which neither of the men recollected in the agitation of the morning. Just as he was going away, Harry paused, came back, and said, "By-the-by! one of the places I am going to is Battersby's, to see that they are getting on with the papers." The Rector was so much startled by this that he had not self-

possession to say more than "Oh!" which was scarcely a satisfactory answer: and then Harry got into the cab with his luggage, and was driven away. "He has gone now, mamma," said Helen, who was standing, though unseen, at the window—just as she had watched him come—but then with much beating of the heart. Now she was very quiet, too quiet, perhaps; her heart that had been so active lying more like a stone than anything else in her breast. "He is gone! and you have never said even good-bye to him," cried Mrs. Huntingtower from her bed, with a sob. "Have you no feeling about it at all, Helen?" Helen, however, made no reply; and then the Rector came in with his strange tale that Harry had said he was going to call at Battersby's to see if they were getting on with the papers—Battersby's, his lawyers! The father and mother discussed this final suggestion with bated breath, but Helen only laughed a little as she went away to her room. She was not seen again for some time; but there was no sign of tears about her eyes when she next submitted herself to her mother's inspection: and if she looked a little tired, that was easily explained, for Mrs. Huntingtower had been seized by one of "her attacks," and Helen had been up with her for some part of the night.

The summer passed on, as summers pass whatever happens. Harry sent a letter, but it was not answered; and Battersbys communicated with Mr. Huntingtower's solicitors, but were informed that the latter firm had no instructions. There were other notes sent which occasioned more searchings of heart, to dressmakers and other functionaries concerned with the beautiful outfit for India which the Huntingtowers had meant their daughter to have. Mrs. Huntingtower sighed when she thought of the piles of muslin and fine linen, and the pleasure she would have had in showing them to all her friends. "She will not get very much money; but the Rector agrees with me that she must have the best outfit that can be got," was a speech she had conned for a long time, and which she had hoped to say over and over again to the hosts of visitors who would come to see Helen's

things. Would "Helen's things" ever be exhibited now to any one? or any such holiday as Helen's wedding ever be held at the Rectory? But, though Mrs. Huntingtower instinctively cast a rapid glance round her at the qualifications of all the young men about, she was obliged to shake her head and dismiss the pleasing thought. Probably now—most probably—Helen would never marry. This was the greatest thing that Mrs. Huntingtower would have asked for herself. But she had the old-fashioned feeling that it was a little derogatory to her daughter, and felt that she would not consent without a pang to see Helen's girlhood pass into the shadow, and the chances of life become ended for her. There was, indeed, *that* Mr. Bernard, about whom Harry had really behaved so very nicely. What if?—but she stopped the thought in great alarm, lest it should be discussed in the deepest recesses of her heart.

The Rectory party went to the lakes on the first of September. They did their duty nobly, going the round, pretending to be excessively interested, and to enjoy every special view. "Why should we insist on going abroad when we have scenery like this at home?" Mrs. Huntingtower said. "And to think that but for an accident we should never have known this fine country, Robert."

"I don't know what you call an accident," said her husband; "you know very well it was on account of Helen's affairs. Well, I shall say no more about it; but here's the mar—whatever you call it—the whole thing broken off: and we might have been in the Oberland all the time."

I will not say that Helen did not look with a curiosity she would not have betrayed to any one, and sometimes even with eyes that a rapid spectator might pronounce wistful, at the lines of tourists that arrived by every train and every boat. But no one came: and the little party "did" the lake country with great faithfulness, but were not sorry when the clergyman's three weeks, which means as good as four, came to an end.

Later in the year the Shipleys arrived too, and, as the weather continued unusually fine,

there was news upon the Green of a renewal of all the summer games—the tennis, and the croquet, and the garden parties—for as long as this St. Martin's summer should last. It startled everybody very much, however, when one morning in the end of October no less a person than Nora Shipley walked into the Rectory garden, where Helen was busy in the little conservatory, looking after the cuttings in their little pots. Nora walked briskly round the side of the house, so that it was not till she felt a hand upon her arm that Helen knew any one was there. She turned round very quickly, with a start that would have shaken any one else's hand off, but Nora was not a person to be got rid of in that way.

"Are you never going to come near me more?" she cried. "Are we never to be friends? We have been ten days here, and you have never come. And you won't accept an invitation or anything. Nelly, you are surely never going to let anything come between you and me?"

Helen was so much dismayed and astounded that she let fall the little pot she had in her hand, though it had one of the very finest of the baby plants in it. To stoop down for it gave her a moment to collect herself, but Nora had been quicker, and gathered it up—broken pot, and crumbling soil, and the small thing with its little threads of roots—and held it out in her hands.

"It's a blue——" said Helen, to give herself a countenance; but the name was a great deal larger than the plant, and passes my powers.

"Oh, Margrave will give you a dozen," cried Nora; "he's great in blue Double-you double-yous. But, Nelly, come and talk with me. Do come and talk with me, and never mind the cuttings. I have not seen you for nearly three months—quite three months; for in July you never came near The Place, unless when you came with that poor Mr. Mortimer to take care of him: and then I never got any good of you. Nelly, I wish you'd come down from your high horse. You know very well there is no one here I can make a friend of but only you."

"It is scarcely my business to provide

friends for you," said Helen, but it was all she said: and it was merely out of regard for the gardener, not to make him the auditor of this unnecessary explanation, that she allowed herself unwillingly to be led away.

"Don't say such horrid things," said Nora; "of course, it is everybody's business that we should be friends, all of us: for that's in the Bible, and can't be gainsaid. I don't know whether you think I have done anything I oughtn't to, Nell. We're always doing things we oughtn't to, don't you know; but you get forgiven when you say it in your prayers."

"I have not accused you of anything, that I know of," Helen said.

"Oh, no! if you did that I could answer back. The dreadful thing is when you don't say. It's about that poor Mr. Mortimer, I know. Was it my fault? I did not wish him to come after me, making Fred furious—quite the reverse. And he did not wish it either, not a bit; only my play suited his, and his play suited mine, and we won everything when we went together. It was the same thing dancing. He's a beautiful dancer, you know. I will say he was thrown away upon you, Helen; you didn't half appreciate him. It was left for me to find out all the things he could do. And he is getting on very well in India—*very* well, Fred says, considering that he is not clever. And the poor fellow to throw up his year's furlough, and go back in three months or so—all because you have been so hard upon him."

"I don't know what you mean by this story," Helen said—but she was trembling a little; "nor who is your authority." Nora still clung to her arm, and, therefore, could not be deceived as to the nervous quiver in her frame.

"Why, Fred to be sure," said Nora, raising innocent, wide open eyes. "Fred Bernard, whom I'm going to marry. I am sure I might have had much greater excuses for throwing him off. But there are some people who are faithful, and some who aren't—it's all a matter of temperament, Fred says. Nelly, are you going to be friends with me again? I do assure you, I was not at all to blame about Mr. Mortimer. Poor fellow! I should like to

have him at The Place; but Fred would dance! He is a perfect Turk for jealousy. But if you would hold up so much as a little finger before he vanishes off the scene, Fred would send it to him, like a shot, and stop him going. Nelly! how can you be so hard? Don't you say your prayers every morning, and that bit about trespassing against you? Fred says if we were all to be tried by our deserts, don't you know— Oh, Nell, Nell! can't you be a little forgiving, and look over it, and let us have the wedding all the same."

But by this time they had reached the open door of the Rectory, and Helen ran in, dragging, as Nora would not let go, her undesired companion after her. "Will you go in and see my mother," she said, trying to be civil. "I can't talk any more on this subject. I—don't blame you. *That*—was not my reason," she said.

Helen walked about her room when she got into its safe shelter, locking the door, for Nora was not scrupulous whom she followed. Helen walked about her room, and went to her window, where she had watched him coming, and watched him going, and then up and down, up and down, to compose her feelings a little. She had only to hold up her little finger. Would she, could she, hold up her little finger? She put her hand upon her heart, and it seemed to her that it was as heavy as lead and as cold as stone. There was a throbbing in her pulse, but it was because of this unexpected discussion and the indignation in her heart, although it was true enough that she did not think it worth her while to blame Nora nor any such nonsensical cause, though it might be apparently for that that Harry Mortimer had thrown her love away. Had he thrown it away? Had it been his when he appeared? She went to her window again, and she seemed to see him coming quickly over the Green. But she only remembered how her heart had been beating. And then she remembered the little easy story of that day. No, she would not hold up a little finger. If a flutter of a handkerchief would do it, she would never flutter that handkerchief. It was not Nora's fault. It lay deeper than Nora, with Fred

Bernard's philosophy to boot—Fred Bernard, who was now apparently in the ascendant—he who was so anxious to find one woman to interpret another. Helen laughed to herself a little over the farce of those whose threads of life had come so strongly together on that sunny afternoon. Her own being had been changed, if not by that, yet somehow through its agency and Harry's. Poor Harry! There was a little dignity, she thought, in his idea of throwing up his furlough, and going back to his work. It showed at least that he had much good feeling left. She was pleased with this for his own sake. "But never more be officer of mine!" she said to herself, throwing back her head as if to shake the last thought away.

Perhaps the reader will fear, as the good Rector did, on hearing the whole matter, that there was much risk that Harry might take to evil ways in his despair. I must relieve their minds in this respect. To have fallen into evil ways would have made Harry Mortimer very uncomfortable, and lost for him the results of all his work, such as it was—and he had too enlightened a regard for himself to do that. What he did was perhaps, on the whole, the best thing he could have done. When he found finally that there was to be no place of repentance for him at the Rectory, he withdrew his heroic resolution about resigning his furlough, stayed out his full time, and found a little girl who, like himself, was eager always to find "something to do," and who was pretty enough and good enough for all his requirements, whom he married, and surprised with the treasure of all the presents which he had sent to Helen during the course of the five years—and took with him to India, where they did very well. It is not so sure that Fred Bernard will succeed in marrying Nora; but that is a question for him to settle. One thing is certain, that, though Mrs. Huntingtower was a little disappointed about Helen's things, and the pleasure of showing them to everybody, yet it was as good as a great fortune to both father and mother to find that there was to be no wedding and no parting, and that their child, for a time at least, was their own once more.