A POOR GENTLEMAN

BY

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'IT WAS A LOVER AND HIS LASS,' 'THE LAIRD OF NORLAW,'
'AGNES,' 'ADAM GRAEME OF MOSSGRAY,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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A POOR GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER I.

THE TWO FAMILIES.

THE house of Penton is one of the greatest in the county of which it is an ornament. It is an old house, but not of the kind which is now so generally appreciated and admired. It is not Elizabethan nor Jacobean, nor of the reign of Queen Anne. The front is Grecian, or rather Palladian, in heavy stone supplemented by plaster, with the balustrades of a stony terrace surmounting the level frontage of the single storey, lofty, yet flat, which stretches like a screen across the higher cluster of building

which forms the body of the house. When you turn the corner from this somewhat blank and low but imposing line you come upon the garden front, which is of the livelier French order of architecture, with long windows, and many of them. The gardens are the pride of the house. These are arranged in terraces and parterres, brilliant with flowers, and there is even an elaborate system of waterworks, a little out of order now, and a few statues here and there, half covered with lichens, yet not unworthy of better preservation. The rooms inside are lofty and sumptuous, intended for great entertainments and fine company, but the gardens are such as Watteau would have delighted in, and which he might have made the scene of many a *fête champêtre* and graceful group of fine ladies and fine gentlemen in costumes more brilliant than are now thought of. The grounds at Penton, indeed, are still filled at times with parties of gaily-dressed people, and the lawns brightened by maidens in muslin and young men in flannels; but Watteau would have had no sympathy with the activities of lawn-

tennis. That popular game, however, was not pursued with any enthusiasm at Penton. It was permitted rather than encouraged.

There was no youth in the house. Sir Walter Penton was an old man, and though he had, like most old gentlemen who figure in romance, an only daughter, she was not either young or fair. She was a lady of somewhat stern aspect, between forty and fifty, married, but childless. The household consisted of her father, her husband, and herself, no more. And there were many circumstances which combined to make it anything but a cheerful house.

Three or four miles from Penton, but on a lower level, lay the house of Penton Hook. It was on the banks of the river, planted on a piece of land which was almost an island in consequence of the curve of the stream which swept round it. The great house stood high on the brow of the bank, an object seen many miles off, and which was the distinguishing feature of the landscape. The smaller one—so small that it was scarcely worthy to be called a country place at all—lay low. When the river was in flood, which

happened almost every winter, Penton Hook stood dismally, with all its little gardens under water, in what seemed the middle of the stream. And though the Pentons all protested that the water never actually came into the house, which was raised on a little terrace, their protest was received by all their neighbours with shaking of their heads. Everything was green and luxuriant, as may be supposed. The house was so covered with creepers that its style was undefinable. A little glimmer of old red brick, delightfully toned and mellowed, looked out here and there from amid the clusters of feathery seedpods on the clematis, and below the branches of the *gloire de Dijon* in winter. In the brighter part of the year it was a mass of leaf and flower: but during all the dark season, when the water was up, when the skies were dark, damp and dreariness were the characteristics of Penton Hook. The rooms looked damp, there was a moist look about the tiles in the little hall. The paper was apt to peel off and the plaster to fall. There were many people who declared that the house was a very fever-trap,

and everybody was of opinion that it must be unhealthy. It ought to have been so indeed, by every rule of sanitary science. A kind Providence alone took care of the drainage. Mr. Penton did not know much about it, and took care not to inquire: for had he inquired it would probably have been necessary to do something, and he had no money to spend on such vanities. Neither, indeed, did there seem much occasion, for, notwithstanding what everybody said, eight young Pentons, tall and straight, and ailing nothing, with appetites which were the despair of their mother, grew up and flourished among the mud and damp, and set all prognostications at defiance.

Nothing could be more unlike than the two families who bore the same name, and lived within sight of each other. The one all gravity and importance and severe splendour; the other poor, irregular, noisy, full of shifts and devices, full of tumult and young life. Mrs. Penton, Sir Walter's daughter (for her husband, who was nobody in particular, had taken her name), went from time to time with the housekeeper through

the ranges of vacant rooms, all furnished with a sort of sombre magnificence, to see that they were aired and kept in order; while her namesake at the Hook (as it was called) schemed how to fit a bed into a new corner, as the boys and girls grew bigger, to make room for their lengthening limbs and the decorums which advancing years demanded. It was difficult to kill time in the one house, and almost impossible to find one day long enough for all the work that had to be done in it, in the other. In the one the question of ways and means was a subject unnecessary to be discussed. The exchequer was full, there were no calls upon it which could not be amply met at any moment, nor any occasion to think whether or not a new expense should be incurred. Mr. Russell Penton, perhaps, the husband of Mrs. Penton, had not always been in this happy condition. It was possible that in his experience a less comfortable state of affairs might have existed, or even might still, by moments, exist; but, so far as the knowledge of Sir Walter and his daughter went, it was only mismanagement, extravagance,

or want of financial capacity which made anybody poor; they could not understand why their relations at the Hook should be needy and embarrassed.

'So long as one knows exactly what one's means are,' said Mrs. Penton, 'what difficulty can there be in arranging one's expenditure? There are certain things which can, and certain things which can't be done on a certain income. All that is necessary is to arrange one's outgoings accordingly.'

'You see that, my dear,' Sir Walter would reply, 'for you were born with the spirit of order: but there are some people who have no sense of order at all.'

The 'some people' were the poor people of Penton Hook. These remarks were made on a day in winter, when the family at the great house were together in the library. It was a very comfortable room, nay, a beautiful one. The house was warmed throughout, and in December was genially, softly, warm as in May, no cold to be got anywhere in corridors or staircases. The fire in the library was a wood

fire, for beauty and pleasantness rather than for warmth. The walls were lined with books, dim lines of carved shelves with gleams of old gilding, and an occasional warm tone of mellowed Italian vellum here and there giving them a delightful covering. The large windows looked across the country, commanding the whole broad plain through which the river ran. This landscape fell away into lovely tones of distance, making you uncertain whether it was the sea or infinitude itself at which you were gazing, in far-away stretches of tender mist, and blueness, and dimness, lightly marked with the line of the horizon. Over the mantel-piece there was one picture, the portrait of an ancestor of whom the Pentons were proud—a veritable Holbein, which was as good, nay, far better, than the most finely emblazoned family pedigree. There was no room for other pictures because of the books which filled every corner: but a portfolio stood open upon a stand in which there was a quantity of the finest old engravings, chiefly historical portraits.

Amid this refined and delightful luxury it

would be most foolish to mention the mere furniture, though that was carved oak, and very fine of its kind. Sir Walter himself sat surrounded by all the morning papers, which, as Penton was not very far from town, were delivered almost as early as in London. Mrs. Penton had a little settlement of her own between the fire and one of the windows, where she made up her household accounts, which she did with the greatest regularity. Mr. Russell Penton was the only member of the little party who seemed at all out of place. He had no special corner which he made his own. He was a restless personage, prone to wander from the fire to the window, to look out though there was nothing particular to look at, nothing more than he saw every day of his life, as his wife sometimes said to him. He ran over the papers very quickly, very often standing before the fire, which was a favourite trick of his; and after he had got through that morning duty he would lounge about disturbing everybody—that is, disturbing Mrs. Penton and Sir Walter, who were the only people subject to be affected by

his vagaries. He never had letters to write, though this is one of the first duties of man, of the kind of man who has nothing else to do. A man who has no letters to write should at least pretend to do so, assuming a virtue if he has it not, in the leisure of a country house; or he should have some study, if it were only the amount of the rainfall; or he should draw and expound art. But none of all these things did Mr. Russell Penton do. And he had not the art of doing nothing quietly and gracefully as some men have. He was restless as well as idle, a combination which is more trying to the peace of your housemates than any other can be.

Sir Walter was essentially well bred, and the carpets were very thick, and the panelling of the floors very solid; but yet there is always a certain thrill under a restless foot, however steady the flooring is, and however thick the carpet; and Mrs. Penton could not help seeing that her father now and then stopped in his reading and fixed his eyes and contracted his eyebrows with a consciousness of unnecessary movement.

But after all it is difficult to find fault with one's husband for nothing more serious than walking from the fire to the window and from the window back to the fire.

Yet it was this rather detrimental and unmeaning personage who chose suddenly, without any reason at all, to cross the current of family feeling.

'The spirit of order is a very good thing,' he said, all at once, making his wife hold her breath, 'but, in my opinion, when you have a large family a little money is still better.' This speech was launched into the domestic quiet like an arrow from a bow.

'Better!' said Sir Walter, letting his newspaper drop upon his knees, and pushing up his spectacles upon his forehead the better to see the speaker, who was standing, shutting out the pleasant blaze of the log on the fire in his usual careless way.

'Gerald means,' said his wife, 'that it is easier to keep things in order when there is money. I have heard people say so before, and perhaps it is true—to a certain extent. You

know, sir, that when one has money in hand one can buy a thing when it is cheap ; one can lay in one's provisions beforehand. The idea is not original, but there is a certain amount of truth in it, I daresay.'

'No one supposed there was not truth in it,' said Sir Walter; 'for that matter there is truth in everything, the most paradoxical statement you may choose to make; but these people are not without money, I suppose. They have an income, whatever the amount may be. They are not destitute. And so long as you have certain means, as you were yourself saying, Alicia, you know what you can afford to spend, and that is what you ought to spend by every law, and not a penny more.'

'Nothing could be more true,' said Mrs. Penton, with a look from under her eyelids to her husband, who was fidgeting from one leg to another, restless as usual; 'and speaking of that,' she said, with curious appropriateness, 'I have been anxious to ask you, papa, about the tapestry chamber, of which, you know, we have always been so proud. Mrs. Ellis and I

have made a very unpleasant discovery—the moth has got into one of the best pieces. We have done all we could, and I think we have arrested the mischief, but to put it right is beyond our powers.'

'Dear me! the tapestry!' cried Sir Walter; 'that's serious indeed—the moth! I should think you might have done something, you and all your women, Alicia, to keep out a moth.'

'One would think so, indeed,' she said, with a smile, 'but it is not so easy as it seems. It is an insidious little creature, which gets in imperceptibly. One only discovers it when the mischief is done. Gerald, who is so very clever in such matters, thinks we had better get a man over from Paris, from the Gobelins. It would be a good deal of trouble, but still it is the best way.'

'I was not aware that Gerald knew anything about such matters,' said Sir Walter. 'As for the trouble, it is only writing a letter, I suppose. But do it, do it. I cannot have anything happen to my tapestry. A man from Paris will be a

nuisance—they're always a nuisance, those sort of fellows—but get it done, get it done.'

'I will write at once,' Mrs. Penton said.

'I remember that tapestry as long as I remember anything,' said the old gentleman, musing. 'In the firelight we used to think the figures moved. It used to be in my mother's room. How frightened I was, to be sure! One night I recollect the hunters and the hounds seemed all coming down upon us. There was a blazing fire, and it was the dancing of the flames, don't you know? I was no bigger than that,' he said, putting his hand about a foot from the ground. The recollection of his infancy pleased the old man. He smiled, and the expression of his face softened. There was nothing cruel or unkind in his aspect. He was a little rigid, a little severe, very sure that he was right, as so many are; but when he thought of his mother's room, and himself a little child in it, his ruddy aged countenance grew soft. Had there been another little child there, to climb upon his knee, it would have melted altogether. But Providence had not granted that other little child.

He gave a wave of his hand as he dismissed these gentle thoughts. 'But get the man from Paris, my dear; don't let anything go wrong with the tapestry,' he said.

Mr. Russell Penton went out as his wife turned to her writing-table, and at once began her necessary letter. It was true that it was he who recommended that a man from Paris should be procured, but he had done it without any of that cleverness in such matters which his wife attributed to him. He was not, perhaps, a man entirely adapted for the position in which he found himself. He had occupied it for a long time, and yet he had not reconciled himself to that constant effort on his wife's part to make him agreeable to her father.

For his own part he had no desire to be disagreeable to Sir Walter or any man; he had married with a generous affection if not any hot romantic love for Alicia: for they were both, he thought, beyond the age of romantic love. She had been thirty-five, very mature, very certain of herself; while he, though a little older and a man who had, as people say, knocked

about the world for a long time, and undergone many vicissitudes, was not at all so sure. She had picked him up out of—not the depths, perhaps—but out of an uncomfortable, unsettled, floating condition, between gentility and beggary; and had taken him into the warmest delightful house, and made everything comfortable for him. He had been very willing to make himself agreeable, to do what he could for the people who had done so much for him, and yet so unreasonable was he that he had never been able quite to reconcile himself to the position. He could scarcely endure those warning glances not to go too far, not to say this or that, or her pretences of consulting him, of being guided by his counsels, the little speeches, such as had been made to-day, about Gerald being so clever—which was his wife's way of upholding her husband. He was not clever, and he did not wish to pretend to be so. He was not cautious, and he could not take the credit of it. He had been thought to be a fortune-hunter when he married, and he was supposed to be a time-server now; and yet he was

neither one thing nor the other. He was fond of Alicia and he liked Sir Walter well enough; yet there were moments when he would rather have swept a crossing than live in wealth and luxury at Penton, and when the sacrifices which he had to make, and the advantages which he gained in return, were odious to him, things which he could hardly bind himself to bear.

This was perhaps the reason why, as he went out, without anything to do or to think of, and looking across that wide, bare, yet bright wintry landscape, losing itself in the wistful distance, caught the chimneys of Penton Hook appearing among the bare trees, there occurred to his mind a contrast and comparison which made his sensations still less agreeable. It was nobody's fault, certainly not his, not even Sir Walter's, that the Pentons at the Hook were so poor, that there were eight children of them, that it was so difficult for the parents to make both ends meet. Could Sir Walter have changed the decrees of Providence by any effort in his power, it was he who should have had those eight sturdy descendants. He would have ac-

cepted all the responsibilities gladly; he would have secured for those young people the best of everything, an excellent education, and all the advantages that wealth could give. But the children had gone where poverty not riches was; and to Sir Walter and Alicia it was a wonder that their parents could not keep within their income, that they could not cut their coat according to their cloth, as it is the duty of all honest and honourable persons to do.

Alicia in particular was very clear on this point; and then she had turned to her table, and written her letter, and ordered the man to be sent from Paris from the great Gobelins manufactory to mend the damages made by the moths in the old tapestry! How strange it was! Russell Penton could not tell what was wrong in it. Perhaps there was no conscious wrong. They had a right to have their tapestry mended, and it was pretty, he could not but confess, to see the old man forget himself and talk of the time when he was a child. What was that about a treasure, which rust or moth could not corrupt? It kept haunting his ear,

yet it was not applicable to the situation. It would be a thousand pities to let the tapestry be spoiled. And as for taking upon his shoulders the burden of Mr. Penton's large family, no one could expect old Sir Walter to do that. What was wrong in it?

But, on the other hand, he could not find it in his heart to blame the poor people at the Hook who had so many cares, so much to do with their income, so many mouths to feed. It was not their fault, nor was it the fault of Alicia and her father. And yet the heart of the man, who was little more than a looker-on, was sore. He could do nothing. He could not even find any satisfaction in blaming one or the other: for, so far as he could see, nobody was to blame.

CHAPTER II.

PENTON.

THE family at Penton had not always been so few in number. Twenty years before the opening of this history there were two sons in the great house; and Alicia, now so important, was though always a sort of princess royal, by no means so great a personage as now. She was the only daughter of the house, but no more; destined apparently, like other daughters, to pass away into a different family and identify herself with another name. The two brothers were the representatives of the Pentons. They were hopeful enough in their youth—healthy, vigorous, not more foolish than other young men of their

age, with plenty of money and nothing to do: and it was a surprise to everybody when, one after the other, they took the wrong turn in that flowery way of temptation, so smooth to begin with, so thorny at the end, which is vulgarly termed 'life.'

No such fatal divergence was expected of them when Walter came of age, and all the neighbourhood was called together to rejoice. They were both younger than their sister, who was already the mistress of the house and a very dignified and stately young lady, at this joyful period. Their mother had died young, and Sir Walter was older than the father of such a family generally is. He had, perhaps, not sufficient sympathy with the exuberance of their spirits. Perhaps the quiet which he loved, the gravity of his house, repelled them, and led them to form their friendships and seek their pleasures elsewhere. At all events, the young Pentons 'went wrong,' both of them, one after the other.

Edward Penton, of the Hook, a young relation of no importance whatever, was much

about the house in those days. He was the son of Sir Walter's cousin, who had inherited the house at Penton Hook from some old aunts, maiden sisters of a far-back baronet, so that the relationship was not very close. But the bonds of kindred are very elastic, and count for much or for nothing, as inclination and opportunity dictate. Edward was much more about the house of Penton than was at all for his good. He fell in love with Alicia for one thing, who naturally would have nothing to say to her poor relation; and, what was still worse, he was swept away by Walter and Reginald in the course of their dissipated career into many extravagances and follies.

They drew him aside in their train from all the sober studies which ought to have ended in a profession; they taught him careless ways, and the recklessness which may be pardonable in a rich man's son, but is crime in the poor. It is true that there was something in him—some gleam of higher principle or character, or perhaps only the passive resistance of a calmer nature—which held him back from following

them to the bitter end of their foolish career; but all the same they did him harm—harm which he never got the better of, though it stopped short of misery and ruin. They themselves did not stop short of anything.

There are some sins like those which made the heart of the Psalmist burn within him—sins which seem to go unpunished, and in the midst of which the wicked appear to flourish like a green bay-tree. And there are some which carry their own sentence with them, and in which the vengeance does not tarry. Even in the latter case, ruin comes more slowly to the rich than to the poor. They have more places of repentance, more time to think, more possibility, if a better impulse comes to them, of redeeming the past; but yet, in the end, few escape who embark their hopes and prosperity on such a wild career.

There were ten years in the history of the Penton household of which the sufferings and the misery could not be told. Sir Walter and his daughter lived on in their beautiful house and watched the headlong career towards

destruction of these two beloved boys (still called so long after they had become men) with anxiety and anguish and despair which is not to be told. There are few families who do not know something of that anguish. Of all the miseries to which men and women are liable there is none so terrible. In every other there is some alleviation, some gleam of comfort, but in this none. The father grew old in the progress of these terrible years, and the proud Miss Penton, the handsome, stately young woman, who looked, the neighbours said, 'as if all the world belonged to her,' grew old too, before her time, and changed and paled, and turned to stone. Not that her heart was turned to stone—on the contrary, it was a fountain of tears; it was a well of tenderness unfailing; it was the heart of a mother, concentrated upon those objects of her love for whom she could do nothing, who were perishing before her eyes. The Pentons were proud people, and they kept up appearances; they entertained more or less, whatever happened. They had parties of visitors in their house; they kept up the old-

fashioned hospitality, and all that their position exacted, and never betrayed to the world the agonised watch they were keeping, as from a watch-tower, upon the proceedings of the young men who would have none of their counsel, and who returned more and more rarely, and then only when help, or nursing, or succour of some sort was wanted, to their home. Latterly, under the excuse of Sir Walter's health, there was a certain withdrawal from the world, and the father and daughter accomplished their miserable vigil with less intrusion of a watchful neighbourhood.

First Reginald and then Walter came home to die. Death is kind: it sheds a light upon the wasted face even when it is sin that has wasted it, and wrings the heart of the watchers with looks purified by pain, that remind them how the sinner was once an innocent child. Through all this the father and daughter went together, leaning upon each other, yet even to each other saying but little. They were as one in their anguish, in their lingering hopes, in the long vigils by these sick-beds, in the un-

utterable pangs of seeing one after another die. Ten years is a long time when it is thus told out in misery and pain. Alicia Penton was a woman of thirty-five when she walked behind the coffin of her last brother to the family burying-ground. She was chief mourner, as she had been chief nurse and chief sufferer all through, for Sir Walter had broken down altogether at the deathbed of his last boy.

This double tragedy passed over with little revelation to the outside world. Everybody, indeed, knew what lives the young men had lived, and how they had died. And people pitied the father to whom it must be, they felt, so great a disappointment that his baronetcy and his old lands should go out of the family, and that in the direct line he should have no heir. If only one of them had married, if there had been but a child to carry on the family, the kind neighbours said. It was thought that Sir Walter was far more proud than tender, and that this would be his view. As for Miss Penton, it was believed that she must find great consolation in the fact that her position and her

importance would be so much increased. A few years' quiet (such as was inevitable in their deep mourning) would make up for all the sacrifices Sir Walter had made for the boys; and then Alicia would be a great heiress, notwithstanding that a considerable portion of the estate was entailed. People thought that, when she realised this, Alicia Penton would dry her tears.

She had not in any case made very much show of her tears. Her father and she went on living in the great, silent house, where now there was not even an echo to be listened for, a piece of evil news to be apprehended; where all was silent, silent as the grave. She had been courted as much as most women in her younger days; she had been loved, but she had listened to no one. Her youth had glided away under the shadow of calamity, the shadow which had stolen away all beauty and freshness from her and made her old before her time, and, lest they should express too much, had turned her features to stone. She had always been stately, but she was stern now that all was over,

and there was neither terror for the future nor sound of the present to keep her tortured heart alive.

But naturally, after a while, these intense emotions, which no one suspected, were calmed, and life began again. Life began even for Sir Walter, who was nearly seventy, much more for his daughter, who was thirty-five. They could not die, nor could they darken their windows and shut out the sunshine for ever because two poor wrecks, two dismal, ruined lives, had come to an end.

It must be such a relief, people said, even though no doubt it was a grief in its way. And though the ending of anxiety in such a way seems almost an additional pang, an additional loss to obstinate love, yet after all it is a dismal relief in its blank and stillness. And life had to be carried on. When Miss Penton, Sir Walter's only child and heiress, came out of her long seclusion there were still men to be found who admired, or said they admired her, and who were very eager to place themselves at her disposal. Amongst these was Gerald

Russell, a man who had once been kind to one of 'the boys,' and who was known as the most good-natured, the least exacting of men. He was poor; he had no particular standing of his own to confuse the family arrangements; and the two liked each other. Truly and honestly they liked each other; he had been almost a suitor of her youth, kept back only, both of them were willing to believe, by his poverty. Gerald was not unaware that there would be sacrifices to make, that he was accepting a position, not without drawbacks, in which, indeed, there might possibly be a good deal to bear. But he had not made much of his life hitherto, and he made up his mind to risk it. And they married, and he was not unhappy.

This was the present position of affairs. He was not unhappy, and she was more nearly happy that she could have been had he not been there. Had 'anything happened,' as the phrase goes, to him—that is, had he died—the world would have become blank to Alicia. Had she been the victim, Mr. Russell Penton would have been truly grieved, and

would have mourned honestly for his wife, but the sense of freedom might perhaps have been something of a compensation to him. Thus they were not equal any more than two human creatures ever are equal. She seemed to have the best of it upon the surface of affairs. She was the head of the house. Both without and within she was the pivot upon which everything turned, and he was by no means of equal importance; but yet he would have been to her a greater loss than she to him, which perhaps made the balance equal once more.

He returned to that question about the tapestry when they set out, as was their custom in the afternoon, to take a walk together. They went through the wood which covered the crest of the high river-bank upon which Penton stood and which defended the house from the north. Everything, it is needless to say, was beautifully kept, the woodland paths just wild enough to preserve an aspect of nature amid the perfection of foresting and landscape gardening on the largest scale. Wherever there was a point of view the openings were skilfully arranged so as

to get its finest aspect, and the broad valley, or rather plain, stretched out below with village spires and scattered clusters of houses, and a red roofed town in the distance, with a light veil of smoke hanging between it and the sky. The river flowed full and strong in its winter volume at their feet, reflecting the grey blueness of the heavens, the deeper colours that began to blaze about the west, and the grey whiteness of the vapours overhead. It was when they had turned, after a momentary pause at one of these mounts of vision, that Russell Penton turned suddenly to his wife with a smile.

'Did you send for the man from the Gobelins? he asked.

'Yes. But what put that into your mind now?'

'Nothing; the chimneys at Penton Hook,' he replied.

'And why the chimneys at Penton Hook? Your mind jumps from one subject to the other in the strangest way. What connection can there be between two things so unlike?'

'Nothing,' he said, with a faint smile; 'and yet perhaps more than meets the eye. There is

no great volume of smoke rising from those chimneys. A faint blue streak or so and that is all. It does not look as if there was a fire in every room or a jolly blaze in the kitchen.'

'What are you aiming at, Gerald? I think you mean mischief. No; probably they have not fires in all the rooms; but what has that to do with us or with the man from Paris? I don't follow you,' she said.

'My dear Alicia, what does it matter? My ways of thinking are jerky, you are aware. If you had as many children as poor Mrs. Penton, you would have fires in all the rooms.'

'Ah! if—' she said, with a sigh; then, in a tone of impatience, 'Poor Mrs. Penton, as you call her, and I—would probably not in any circumstances act in the same way.'

'No, because you are rich Mrs. Penton, my dear. I think you were a little hard upon them, upon the duty of keeping within their income, and all that. I daresay the children have blue little hands and cold noses. If they were mine they should have fires in their rooms whatever my income might be.'

'They would have nothing of the sort—that is, if I were your wife, Gerald,' said Mrs. Penton, with composure. She made a little pause, and then added, with a momentarily quickened breath, 'Perhaps under these circumstances I might not have been so.'

He felt the blow; it was a just one, if not perhaps very generous. And if he had been a man of hot temper, or of very sensitive feelings, it would have wounded him. But he was pacific and middle-aged, and knew the absolute inutility of any quarrel. So he answered quietly,

'As I cannot conceive myself with any other wife in any circumstances, that is not a possibility we need consider.'

Mrs. Penton's mind went quickly, though her aspect was rigid. She had begged his pardon before these words were half said, with a quick rising colour, which showed her shame of the suggestion she had made.

'I was wrong to say it; yet not wrong in what I said. If you had been a poor man, Gerald, your wife would have known how to cut her coat according to her cloth.'

'You mean if she had not been a rich woman. It is ill judging, they say in Scotland, between a full man and a fasting. I have a proverb, you see, as well as you. You were quite right, my dear, to send for that man from the Gobelins; but I would say nothing about my poor neighbours and the coat that is not cut according to the cloth.'

'If you think I am wrong, you should say so plainly, Gerald.' The colour still wavered a little upon her cheek. She was perhaps not so patient even of implied blame as she thought she was. 'It is perhaps wrong,' she added, quickly, 'but I should not wonder if I shared without knowing it my father's feeling about the heir. Oh, you need not say anything; I know it is unreasonable. It is not Edward Penton's fault that he is the next in the entail. But human creatures are not always reasonable, and they say no man likes to be haunted with the sight of his heir.'

'Poor heir!' said Russell Penton, very softly, almost under his breath.

'Poor heir? I should say poor possessor,

poor old man, who must see his home go into the hands of a stranger!'

They had come to another point where their accustomed feet paused, where the bare winter boughs, with all their naked tracery, framed in a wide opening of sky and cloud and plain, and where once more those clustered chimneys of Penton Hook, with their thin curls of smoke, seemed to thrust themselves into the front of the landscape. The house lay almost at the gazers' feet, framed in with a cluster of trees, encircled with a glowing sweep of the stream, which looked like a ribbon of light full of shimmering colour, round the brown settlement of the half-seen building and wintry branches. Mrs. Penton clasped her hands together with a sudden quick suppressed movement of strong feeling, and turned hastily away.

CHAPTER III.

PENTON HOOK.

SOON after the day on which this discussion was carried on among the woods of Penton over their heads, the family at Penton Hook held a sort of committee of ways and means in their damp domain below. The winter afternoon was clear and bright, and the river ran in deceitful brightness round the half-circle of the little promontory. It was not of itself at all a disagreeable house. If it had not been that the mud and wetness of the garden paths, where the water seemed to well up even through the gravel, made every footstep mark the too bright blue and brown tiles in the hall, and gave it

a sloppy and disorderly look, the entrance itself might have been pretty enough; but no attempt had been made to furnish or utilise it, and there were tracks of glistening steps across it in different directions to the different doors, all of which opened out of the hall. And the drawing-room was a well-sized, well-shaped room, with three or four windows; a room of which, with a little money and taste, something very pretty might have been made. But the windows were turned to the north, and the furniture was bare and worn; the walls and the carpets and curtains had alike faded into a colour which can only be described as being the colour of poverty. The pattern was worn and trodden out upon the carpet; it was blurred and dull upon the walls: everything was of a brownish, greenish, greyish, indescribable hue. The pictures on the walls seemed to have grown grey too, being chiefly prints, which ran into the tone of the whole.

The table at which Mrs. Penton (poor Mrs. Penton) sat with her work was covered with a woollen cover, the ground of which had been

red with a yellow pattern; but it (perhaps mercifully) had faded too. And, as for the lady, she was faded like everything else. Her dress, like the room, had sunk into the colour of poverty. There was nothing about her that was above the level of matter-of-fact dulness. She was darning stockings, and they were also indefinite in hue. Her hair, which had been yellow or very light brown, had lost its gloss and sheen. It was knotted behind in a loose knot, and might have been classical and graceful had it not suggested that this was the easiest way possible to dispose of those abundant locks. Her head was stooped over her work; her basket on the table was overflowing. She paused now and then and looked up to make an observation when it was her turn, but not even for the sake of the family consultation could she intermit her necessary work. Nine pairs of stockings, not to speak of her own, are a great deal for a woman to keep in order. Her own were not much worn, for she walked very little. She was one of those women who are indolent by nature, yet always busy. Once

seated at her work, stocking after stocking went through her hands, and holes as big as a half-moon got deftly, swiftly, silently filled up; but it cost her an effort to rise from her seat to go about her domestic business. She was indolent in movement, though so industrious; a piece of still life, though her hands were never idle. This was the kind of woman to whom, in his maturer judgment, the man who had once been Alicia Penton's adorer had turned.

He was not far from her, seated in an elbow-chair, not an easy-chair, but an old-fashioned mahogany article with arms, upon which he reposed his elbows. His hands were clasped in front of him, and now and then, when he forgot himself, he twirled his thumbs. He bore a family likeness to Sir Walter Penton, having a high nose and long face; but he was not the same kind of man. Old Sir Walter at nearly eighty was firm and erect still, but Edward Penton was limp. He was prone to tumble down upon himself, so to speak, like a crumbling wall; to go sinking, telescoping into himself like a slippery mass of sand or clay. There was an anxious look in

his countenance, contradicting the pretensions of that prominent feature, the nose, which looked aristocratic, his family thought, and did its best to look strong. It was the mouth that did it, some people thought, a mouth which was manifestly weak, with all kinds of uncompleted piteous curves about it, and dubious wavering lines. His lower lip would move vaguely from time to time, as though he were repeating something. He was dressed in knickerbockers and gaiters and a rough coat, as if he had a great deal to do out of doors. He might have been a gentleman farmer, or a squire with an estate to look after, or even a gamekeeper of a superior kind; but he was nothing of all these. He was only a man who lived in the country, and had nothing to do, and had to walk about, as it were, for daily bread.

On the corner of the table, not far from Mrs. Penton, sat, with his legs swinging loosely, a younger, a quite young man; indeed, poor Wat did not know that he was a man at all, or realise what he was coming to. He was the eldest son. That did not seem to say very much, con-

sidering the character of the house, and the manner of life pursued in it, but it sounded a great deal to them, for young Walter was the heir in tail male. He was the representative of all the Pentons, the future head of the family. He thought a great deal of his position, and so did the rest. In time Penton would be his, the stately old house, and the title would be his which his ancestors had borne. The young man felt himself marked out from his kind by this inheritance. He was humble enough at present, but he had only to go on living, to wait and keep quiet, and he must be Sir Walter Penton of Penton in the end. He felt a greater confidence in this than his father did who came before him. Mr. Penton did not look forward to the baronetcy for his part with much enthusiasm. It did not rouse him from his habitual depression: perhaps because care was so close and so constant, perhaps because he had come to an age which expects but little from any change. He did not feel that to become Sir Edward would do much for him: but even he felt that for Wat it was a great thing.

The other two people in the room were the two girls; that was all that anybody ever said of them. They were scarcely even distinguished by name the one from the other; you could scarcely say they were individuals at all; they were the two girls. The children were apt to run their two names into one, and call them indiscriminately—Ally-Anne. Whether it was Ally or whether it was Anne who came first did not matter, it was a generic title which belonged to both. And yet they were not like each other. Ally had been called Alicia, after her relation at Penton, who was also her godmother, but at Penton Hook life was too full for so many syllables. They never got further than Alice in the most formal moments, and Ally was the name for common wear. Anne bore her mother's name, but Mrs. Penton was Annie, whereas the girl preferred the one tiny syllable which expressed her better; for Anne, though she was the youngest, had more fibre in her than all the rest put together; but description is vain in face of such a little person. Her sister, though the eldest, was the shadow and

she the substance, and no doubt it was one of the subtle but unconscious discriminations of character which the most simple make unawares which led the little ones to call whichever individual of this pair appeared by the joint name.

'I shall always say, Edward, that you ought to have your share now,' said Mrs. Penton, in a soft even voice, never lifting her eyes from her work, but going on steadily like a purling stream; 'you have more to do with it than Mr. Russell Penton, who can never succeed to anything; you ought to have your allowance like any other heir.'

'I don't know why I should have an allowance,' said Mr. Penton, with a voice in which there was a certain languid irritation; 'I have always held my own, and I shall always hold my own. And besides, Sir Walter does not want me to have the land; he would rather a great deal that it went to—Russell Penton, as you call him, though he has no right to our name.'

'But that can't be,' cried young Wat, 'seeing

that I—I mean you, father, are the heir of entail.'

'It might be,' said Mr. Penton, going on with his tone of subdued annoyance, 'if the law was changed; and one never knows in these revolutionary times how soon the law might be changed. It has been threatened to be done as long as I can remember. Primogeniture and the law of entail have been in every agitator's mouth; they think it would be a boon to the working man.'

'How could it be a boon to the working man? What have we got to do with the working man? What does it matter to him who has the property? it could not come to him anyhow,' cried Wat, with great energy, colouring high, and swinging his legs more than ever in the vehemence of personal feeling. It is all very well to talk of political principles, but when the question involves one's self and one's own position in the world, the argument is very much more urgent and moving. Young Walter was rather a revolutionary in his own way; he was of the class of generous aristocrats who take a great

interest in the working man; but there is reason in all things, and he did not see what this personage had to do with his affairs.

'Oh, I don't know, there is no telling; they might be made to think it would do them good somehow. It has always been a favourite thing to say. At all events, you know,' Mr. Penton continued, with his mild disgust of everything, 'it could not do them any harm. Primogeniture has always been a sort of thing that makes some people foam at the mouth.'

'My dear Edward!' cried Mrs. Penton; she almost looked up from her work, which was a great thing to say; and when this mild woman said 'My dear Edward,' it was the same thing as when a man says 'By Jove,' or 'By George.' In the gentle level of her conversation it counted as a sort of innocent oath. 'My dear Edward! how could they abolish primogeniture? which so far as I know is just the Latin way of saying that one of your children is born before the others. Isn't it, Wat? Well, I always thought so. The Radicals may get to be very

powerful, but they can't make you have your children all in a heap at the same time.'

'But they can make it of no importance which is born first; that is what it means,' said Mr. Penton. 'They would have the children all equal, just the same; whether it is little Horry or Wat there who thinks himself such a great man.'

'Well, so they are all the same,' said the mother, a little bewildered. 'I often wonder how it is that people can make favourites, for I am sure I could not say, for my part, which of them all I liked best. I like them all best —Horry because he is the littlest, and Wat because he is the biggest, and all the rest of them for some other reason, or just for no reason at all. And so, I am sure, Edward, do you.'

'In that way Wat would be no better than any of the rest,' said Anne.

'I should have no call to do anything for you,' said the young man, with an uncomfortable laugh. 'It would be everyone for himself. There would be no bother about little sisters or

brothers either. On the whole, it would be rather a good bargain, don't you think so, mother? Horry and the others must all shift for themselves when there is no eldest son—'

This time Mrs. Penton really did lift her soft eyes.

'Don't say such wicked things!' she said; 'it is going against Scripture. As if anything could change you from being the eldest son! Who should look after the children if your father and I were to die? Oh, Wat! how can you speak so?—when it is just my comfort, knowing how uncertain life is, that the eldest is grown up, and that there would be some one to take our place, and take care of all these little things!'

Mrs. Penton had no mind for politics, as will be perceived, but the vision of the little orphans without an elder brother struck her imagination. This picture of unnatural desolation brought the tears warm to her eyes. She took another view of primogeniture from that which is familiar to discussion, and it was some time before they could explain it to her and get her

calmed and soothed. Indeed, as to explaining it, that was never accomplished; but when she fully knew that her first-born did not cast off all responsibility in respect to little Horry she was calm.

'I don't pretend to understand politics,' she said, with great truth, 'but I know nature,' which perhaps was not quite so true.

Mr. Penton was not at all moved by this little digression, he took no notice of the argument between the mother and the children. He was a man who inclined to the opinion that things were badly managed in this world, and that those who meant to do well had generally a hard fight. He thought that on the whole the worst people had the best of it, and that a man like himself, struggling to do as well as he could for his children, and to live as well as he could, and do his duty generally, was surrounded by hindrances and drawbacks which never came in the way of less scrupulous people.

Such an opinion as this often fills a man with indignation and something like rage, but it did not have this effect upon Mr. Penton. It gave

him a general sense of discouragement, a feeling that everything was sure to go against him: but it did not make him angry. Instead of pointing, as the Psalmist did, with wonder and indignation to the wicked who flourished like a green bay-tree, he was more disposed to regard this spectacle with a melancholy smile as the natural course of affairs. One might have known that was how it would be, his look said. And he was rather apt perhaps to identify himself as the righteous man who had no such good-fortune to look for. He had followed his own train of thoughts while the others talked, and now he went on continuing the subject.

'We never can tell,' he said, 'one day from another what changes may be made in the law. Sir Walter is an old man, and it doesn't seem as if there could be any changes in his time; but still a craze might get up, and the thing might be done all in a moment, which has been threatened ever since I can recollect. So I hope none of you will fill your heads with foolish thoughts of what may happen when Penton comes to me: for you see, for any-

thing we know, it may never come to me at all.'

Having said this, he ceased twirling his thumbs, and rising up slowly cast a glance about him as if looking for his hat. He never brought his hat into the drawing-room, yet he always did this, just as a dog will try to scrape a hole in a Turkey carpet; and then Mr. Penton said, as if it was quite a new idea,

'I think I'll just take a little walk before tea.'

It was from an unusual quarter that the conversation was renewed. Ally, who was so like her mother, who had the same kind of light-brown hair shading her soft countenance, knotted low at the back of her head, the same fragile willowy figure and submissive ways, lifted up her head after the little pause that followed his exit, when they all instinctively listened, and followed him, so to speak, with their attention while he walked out of the house. Ally raised her head and asked, in a voice in which there was a little apprehension,

'I wonder if father really thinks that: and what if it should come true!'

'Your father would not say it,' Mrs. Penton replied, always careful to maintain her husband's credit, 'unless he thought it, in a kind of a way. But, for all that, perhaps it may never happen. Things take a long time to happen,' she said, with unconscious philosophy. 'We just worry ourselves looking for changes, and no change comes after all.'

'But such a thing might happen suddenly,' said Wat, thinking it necessary, in his father's absence, to take up the serious side of the argument, 'father is quite right in that. With all the extensions of the suffrage and that sort of thing which you don't understand, Ally, a change in the law that has been long talked about might happen in a moment. It all depends upon what turn things may take.'

'Then we may never go to Penton at all,' said Anne, jumping up and throwing her work into her mother's large basket. 'I have always been frightened for Penton all my life. It's a horrid big chilly place that never would look like home. I like the little old Hook best, and I hope they will abolish primogeniture, or what-

ever you call it, and so Wat will have to do something and we shall stay at home.'

'Anne! do you wish that your father should never come into his fortune,' her mother said, in a reproachful tone, 'when you know his heart is set upon it? I am frightened myself sometimes when I think of the change of living, and having to give dinner-parties and all that; but when I think that Edward has never yet been in his right element, that he has never had the position he ought to have had—ah! for that I could put up with anything,' she said.

CHAPTER IV.

THE YOUNG PEOPLE.

THE young people at Penton Hook were good children on the whole. They respected their father and their mother, and though they did not always agree in every domestic decision, with that holy ignorance which distinguishes childhood, they were not much less docile than the little ones in respect to actual obedience. At seventeen and eighteen, much more at twenty, a young soul has begun to think a little whether it reveals its judgment or not. Anne had her own opinions on every subject by perversity of nature; and Wat, who was a man, and the heir, took on many points a very independ-

ent view, and could scarcely help thinking now and then that he knew better than his father. And even Ally, who was the quietest, the most disposed to yield her own way of thinking, still had a little way of her own, and felt that other ways of doing things might be adopted with advantage. They were quite friends all three, each other's chief companions; and among themselves they talked very freely, seeing the mistakes that were being made about the other children, and very conscious of much that might have been done in their own individual cases. Wat, for example, had much to complain of in his own upbringing. He had been sent for a year or two to Eton, and much had been said about giving him the full advantage of what is supposed to be the best education. But it had been found after awhile that the infallible recurrence of the end of the half, and the bills that accompanied it, was a serious drawback, and the annoyance given by them so entirely outbalanced any sense of benefit received, that at sixteen he had been taken away from school under vague understandings that there was to

be work at home to prepare him for the University. But the work at home had never come to much. Mr. Penton had believed that it would be a pleasant occupation for himself to rub up his Latin and Greek, and that he would be as good a coach as the boy could have. But his Latin and Greek wanted a great deal of rubbing up. The fashions of scholarship had changed since his day, and perhaps he had never been so good a scholar as he now imagined. And then it was inconceivable to Mr. Penton that regularity of hours was necessary in anything. He thought that a mere prejudice of schoolmasters. He would take Wat in the morning one day, then in the afternoon, then miss a day or two, and resume on the fifth or sixth after tea. What could the hours matter? It came about thus by degrees that the readings which were to fit the young man for matriculation failed altogether, and no more was said about the University.

Wat had no very strong impulse to work in his own person, but when he came to be twenty and became aware that nothing further was likely to come of it, he felt that he had been

neglected, and that, so far as education was concerned, he had not had justice done him. Had he been a very intellectual young man, or very energetic, he would no doubt have been spurred by this neglect into greater personal effort, and done so much that his father would have been shamed or forced into taking further steps. But Wat was not of this noble sort. He was not fond of work; he had always seen his father idle; and it seemed to him natural. So that he, too, fell into the way of lounging about, and doing odd things, and taking the days as they came. They kept no horses, so he could not hunt. He had not even a gun, nothing better than an old one, which, now he was old enough to know better, he was ashamed to carry. So that those two natural occupations of the rural gentleman were denied to him. And it is not to be supposed that a boy could reach his twentieth year without feeling that an education of this kind—a non-education—had been a mistake. He knew that he was at a disadvantage among his fellow-boys or fellow-men. Whether he would have felt this as much had he been

under no other disadvantages in respect to horses and guns and pocket-money, we do not venture to say; but, taking everything together, Wat could not but feel that he was manqué, capable of nothing, having no place among his kind. And if he felt doubly in consequence the importance of his heirship, and that Penton would set all right, who could blame him? It was the only possibility in that poor little dull horizon which at Penton Hook seemed to run into the flats of the level country, the mud and the mist, and the rising river, and the falling rain.

The girls had their little grievances too, but felt Wat's grievance to be so much greater than theirs, that they took up his cause vehemently, and threw all their indignation and the disapproval of their young intelligences into the weight of his. It was impossible that they could be as they were, young creatures full of life and active thought, without feeling what a mistake it all was, and how far the authorities of the family were wrong. They subjected, indeed, the decisions of the father and mother, but

especially the father, as all our children do, to a keen and clear-sighted inspection, seeing what was amiss much more clearly than the wisest of us are apt to do in our own case. A little child of ten will thus follow and judge a philosopher, perhaps unconsciously in most cases, without a word to express its condemnation. The young Pentons were not so silent. They spoke their mind, in the perfect confidence of family intercourse, to their mother always, sometimes to their father too. And no doubt, in pure logic, this criticism and disapproval should have dealt a great blow at the discipline of the house, and destroyed the principle of obedience.

But fortunately logic is the last thing that affects the natural family life. Wat and Ally and Anne were in reality almost as obedient as were the little ones to whom the decisions of papa and mamma were as the law and the gospels. It had never occurred to them to raise any standard of rebellion; they did what they were told by sweet natural bonds of habit, by the fact that they had always done it, by the unbroken sentiment of filial subjection. The one thing did

not seem to affect the other. It never occurred even to Wat to stop and argue the point with his father; he did what he was told, though afterwards, when he came to think of it, he might think that his own way would have been the most wise.

The conversation which is set down in the last chapter did not give any insight into the family controversy that had been going on—being only, as it were, the subsiding of the waves after that discussion had come to an end. The subject in question was one which greatly moved and excited all the young people. Oswald, the second boy, who came next in the family after Anne, was the genius of the house. He was not much more than fifteen, but he had already written many poems and other compositions which had filled the house with wonder. The girls were sure that in a few years Lord Tennyson himself would have to look to his laurels, and Mr. Ruskin to stand aside; for Oswald's gifts were manifold, and it was indifferent to him whether he struck the strings of poetry or the more sober chord of

prose. Wat's fraternal admiration was equally genuine and more generous, for it is a little hard upon a big boy to recognise his younger brother's superiority ; and it was dashed by a certain conviction that it would be for Osy's good to be taken down a little.

But Wat, quite as much as the girls, was agitated by the question which had been, so to speak, before a committee of the whole house. It was a question of more importance at Penton Hook than the fate of the ministry or the elections, or anything that might be going on in Europe. It was the question whether Osy should be continued where he was, at Marlborough, or if his education should be suspended till 'better times.' Behind this lay a darker and more dreadful suggestion, of which the family were vaguely conscious, but which did not come absolutely under discussion, and this was whether Osy's education should be stopped altogether, and an 'opening in life' found for him.

Nothing that had ever happened to them had moved the family so much as this ques-

tion. The 'better times' to which the Pentons looked forward could be nothing other than the death of Sir Walter, and Mr. Penton's accession to the headship of the family; and it was in the lull of exhaustion that followed a long discussion that Mrs. Penton made her suggestion about the propriety of an allowance being made to her husband as the heir of the property, which had led him into the expression of those general but discouraging ideas about entails and primogeniture. It had not perhaps occurred to Mr. Penton before; but, now he came to think of it, it seemed just of a piece with the general course of affairs, and of everything that had happened to him in the past, that new laws should come in at the moment and deprive him in the future of the heirship of which he had been so sure.

When Mr. Penton went out for his walk after the statement he had made of these possibilities, Wat and the girls went out too, on their usual afternoon expedition to the post. There was not very much to be done at Penton Hook, especially at this depressing time of the year,

when tennis was impracticable, and the river was not to be thought of. The only amusement possible was walking, and that is a pleasure which palls—above all, when the roads are muddy and there is nowhere in particular to go to. It was Anne, in the force of her youthful invention, who had established the habit of going to the post. It was an 'object,' and made a walk into a sort of duty—not the mere meaningless stroll which, without this purpose, it would turn to; and, though the correspondence of the household was not great, Anne also managed that there should always be something which demanded to be posted, and could not be delayed. When there was nothing else, she would herself dash off a note to one of the many generous persons who advertise mysterious occupations by which ladies and other unemployed persons may earn an income without a knowledge of drawing or anything else in particular. Alas! Anne had answered so many of these advertisements that she was no longer sanguine of getting a satisfactory reply; but if there was no letter to be sent off, nothing of

her father's about business, no post-card concerning the groceries, or directions to the dressmaker, or faithful family report from Mrs. Penton to one of her relations, such as, amid all the occupations of her life, that dutiful woman sent regularly, Anne could always supply the necessary letter from her own resources.

It was on a similar afternoon to that on which the Pentons at the great house had discussed and thought of the poorer household; and a wintry sunset, very much the same as that on which Mr. Russell and his wife had looked, shone in deep lines of crimson and gold, making of the river which reflected it a stream of flame, when the three young people, far too much absorbed in their own affairs to think of the colours in the sky or the reflections in the river, or anything but Osy and his prospects, and the state of the family finances, and the mistakes of family government, came down the hill from the level of the Penton woods towards their own home. The western sky, blazing with colour, was on the left hand; but

even the sky towards the north and east shared in the general illumination, and clouds all rose-tinted, concealing their heaviness in the flush of reflection, hung upon the chill blue, and seemed to warm the fresh wintry atmosphere before it sank into the chill of night. The girls and their brother kept their heads together, speaking two at once in the eagerness of their feelings, and found no time for contemplation of what was going on overhead. A sunset is a thing which comes every evening, and about which there is no urgent reason for attention, as there was upon this question about Osy, which struck at the foundations of family credit and hope.

'When I left Eton,' said Wat, with melancholy candour—'I had not much sense, to be sure—it seemed rather fine coming away to work at home. Fellows thought I was going to work for something out of the common way. I liked it—on the whole. When you are at school, there is always something jolly in the thought of coming home. And so will Osy feel like me.'

'But you were never clever, Wat,' said the impetuous Anne.

This was perhaps a little hard to bear.

'Clever is neither here nor there,' said Wat, with a little flush. 'It does not make much difference to your feelings; I suppose I can tell better how Osy will take it than one of you girls.'

'Oh, no; for girls are more ambitious than boys, I mean boys that are just ordinary like the rest. And Osy is not like you. He is full of ambition, he wants to be something, to make a great name. I have the most sympathy with that. Ally and you,' cried the girl, with a toss of her head like a young colt, 'you are the contented ones, you are so easily satisfied; but not Osy nor me.'

'Contented is the best thing you can be,' said gentle Ally. 'What is there better than content? Whatever trouble people take, it is only in the hope of getting satisfaction at the end.'

'I wish I was contented,' said Walter, 'that is all you know. What have I got to be con-

tented about? I have nothing to do; I have no prospects in particular, nothing to look forward to.'

'Oh, Watty—Penton!'

'Penton is all very well: but how can we tell when Sir Walter may die? No, I don't want him to die,' cried the young man. 'I wish no harm to him nor to any man. I only say that because— Of course, so long as Sir Walter lives Penton may be paradise, but it has nothing to say to us. And then, as father says, the law may be changed before that happens, or something else may come in the way. No, I don't know what can come in the way; for after Sir Walter, of course, father is head of the family, and I am the eldest son.' These words had a cheering effect upon the youth in spite of himself. He turned back to look up where the corner of the great house was visible amid the trees. The Pentons of the Hook knew all the spots where that view was to be had. He turned round to look at it, turning the girls with him, who were like two shadows. No prospects in particular! when there was that

before his eyes, the house of his fathers, the house which he intended to transmit to his children! He drew a long breath which came from the very depths of his chest, a sigh of satisfaction yet of desire—of a feeling too deep to get into words. 'I say, what a sunset!' he cried, by way of diverting the general attention from this subject, upon which he did not feel able to express himself more clearly.

They all looked for the first time at the grand operation of nature which was going on in the western sky. The heavens were all aglow with lines of crimson and purple, the blue spaces of the great vault above retiring in light ineffable far beyond the masses of clouds, which took on every tinge of colour, preserving their own high purity and charms of infinitude. The great plain below lay silent underneath like a breathless spectator of that great, ever-recurring drama, the river gathering up fragments of the glory and flashing back an answer here and there in its windings wherever it was clear of the earthly obstructions of high banks and trees. Something of the same radiance flashed in

miniature from the young eyes that with one accord turned and looked—but for a moment and no more. They noted the sunset in a parenthesis, by a momentary inference; what they had sought was Penton, with all its human interests. And then they turned again and faced the north, where lay their poor little home and the lowliness of the present, to which neither the sunset nor any other glory lent a charm.

'You are the eldest son,' said Anne, resuming without a pause; 'that's all about it. That makes everything different. Suppose it is right—or at least not wrong—for you to loaf about. But Osy hasn't got Penton; he has got to make himself a name. If he is stopped in his education, what is he to do? You ought to speak to father; we all ought to make a stand. If Osy is stopped in his education it is quite different. What is he to do?'

'Father would never stop his education if he could afford it. It is the money. If we could only give up something. But what is there we can give up? Sugar and butter

count for so little,' said Ally, in soft tones of despair.

'I should not mind,' said Anne, 'if we did not get anything new for years.'

'We so seldom have anything new,' her sister said, with a sigh; there was so little to economise in this way. All the savings they could think of would not make up half the sum that had to be paid for Osy. Their young spirits were crushed under this thought. What could they do? The girls, as has been said, had answered a great many of those advertisements which offer occupation to ladies; they had tried to make beaded lace and to paint Christmas cards. Alas! that, like the butter and sugar, counted for so little. They might as well try to make use of the colours of the sunset as to make up Osy's schooling in that way: and Wat was even more helpless than they. It was so discouraging a prospect that no one could say a word. They walked down with their faces to the greyness and dimness from whence night was coming, and their hopes, like the light, seemed to be dying away.

It was Anne, always the most quick to note everything that happened, who broke the silence.

'What is that,' she cried, 'at our door? Look there, wheeling in just under the lime-trees!'

'A carriage! Who can it be?'

'The Penton carriage! Don't you see the two bays? Something must be up!' cried Walter, a flash of keen curiosity kindling in his eyes.

They stopped for a moment and looked at each other with a sudden thrill of expectation.

'No one has been to see us from Penton for years and years.'

'The carriage would not come for nothing!'

'It has been sent perhaps to fetch father!'

They hurried down with one accord, full of excitement and wonder and awe.

CHAPTER V.

A WINTER'S WALK.

Mr. Penton went out to take his walk in a depressed mood. He was familiar with all the stages of depression. He was a man who thought he had been hardly dealt with in the course of his life. In his youth there had been a momentary blaze of gaiety and pleasure. In those days, when he had shared the early follies of Walter and Reginald, and fallen in love with Alicia, it had not occurred to him that the path of existence would be a dull one. But that was all over long ago. When the other young men had fallen into dissipation and all its attendant miseries, he had pulled himself up. Pleasure

was all very well, but he had no idea of paying such a price for it as that. He was not a man who had ever been brought under any strong religious impulse, but he knew the difference between right and wrong. He pulled himself up with great resolution, and abandoned the flowery path where all the thorns are at first hidden under the bloom and brightness.

It was no small sacrifice to descend into the grey mediocrity of Penton Hook, and give himself up to the dull life which was all that was possible; but he did it, which was not an easy thing to do. It was true that he was still in those days a young man, and might have made something better of his existence: but he had no training of any special kind, no habit of work, no great capacity one way or other. He settled down to his dull country life without any feeling that he could do better, leaving all excitement behind him. It was perhaps a more creditable thing to do than if he had been able to plunge into another kind of excitement, to face the world and carve a fortune out of it, which is the

alternative possible to some men. And as there had been no illusion possible when he accepted that neutral-tinted life, so there had been no unexpected happiness involved in its results.

He had married a good woman, but not a lively one. His children had been pleasant and amusing in their babyhood, but they had brought innumerable cares along with them. Before their advent Penton Hook had been dull, but it had not been without many little comforts. He had been able to keep a couple of horses, which of itself was a considerable thing, and to hold his place more or less among the county people. But as the young ones grew, it made a great difference. Just at the time when life ought to have opened up for their advantage, it had to be narrowed and straitened. He was compelled to give up his own gratifications on their account, yet without any compensating consciousness that he was doing the best he could for them. Indeed, there seemed no possibility of doing the best that could be done for anyone. To keep on, to do what was indispens-

able, to provide food and clothing—the mere sordid necessities of life—was all that was within his power. In the early days after his marriage nothing had been saved; the necessity of education and provision for the children seemed either ludicrous in presence of the tiny creatures who wanted nothing but bread-and-milk and kisses, or so far off as to be beyond calculation. But by gradual degrees this necessity had become the most important of all. And with it, unfortunately, had come that depreciation in the value of land which made his little estate much less productive exactly at the time when he wanted money most.

One of his farms was vacant, the others were let at low rents—all was sinking into a different level. And, on the other hand, the wants of the family increased every day. It is not to be supposed that Mr. Penton liked to take Osy from school. He had been indifferent about Wat for various reasons, first because he then quite believed he was really capable of 'reading' with his boy, and would rather like it than otherwise, and then it would

be a good thing for them both; .and second, because Wat was the heir, and no great education is necessary (Mr. Penton thought with Mrs. Hardcastle in the play) to fit a man to spend a large income. But with Osy no such argument told. Osy was heir to nothing. He was the clever one of the family; and, as for reading with Osy, his father knew that he was not capable of any such feat, even if he had not proved that to keep settled hours and give up a part of this day to his son's instruction had come to be a thing impossible to him. He knew very well now that to take Oswald from school would be to do him an injury. But what could the poor man do?

All that the young ones said in their warm partisanship for Osy, in their indignation at the idea of making him suffer, had more or less affected their father. He was not very sensitive to anything they could say, and yet it wounded him in a dull way. It made him more depressed and despondent. To battle with the waves, to be tossed upon a great billow which may swallow you up, yet may also throw you ashore and

bring you to a footing upon the solid earth, is less terrible than just to keep your head above the muddy tide which sucks you down and carries you on, with no prospect but to go to the bottom at last when your powers of endurance are spent. This last was Mr. Penton's state. There was no excitement of a storm, no lively stir of winds and waters—all was dull, dreary, hopeless; a position in which he could do nothing to help himself, nothing to save himself—in which he must go on, keeping his head above water as he could, now and then going down, getting his eyes and throat full of the heavy, muddy, livid stream. Poverty is little to the active soul which can struggle and strive and outwit it, which can still be doing; but to those who have nothing they can do, who can only wait speechless till they are engulfed, how bitter is that slowly-mounting, colourless, hopeless, all-subduing tide!

There was very little for a man to do at Penton Hook. He had tramped about the fields of the vacant farm, trying helplessly to look after things which he did not understand,

and to make the fallow fields bear crops by looking at them, in the morning: and he had come away from them more depressed than ever, wondering whether, if he could get money enough to start and work the farm, anything might be made of it; then reflecting dolefully that in all likelihood the money for such operations, even if he could raise it, might in all probability be as well thrown into the river for any good it would do.

In the afternoon he did not attempt any further consideration of this question, but simply took a walk, as he had been in the habit of doing for so many years. And though in some circumstances there are few things so pleasant, yet in others there is nothing so doleful as this operation of taking a walk.

How much helpless idleness, how many hopeless self-questions, miserable musings, are summed up in it; what a dreamy commonplace it turns to, the sick soul's dull substitute for something to do or think of. It was in its way a sort of epitome of Edward Penton's wearisome life. He knew every turning of the road; there

was nothing unexpected to look forward to, no novelty, no incident; when he met anyone he knew, any of his equals, they were most probably riding or driving, or returning from a day with the hounds, splashed and tired, and full of talk about the run. He took off his hat to the country ladies as they drove past, and exchanged a word with the men. He had nothing to say to them nor they to him. He was of their sphere indeed, but not in it. He knew when he had passed that they would say 'Poor Penton!' to each other, and discuss his circumstances. He was happier when he came now and then upon a solitary poor man breaking stones on the way, with whom he would stop and have a talk about the weather or how the country was looking. When he could find twopence in his pocket to give for a glass of beer he was momentarily cheered by the encounter. It was a cheap pleasure, and almost his only one. It gave a little relief to the dulness and discouragement which filled all the rest of the way.

There was, however, one incident in his walk

besides the twopence to the stone-breaker. There was no novelty in this. Every day as he came up to the turning he knew what awaited him; but that did not take away from its perennial interest. This incident was Penton, seen in the distance, not the terraced front, which he, like all the Pentons, thought a monument of architectural art, but a high shoulder of red masonry, which shone through the trees, and suggested all the rest to his accustomed eyes. Penton was the one incident in his walk, as it was in his life. He was poor, and the waters of misery were almost going over his head. Yet Penton stood fast, and he was the heir. He had said this to himself for years, and though the words might have worn out all their meaning, so often had they been repeated, yet there was an endless excitement in them.

Twenty years before he had said them with a sense of mingled exultation and remorse, which was when the last of 'the boys' died, and he became against all possibility the next heir. Sir Walter had been an old man then, and it seemed probable that these recurring calamities would

end his life as well as his hopes. Edward Penton had nothing to reproach himself with; he had never been hard upon his cousins, though he had abandoned their evil ways, and he had been shocked and sorry when one by one they died. But afterwards he had looked forward to his inheritance; he had believed that it could not be far off. He had come to this turning when first he began to feel life too many for him, and had looked at the house that was to be his, and had taken comfort. But twenty years is a long time, and waiting for dead men's shoes is not a pleasant occupation. He looked at Penton now always with excitement, but without any exhilaration of hope. It did not seem so unlikely as before that Sir Walter might live to be a hundred; that he might live to see his younger cousin out. As he had outlived his own sons, he might outlive Edward Penton and *his* sons after him. Nothing seemed impossible to such an old man. And Mr. Penton did not feel that his own powers of living, any more than any other powers in him, were much to be reckoned upon. He stood on this particular day and

gazed at the house of his fathers with a long and wistful look. Should he ever step into it as his own? Should he ever change his narrow state for the lordship there? This question did not bring to him the same quickening of the breath which he had been sensible of on so many previous occasions. He was too much depressed to-day to be roused even by that. He turned away with a sigh, and turned his back to that vision and his face homeward. At home all his cares were awaiting him—as if he had not carried them with him every step of the way.

As he walked back towards Penton Hook his ear was caught by the chip of the hammer, which sounded in the stillness of the wintry afternoon like some big insect on the road. Chip, chip, and then the little roll of falling stones. The man who made the sound was sitting on a heap of stones by the roadside, working very tranquilly, not hurrying himself, taking his occupation easily. He was grey-haired, with a picturesque grey beard, and a red handkerchief knotted underneath. He paused

to put his hand to his cap when he saw Mr. Penton. The recollection of past glasses of beer, or hopes for the future, or perhaps the social pleasure, independent of all interested motives, of five minutes' talk to break the dulness of the long afternoon, made the approach of the wayfarer pleasant.

'Good afternoon, sir,' he said, cheerfully.

Old Crockford, though he was a great deal older than Mr. Penton, and much poorer absolutely, though not comparatively, was by no means a depressed person, but regarded everything from a cheerful point of view.

'Good morning, Crockford,' said Mr. Penton. 'I didn't see you when I passed a little while ago. I thought you had not been out to-day.'

'Bless you, squire, I'm out most days,' said Crockford; 'weather like this it's nothin' but pleasure. But frost and cold is disagreeable, and rain's worst of all. I'm all right as long as there's a bit o' sunshine, and it keeps up.'

'It looks like keeping up, or I am no judge,' said the poor squire.

Crockford shook his head and looked up at the sky.

'I don't like the look of them clouds,' he said. 'When they rolls up like that, one on another, I never likes the look of them. But, praise the Lord, we's high and dry, and can't come to no harm.'

'It is more than I am,' said Mr. Penton, testily. 'I hate rain!'

'And when the river's up it's in of the house, sir, I've heard say? That's miserable, that is. When the children were young my missis and me we lived down by Pepper's Wharf, and the fevers as them little ones had, and the coughs and sneezin's, and the rheumatics, it's more nor tongue can say. Your young ladies, squire, is wonderful red in the face and straight on their pins to be living alongside of the river. It's an onpleasant neighbour, is the river, I always do say.'

'If you hear any fools saying that the water comes into my house you have my permission to —stop them,' said Mr. Penton, angrily. 'It's no such thing; the water never comes higher than

the terrace. As for fevers, we don't know what they are. But I don't like the damp in my garden; that stands to reason. It spoils all the paths and washes the gravel away.'

'That's very true,' said Crockford, with conviction; 'it leaves 'em slimy, whatever you do. I've seen a sight to-day as has set me thinking, though I'm but a poor chap. Poor men, like others, they 'as their feelings. I've seen a lady go by, squire, as maybe once upon a day, years ago, you, or most of the gentlemen about—for she was a handsome one, she was——'

'Ah, an old beauty! "Even in our ashes live their wonted fires." And who might this lady be?'

'Many a one was sweet upon her,' said Crockford. 'I ain't seen her, not to call seeing, for many a year. I don't know about ashes, squire, except as they're useful for scouring. And they say that beauty is but skin deep; but when I looks at an 'andsome lady I don't think nothing of all that.'

'I didn't know you were such an enthusiast, Crockford.'

'I don't always understand, squire,' said Crockford, 'the words the quality employ. Now and then they'll have a kind of Greek or Latin that means just a simple thing. But I sits here hours on end, and I thinks a deal; and for a thing that pleases the eye I don't think there's nothing more satisfying than an 'andsome woman. I don't say in my own class of life, for they ages fast, do the women; they don't keep their appearance, like you and me, if I may make so bold. But for a lady as has gone through a deal, and kep' her looks, and got an air with her, that goes with riding in her own carriage behind a couple of 'andsome bays—I will say, squire, if I was to be had up before the magistrates for it—and you're one yourself, and ought to know—and what I say is this: that Miss Aliciar from the great house there is just as fine a sight as a man would wish to see.'

'Miss Alicia!' cried poor Penton, The name was one he had not heard for long, and it seemed to bring back a flush of his youth which for a moment dazzled him. He burst out into a tre-

mendous laugh after a while. 'You old blockhead!' he said. 'You're talking of Mrs. Russell Penton, my cousin, who hasn't been called by that name these twenty years!'

'Twenty years,' said old Crockford, 'is nothin', squire, to a man like me. I knew her a baby, just as I knowed you. You're both two infants to the likes of me. Bless you, I hear the bells ring for her christening and yours too. But she's a fine, 'andsome woman, a-wheelin' along in her carriage as if all the world belonged to her. I don't think nothin' of a husband that hain't even a name of his own to bless himself with, nor a penny to spend. It's you and her that should have made a match; that's what ought to have been, squire.'

'Unfortunately, you see,' said Mr. Penton, 'I have got a wife of my own.'

'But you hadn't no wife nor her a husband in the old days,' said Crockford, meditatively, pausing to emphasise his words with the chip, chip of his hammer. 'Dear-a-me! the mistakes that are in this life! One like me, as sits here hours on end, with nought afore him but the

clouds flying and the wind blowing, learns a-many things. There's more mistakes than aught else in this life. Going downright wrong makes a deal of trouble, but mistakes makes more. For one as goes wrong there's allays two or three decent folks as suffers. But mistakes is just like daily bread; they're like the poor as is ever with us, accordin' to the Scripture; they just makes a muddle of everything. It's been going through my mind since ever I see Miss Aliciar in her chariot a-driving away, as fine as King Solomon in all his glory. The two young gentlemen, that was a sad sort of a thing, squire, but I don't know as t'other is much better, the mistakes as some folks do make.'

'Crockford, you are growing old, and fond of talking,' said Mr. Penton, who had heard him out with a sort of angry patience. 'Because one lets you go on and say your say, that's not to make you a judge of your betters. Look here, here's twopence for a glass of beer, but mind you keep your wisdom to yourself another day.'

'Thank ye, squire,' said Crockford. 'I speak my mind in a general way, but I can hold my tongue as well as another when it ain't liked. Remarks as is unpleasant, or as pricks like, going too near a sore place——'

'Oh, confound you!' said the squire; 'who ever said there was a—' But then he remembered that to quarrel with Crockford was not a thing to be done. 'I think, after all,' he said, 'you're right, and that those clouds are banking up for rain. You'd better pack up your hamper, it's four o'clock, and it will be wet before you get home.'

'Well, squire, if you says so, as is one of the trustees,' said Crockford, giving an eye to the clouds, he swung himself leisurely off his hard and slippery seat upon the heap of stones,—'I'll take your advice, sir, and thank ye, sir: and wishing you a pleasant walk afore the rain comes on.'

Mr. Penton waved his hand and continued his walk down hill towards his home. The clouds were gathering, indeed, but they were full of colour and reflection, which showed all

the more gorgeous against the rolling background of vapour which gradually obliterated the blue. He was not afraid of the rain, though if it meant another week of wet weather such as had already soaked the country, it would also mean much discomfort and inconvenience in the muddy little domain of Penton Hook. But it was not this he was thinking of. His own previous reflections, and the sharp reminder of the past that was in old Crockford's random talk, made a combination not unlike that of the dark clouds and the lurid reflected colours of the sky. Mistake? Yes; no doubt there had been a mistake—many mistakes, one after another, mistakes which the light of the past, with all its dying gleams, made doubly apparent.

His mind was so full of all these thoughts that he arrived at his own gate full of them, without thinking of the passing vision which had stirred up old Crockford, and his own mind too, on hearing of it. But when he pushed open the gate and caught sight of the two bays, pawing and rearing their heads, with

champ and stir of all their trappings, as if they disdained the humble door at which they stood, Edward Penton's middle-aged heart gave a sudden jump in his breast. Alicia here! What could such a portent mean?

CHAPTER VI.

RICH MRS. PENTON AND POOR MRS. PENTON.

MRS. RUSSELL PENTON had not come to the Hook for nothing. It was years since she had visited her cousin's house—partly because of repeated absences—for the family at Penton were fond of escaping from the winter, and generally spent that half of the year on the Riviera—partly from the feeling she had expressed to her husband, which was not a very Christian feeling, of repulsion from her father's heir: and partly, which was perhaps the strongest reason of all, because they were not, as she said, 'in our own sphere.' How can the wife and many children of a poor man living in a small muddy

riverside house be in the sphere of one of the great ladies of the district? Only great qualities on one side or another, great affection or some other powerful inducement, would be enough to span that gulf. And no such link existed between the two houses. But there had come to light between her father and herself in one of those close and long consultations, to which not even her husband was admitted, a plan which required Edward Penton's concurrence, and which, they concluded between them, had better be set before him by Alicia herself. This might have been done by summoning the heir-at-law to Penton. But Russell Penton's veiled remonstrances, his laugh at her inconsistency, his comparison of the importance of the moth-eating tapestry and poor Mrs. Penton's inability to cut her coat according to her cloth, had not been without effect on his wife's mind. She was not incapable of perceiving the point which he made; and though she confessed to nobody, not even to herself, that her visit to Penton Hook had a little remorseful impulse in it, yet this mingled largely with the evident

business which might have been managed in another way.

Many recollections rose in her mind also as she went along, not exposed even to such inspections as that of old Crockford, all by herself with her own thoughts, remembering in spite of herself the youthful expeditions in which the Hook was so large a feature, the boating parties that 'took the water' there, the anxious exertions of poor Edward to make his forlorn little mansion bright. Poor Edward! She remembered so clearly his eager looks, his desire to please, the anxious devices with which he sought to gratify her tastes, to show how his own followed them. She had not seen much of his older aspect, and had no distinct image in her mind to correct that of the eager young man reading her face to see if she approved or disapproved, and having no higher standard by which to shape his own opinions. She saw him in that aspect; and she saw him as by a lightning flash of terrible recollection, which was half imagination, as he had appeared to her by the side of her last brother's grave, the chief

mourner and the chief gainer, concealing a new-born sense of his own importance under the conventional guise of woe.

Alicia was half-conscious that she did poor Edward wrong. He was not the sort of man to exult in his own advantage as purchased by such a terrible family tragedy. But even now, when the passion of grief and loss was over, she could not surmount the bitter suggestion, the knowledge that he had certainly gained by what was ruin to her father's house. When she drove past the old stone-breaker on the road without taking any notice of him, without even remarking his presence, this had been the recollection with which her soul was filled. But her heart melted as the carriage swept along by all the well-remembered corners, and a vision of the happy youthful party of old, the sound of the boats at the little landing, the eager delight of the young master of the place, seemed to come back to her ears and eyes.

But Penton Hook did not look much like a boating-party to-day. The water was very near the level of the too green grass, the empty

damp flower-beds, the paths that gleamed with wet. A certain air of deprecating helplessness standing feebly against that surrounding power was in everything about. Alicia, as she was now, the active-minded manager of much property, full of energy and resources, one of those who, like the centurion, have but to say, 'Come, and he cometh; do this, and he doeth it,' cast her eyes, awakened out of all dreams, upon the sweep of river and the little bit of weeping soil which seemed to lie in its grasp appealing for mercy to the clouds and the skies. The sight gave new life to all her scornful comments upon the incompetency of those who, knowing what they had, could not take the dignified position of making it to do, but sank into failure and helpless defeat. She planned rapidly in a moment what she would do, were it but to keep the enemy at bay. Were it hers she would scarcely have waited for the dawn of the morning, she would have sent in her workmen, prepared her plans, learned the best way to deal with it, long ago. She would have made herself the mistress, not the

slave, of the surrounding stream. In whatever way, at whatever cost, she would have freed herself, she would have overcome these blind influences of nature. It was with a little scorn, feeling that she could have done this, feeling that she would like to do it, that it would be a pleasure to fight and overcome that silent, senseless force, that Mrs. Russell Penton, rich Mrs. Penton, swept in through the weeping gardens of the Hook, and with all the commotion of a startling arrival, her bays prancing, her wheels cutting the gravel, drew up before the open door.

The door was always open, whether the day was warm or cold, with an aspect not of hospitality and liberal invitation, but rather of disorder and a squalid freedom from rule. The hall was paved with vulgar tiles which showed the traces of wet feet, and Mrs. Russell Penton sank down all at once from her indignant half-satisfied conviction that it was a sign of the incompetency of poor Edward in his present surroundings that he had never attempted to do anything to mend matters, when brought thus

face to face with poverty. The traces of the wet feet appalled her. This was just such an evidence of an incompetent household and careless mistress as fitted in to her theory; but it was terrible to her unaccustomed senses, to which a perfection of nicety and propriety was indispensable, and any breach of absolute cleanliness and purity unknown. The maid, who hurried frightened, yet delighted, to the door, did not, however, carry out the first impression made. She was so neat in her black gown and white apron that the visitor was non-plussed as by an evident contradiction.

'Can you tell me if Mr. Penton is at home?' she asked, leaning out of the carriage and putting aside the footman with a momentary feeling that this, perhaps, might be one of poor Edward's daughters acting as housemaid.

'No, my lady; but missis is in,' said the handmaid with a curtsey which she had learned at school. Martha did not know who the visitor was, but felt that in all circumstances to call a visitor who came in such a fine carriage my lady could not be wrong.

'Missis is in!'

Rich Mrs. Penton felt a momentary thrill. It was as if she had been hearing herself spoken of in unimaginable circumstances. She paused a little with a sense of unwillingness to go further. She had met on various occasions the insignificant pretty young woman who was poor Edward's wife. She had made an effort to be kind to her when they were first married, when the poor Pentons were still more or less in one's own sphere. But there had been nothing to interest her, nothing to make up for the trouble of maintaining so uncomfortable a relationship, and since that period she had not taken any notice of her cousin's wife, a woman always immured in nursing cares, having babes or nourishing them, or deep in some one of those semi-animal (as she said) offices which disgust a fastidious woman, who in her own person has nothing of the kind to do. A woman without children becomes often very fastidious on this point. Perhaps the disgust may be partly born of envy, but at all events it exists and is strong.

Mrs. Penton hesitated as to whether she would turn back and not go in at all, or whether she would wait at the door till Edward came in, or ask to be shown into his particular sitting-room to wait for him: but that, she reflected, would be a visible slight to Edward's wife. The unexpressed, unformulated dread of what Russell might say restrained her here. He would not criticise, but he would laugh, which was much worse. He would perhaps give vent to a certain small whistle which she knew very well, when she acknowledged that she had been to Penton Hook without seeing the mistress of the house. She did not at all confess to herself that she was a coward, but as a matter of fact rich Mrs. Penton was more afraid of that whistle than poor Mrs. Penton was of anything, except scarlatina.

Alicia hesitated; she sat still in her carriage for the space of a minute, while simple Martha gazed as if she had been a queen, and admired the deep fur on the lady's velvet mantle, and the bonnet which had come from Paris. Then Mrs. Penton made up her mind.

'Perhaps your mistress will see me,' she said; 'I should like to wait till Mr. Penton comes in.'

'Oh, yes, my lady,' Martha said. Though she had been carefully instructed how to answer visitors, she felt instinctively that this visitor could not be asked her name as if she was an ordinary lady making a call. She then opened the drawing-room very wide and said, 'Please, ma'am!' then stopped and let the great lady go in.

Mrs. Penton, poor Mrs. Penton, was sitting by the fire on a low chair. There was not light enough to work by, and yet there was too much light to ask for the lamp. It was a welcome moment of rest from all the labours that were her heritage. She liked it perhaps all the better that her husband and the older ones, who would talk or make demands upon her to be talked to, were out and she was quite free. To be alone now and then for a moment is sweet to a hard-worked woman who never is alone. Indeed, she was not alone now. Two of the little ones were on the rug by her feet.

But they made no demands upon their mother, they played with each other, keeping up a babble of little voices, within reach of her hand to be patted on the head, within reach of her dress to cling to, should a wild beast suddenly appear or an ogre or a naughty giant. Thus, though they said nothing to each other, they were a mutual comfort and support, the mother to the children and the children to the mother.

And if we could unveil the subtle chain of thinking from about that tired and silent woman's heart, the reader would wonder to see the lovely things that were there. But she was scarcely aware that she was thinking, and what she thought was not half definite enough to be put into words. A world of gentle musings, one linked into another, none of them separable from the rest, was about her in the firelight, in the darkness, the quiet and not ungrateful fatigue. She was not thinking at all, she would have said. It was as though something revolved silently before her, gleaming out here and there a recollection or realisation. The

warmth, the dimness, the quiet, lulled her in the midst of all her cares. She had thought of Osy till her head ached. How this dreadful misfortune could be averted; how he could be kept on at Marlborough; until in the impossibility of finding any expedient, and the weariness of all things, her active thoughts had dropped. They dropped as her hands dropped, as she gave up working, and for that moment of stillness drew her chair to the fire. There was nothing delightful to dwell upon in all that was around and about her. But God, whom in her voiceless way she trusted deeply, delivered the tired mother from her cares for the moment, and fed her with angels' food as she sat without anything to say for herself, content by the fire.

It was a moment before she realised what had happened when the door opened and the visitor swept in. She was not clever or ready, and her first consciousness that some one had come in was confused, so that she did not know how to meet the emergency. She rose up hastily, all her sweet thoughts dispersing; and the chil-

dren, who saw a shadowy tall figure and did not know what it was, shuffled to her side and laid hold of her dress with a horrible conviction that the ogre who eats children on toast had come at last. Rich Mrs. Penton sweeping in had command of the scene better than poor Mrs. Penton had who was its principal figure. She saw the startled movement, the slim figure rising up from before the fire, in nervous uncertainty what to say or do, and the sudden retreat of the little ones from their place in the foreground, lighted by the warm glow of the fire, to the shelter of their mother's dress. The whole group had a timid, alarmed look which half-piqued and half-pleased Alicia. She rather liked the sensation of her own imposing appearance which struck awe, and yet was annoyed that anyone should be afraid of her. She had no doubt what to do; she went forward into the region of the firelight and held out a hand.

'You don't remember me,' she said, 'or perhaps it is only that you don't see me. I am Alicia Penton. May I sit down here a little till my cousin comes in?'

'Mrs. Russell Penton! oh, sit down, please. Will you take this chair, or will you come nearer the fire? I am ashamed to have been so stupid, but I have not many visitors, and I never thought—will you take this chair, please?'

'You never thought that I should be one? Oh, don't think I blame you for saying so. It is my fault; I have often felt it. I hope you will let bygones be bygones now, and look upon me as a friend.'

'Horry,' said Mrs. Penton, 'run and tell Martha to bring the lamp.' She did not make any direct reply to her visitor's overture. 'I am fond of sitting in the firelight,' she said. 'A little moment when there is nothing to do, when all is so quiet, is pleasant. But it is awkward when anyone comes in, for we cannot see each other. I hope Sir Walter is quite well,' she added, after a momentary pause.

It was in the rich Mrs. Penton's heart to cry out, 'Don't ask me about Sir Walter; you don't hope he is well; you wish he was dead, I know you must, you must!' These words rushed to her lips, but she did not say them. There was

in this mild interior no justification for such a speech. The absence of light threw a veil upon all the imperfections of the place, and there was something in the gentle indifference of the mistress of the house, the absence of all feeling in respect to her visitor except a startled civility, which somehow humbled and silenced the proud woman. She had been, in spite of herself, excited about this meeting. She had come in with her heart beating, making overtures, which she never would have made to a stranger. She did not know what she expected: either to be received with warm and astonished gratitude, or to be held at arm's length in offence. But this mild woman in the soft confusion of the firelit gloom did neither—had not evidently been thinking of her at all—had no feeling about her one way or another. Mrs. Russell Penton felt like one who had fallen from a height. She blushed unseen with a hot sensation of shame. To feel herself of so much less consequence than she expected, was extraordinary to her, a sensation such as she had rarely felt before. She felt even that the pause

she made before replying, which she herself felt so much, and during which so many things went through her head, was lost upon the other, who was pre-occupied about the lamp, and anxious lest it should smell, and concerned with a hundred other things.

'My father is quite well,' said Alicia, with a little emphasis; 'I never saw him in better health. It is not thought necessary for him, he is so well, to go abroad this year.'

The maid was at the door with the lamp, and there came in with her, exactly as Mrs. Penton feared, an odour of paraffin, that all-pervading unescapable odour which is now so familiar everywhere. She scarcely caught what her visitor said, so much more anxious was she about this. And in her mind there arose the anxious question, what to do? Was it better to say nothing about the smell, and hope that perhaps it might not be remarked? or confess the matter and make a commotion, calling Mrs. Penton's attention to it by sending it away? Even if she did the latter she could not send

away the smell, which, alas! was here, anyhow, and would keep possession. She resolved desperately, therefore, to take no notice, to hope, perhaps, that it might not be remarked. This presumption, though poor Mrs. Penton was so far from suspecting it, completed the discomfiture of the great lady who had made sure that her visit would be a great event.

'I am very glad,' said the mistress of the house at last, vaguely; 'Edward has gone out for a walk, he will be in directly, and I am sure it will give him great pleasure to see you. The girls are out too; there is not very much for them in the way of amusement at this time of the year.'

And then there was a pause, for neither of the ladies knew what to say. Mrs. Russell Penton examined her hostess closely by the light of the malodorous lamp. It was kinder to the poor lady than daylight would have been, and to the poor room, which, with the flickering firelight rising and falling, and the shade over the lamp, which left the walls and the furniture in a

flattering obscurity, showed none of their imperfections to the stranger's eyes. And all that was apparent in Mrs. Penton was that her gown, which was of no particular colour, but dark and not badly cut, hung about her slim figure with a certain grace, and that the curling twist of her hair, done up in that soft large knot on the back of her head, suited her much better than a more elaborate coiffure would have done.

Rich Mrs. Penton looked closely at her poor relation, but her scrutiny was not returned. The thing that had now sprung into prominence in the mind of the mistress of the house, was whether Martha would bring tea in nicely, and whether the cake would be found which was kept for such great occasions, without an appeal to herself for the keys. She was careful and burdened about many things; but in the very excess of her anxieties was delivered from more serious alarms. It did not occur to her to trouble herself with the questions which the children had asked each other so anxiously,

which Mr. Penton was inquiring of himself with a beating heart,

'What could have brought Alicia Penton here?'

CHAPTER VII.

THE YOUNG AND THE OLD.

THERE was, however, no lack of excitement when the rest of the family came in. The girls dazzled with the quick transition from the darkness outside to the light within, their eyes shining, their lips apart with breathless curiosity and excitement, and a thrill of interest which might have satisfied the requirements of any visitor: and after a little interval their father, pale, and somewhat breathless too, whose expectation was not of anything agreeable, but rather of some new misfortune, of which perhaps his cousin had come to tell him. Edward Penton did not pause to think that it was very

unlikely that Alicia would thus break in upon his retirement in order to tell him of some misfortune. The feeling was instinctive in his mind because of long acquaintance with defeat and failure, that every new thing must mean further trouble. He was always ready to encounter that in his depressed way. He came into the atmosphere which was tinged with the smell of paraffin, the discomfort of which was habitual to him, added to the undercurrent of irritation in his mind, and with the feeling that there was already a crowd of people in the room, where probably no one was necessary but himself.

Alicia Penton had long, long ceased to be an object of special interest to him: nobody now was of particular interest to Mr. Penton in that or any sentimental way. The people who were about him now either belonged to him, in which case they gave him a great deal of altogether inevitable trouble: or else they did not belong to him, and were probably more or less antagonistic—wanting things from him, entertainment, hospitality, subscriptions, some-

thing or other which he did not wish to give. Such were the two classes into which the human race was divided; but if there was a debateable ground between the two, a scrap of soil upon which a human foot could be planted, Sir Walter and his daughter were its possible inhabitants. They belonged to him too—in a way; they were antagonistic too—in a way. Both the other halves of the world were more or less united in them.

He came forward into the light, which, however, revealed his knickerbockers and muddy boots more distinctly than his face.

'It is a long time,' he said, 'since we have met.'

'Yes, Edward, it is a long time; I have been saying so to your wife. The girls have grown up since I saw them last; they were little girls then, and now they are—grown up——'

When emotion reaches a high strain and becomes impassioned, the power of expression is increased, and eloquence comes; but on the lower levels of feeling, suppressed excitement

and commotion of mind often find utterance in the merest commonplace.

'Yes, they are grown up—the boy too,' said Mr. Penton, under the same spell.

She cast a glance upward to where, beyond the lamp, on his mother's side of the table, Wat appeared, a lengthy shadow, perhaps the most uncongenial of all. She made a slight forward inclination of her head in recognition of his presence, but no more. The girls she had shown a certain pleasure in. They stood together, with that pretty look of being but one which a pair of sisters often have, so brightly curious and excited, scanning her with such eager eyes that it would have been difficult not to respond to their frank interest. But Mrs. Penton could not tolerate Wat: his very presence was an offence to her, and the instinctive way in which he went over to his mother's side, and stood there in the gloom looking at the visitor over the shade of the lamp. She would have none of him, but she turned with relief to the girls.

'I am ashamed to ask the question,' she said,

'but which of you is my godchild? You seem about the same age.'

It was a vexation that it should be the other one—the one who was like her mother, not the impetuous darker girl whose eyes devoured the great lady who was her cousin—who replied,

'It is I who am Ally. There is only a year between us. We are more together than any of the others.'

'Ally!' said Mrs. Russell Penton, with a little scorn. 'And what is your name?'

'I am Anne.'

'She should be Anna,' said her mother, 'which is far prettier: but she likes what is shortest best. There are so many of them. None of them have their full names. Some families make a great stand on that—to give everyone their full name.'

'It is a matter of taste,' said the visitor, coldly. She was doubly, but most unreasonably, annoyed after her first moment of interest to find that it was the wrong sister who was her godchild, and that even she did not bear the name

that had been given her. It seemed a want of respect, not only to herself, but to the family, in which there had been Alicias for countless years.

'I hope my uncle is well?' said Mr. Penton, after another embarrassed pause. Sir Walter was not his uncle, but it was a relic of the old days, when he was a child of the house, that the younger cousin was permitted to call the elder so. 'I heard you were not going away this year.'

'No; the doctors think he may stay at home, as there is every prospect of a mild winter. Of course, if it became suddenly severe we could take him away at a moment's notice.'

'Of course,' Edward Penton said. However severe the weather might become, neither he nor his could be taken away at a moment's notice. He could not help feeling conscious of the difference, but with a faint smile breaking upon his depression. Alicia did not mean it, he was sure, but it seemed curious that she should put the contrast so very clearly before him There was a little whispering going on

between the mother and daughters about the tea. Tea was a substantial meal at the Hook, and the little ornamental repast at five o'clock was unusual, and made a little flurry in the household. Mrs. Penton had to give Anne certain instructions about a little thin bread-and-butter and the cake. She thought that Edward, who was keeping up the conversation, screened off these whisperings from his cousin's notice: but as a matter of fact Alicia was keenly alive to all that was taking place, and felt a sharper interest in the anxiety about Martha's appearance than in anything Edward was saying. 'You still keep the villa at Cannes?' he went on.

'Yes; up to this time it has been a necessity for my father: but I have not seen him so well for years.'

'I am very glad to hear it,' Mr. Penton said, with a little emphasis. He had to stand aside as he spoke, for Martha arrived, rather embarrassed, with her tray, for which there was no habitual place: and the girls had to clear the books and ornaments off a little table while she

waited. He was used to these domestic embarrassments, and it must be said for him that he did the best he could to screen them even at the sacrifice of himself. He drew a chair near to his cousin and sat down, thus doing what he could to draw her keen attention from these details.

'It is long since I have seen Penton,' he said. 'I hear you have made many improvements.'

'Nothing that you would remark—only additions to the comfort of the house. It used to be rather cold, you will remember.'

'I don't think I knew what cold was in those old days,' he said, with a slight involuntary shiver, for the door had just opened once more to admit the cake, and a draught came in from the always open hall.

'We have had it now warmed throughout,' said Mrs. Russell Penton, with a slight involuntary smile; 'and we are thinking of fitting it up with electric light. My husband has a turn for playing with science. It is a great deal of trouble at first, but very little afterwards, I

believe; and very convenient, without any of the drawbacks of lamps or gas.'

She could not but turn her head as she spoke, to the large crystal lamp upon the table, which filled the room with something more than light. The tea had been arranged by this time, and poor Mrs. Penton had begun to pour it out, but not yet was her mind disengaged from the many anxieties involved—for the tea was poor. She shook her head and made a little silent appeal to the girls as she poured out the almost colourless cup. And then there was a jug of milk, but no cream. This necessitated another whispering, and the swift despatch of Ally to fetch what was wanted. Mrs. Russell Penton looked on at all this, and took in every detail as if it had been a little scene of a comedy enacted for her amusement; but there was in the amusement an acrid touch. The smile was sharp, like Ithuriel's spear, and cut all those innocent little cobwebs away.

'I have no doubt you will make it very complete,' Edward Penton said, with a sigh. There was an assumed proprietorship about all

she said, which was like cutting him off from the succession, that only possibility which lay in his future. And yet they could not cut him off, he said to himself.

'Is this tea for me? How very kind! but I never take it at this hour,' said Alicia, putting up her gloved hand with a little gesture of refusal. It smote, if not her heart, yet her conscience, a little to see the look that passed between the mother and the girls. Had Russell seen that scene he would assuredly have retired into a corner, and relieved himself with a whistle, before asking for a cup and eating half the cake, which was what he would have done regardless of consequences. Rendered compunctious by this thought Alicia added hastily, 'You must bring the girls up to see the house; they ought to know it; and I hope I may see more of them in the time to come.'

'Their mother, I have no doubt, will be pleased,' said Edward Penton, vaguely.

'Indeed, you must not think of me,' his wife said; she had not taken offence. It was not in her mild nature to suppose that anyone could

mean to slight or insult her; but she was a little annoyed by the unnecessary waste of tea 'I am a poor walker, you know, Edward; and always occupied with the children; but I am sure the girls would like it very much. It would be very nice for them to make acquaintance—Wat could walk up with them if you were busy. Especially in the winter,' she said, with a little conciliatory smile towards the great lady. 'I am always looking out for a little change for the girls.'

'Then we shall consider that as settled,' said Alicia. She rose, in all the splendour of her velvet and furs, and the whole family rose with her. A thought ran through their minds—a little astonished shock—a question, Was it possible that this was all she had come for? It was a very inadequate conclusion to the excitement and expectation in all their minds. Mrs. Penton alone did not feel this shock. She did not think the result inadequate; a renewal of acquaintance, an invitation to the girls, probably the opening to them of a door into society and the great world.

She came forward with what to her was warmth and enthusiasm.

'It is very kind of you to have called,' she said, 'I am truly grateful, for I make few calls myself, and I can't wonder if I fall out of people's recollection. It is a great thing for a woman like you to come out of your way to be kind to Edward's little girls. I am very grateful to you, and I will never forget it.'

Poor Mrs. Penton gave her rich namesake a warm pressure of the hand, looking at her with her mild, large-lidded grey eyes, lit up by a smile which transformed her face. Not a shadow of doubt, not the faintest cloud of consciousness that Alicia's motive had been less than angelic, was in her look or in her thoughts.

Rich Mrs. Penton faltered and shrank before this look of gratitude. She knew that, far from deserving it, there had been nothing but contempt in her thoughts towards this simple woman who had been to her like a bit of a comedy. She withdrew her hand as quickly as possible from that grateful clasp.

'You give me credit—that I don't deserve,'

she said. 'I—I came to speak to my cousin on business. It was really a—I won't call it a selfish motive, that brought me. But it will give me real pleasure to see the girls.'

To divine the hidden meaning of this little speech, which was entirely apologetic, occupied the attention of the anxious family suddenly pushed back into eagerness again by the intimation of her real errand. It was not all for nothing, then! It was not a mere call of civility! Mr. Penton, who had felt something like relief when she rose, consoled by the thought that there could not at least be any new misfortune to intimate to him, fell again into that state of melancholy anticipation from which he had been roused, while the young ones bounded upwards to the height of expectation. Something was coming—something new! It did not much matter to them what it was. They looked on with great excitement while their father conducted his cousin across the hall to his book-room, as it was called. They were not given to fine names at Penton Hook. It had been

called the library in former days. But it was a little out at elbows, like the rest of the house—the damp had affected the bindings, the gilding was tarnished, the Russia leather dropping to pieces, a smell of mustiness and decay, much contended against, yet indestructible, was in the place. And it was no longer the library, but only the book-room. The door of the drawing-room being left open, the family watched with interest indescribable the two figures crossing the hall. Mrs. Russell Penton, though she had not been there for so many years, knew her way, which particular interested the girls greatly, and opened a new vista to them into the past. Mrs. Penton, for her part, knew well enough all about Alicia, but she was not jealous. She shivered slightly as she saw the lady's skirt sweep the hall.

'Oh, Anne,' she whispered, 'tell Martha to bring a cloth and wipe it. A velvet dress! You children, with your wet feet, you are enough to break anyone's heart. What are the mats put there for, I should like to know?'

'Oh, what do you think of her, mother? Did you like her? Don't you think she meant to be kind? Do you think we must go?'

'Certainly you must go,' said Mrs. Penton. 'What do I think of her? This is not the first time I have seen Alicia Penton, that you should ask me such a question. Yes, yes, you must go. You ought to know that house better than any house in the country, and it is only right that you should first go into society there.'

'Do you think Cousin Alicia will ask us to parties? Do you think she really meant—really, without thinking of anything else—to be kind to Ally and me?'

'Anne, I am sorry that you should take such notions. What object could she have but kindness,' said Mrs. Penton, with mild conviction, 'for coming here? It is all very well to talk of business with your father. Yes, no doubt she has business with your father, or she would not have said so; but I am very sure she must have suffered from the estrangement. I always thought she must suffer. Men do not think of

these things, but women do. I feel sure that she has talked her father over at last, and that we are all to be friends again. Sir Walter is an old man; he must want to make up differences. What a dreadful thing it would be to die without making it up!'

'Was there any real quarrel?' said Wat, coming forward with his hands in his pockets. 'She may be kind enough, mother, that fine lady of yours, but she does not like me.'

'How can she know whether she likes you or not? She doesn't know you, Wat.'

'She hates me all the same. I have never done anything to her that I know of. I suppose I did wrong to be born.'

'If it were not you it would be some one else,' said Mrs. Penton; 'but, children! oh, don't talk in this hard way. Think how her brothers died, and that she has no children. And the house she loves to go away from her, and nothing to be hers! I do not think I could bear it if it was me. Make haste, Anne, oh, make haste and get Martha to wipe up the hall. And, Horry, you may as well have the thin bread-and-butter. If

I had only known that Mrs. Russell Penton never took tea—'

About this failure Mrs. Penton was really concerned; it was not only a waste of the tea and of that nice bread-and-butter (which Horry enjoyed exceedingly), but it was a sort of a sham, enacted solely for the benefit of the visitor, which was objectionable in other points of view besides that of extravagance. It gave her a sense of humiliation as if she had been masquerading in order to deceive a stranger who was too quick of wit to be deceived. But Mrs. Penton neither judged her namesake, nor was suspicious of her, nor was she even very curious as the children were, as to the subject of the interview which was going on in the book-room. She feared nothing from it, nor did she expect anything. She was not ready to imagine that anything could happen. Sir Walter might die, of course, and that would make a change; but she had Mrs. Russell Penton's word for it that Sir Walter was better than usual; and in the depth of her experience of that routine of com-

mon life which kept on getting a little worse, but had never been broken by any surprising incidents, she had little faith in things happening. She felt even that she would not be surprised for her part if Sir Walter should never die. He was eighty-five, and he might live to be a hundred. Though they had not met for years, she saw nothing extraordinary in the fact that Alicia Penton had come to talk over some business matters with her cousin. It was partly indolence of mind, and partly because she had so much that was real to occupy her, that she had no time for imaginary cases. And so, while the girls hung about the doors in excitement, unable to settle to anything, curious to see their great relation pass out again, and to watch her getting into her carriage, and pick up any information that might be attainable about the object of her mission, Mrs. Penton, with a word of rebuke to their curiosity, took Horry upstairs to the nursery and thence retired to her own room to make her modest little toilette for the evening. There was no dinner to

dress for, but the mother of the household thought it was a good thing as a rule and example that she should put on a different gown for tea.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PROPOSAL.

ALICIA was a little subdued when she found herself in the old library, the room she had known so well in other circumstances. The air of decay, the unused books which she had borrowed and read and talked over, Edward being a little more disposed that way than her brothers, and ready to give her advice about her reading, and receive with reverence her comments which the others took no interest in, impressed her in spite of herself. Her eyes turned to the corner in which there had been a collection of the poets more accessible and readable than any that existed at Penton, where

the books were all of a ponderous kind. They were still there, the same little volumes, which it had been so easy to carry about, which had been brought from the Hook in Edward's pocket, which she had taken with her in the boat and read in the shady corner under the trees among the water-lilies. She could see they were still there, the binding a little tarnished, the line broken, as if several volumes were lost or absent. Who read them now? She gave but one glance and saw everything, then turned her back upon that corner. There was a table in the window which had not been there formerly, a table covered with books and papers such as she was sure Edward Penton did not amuse himself with. It would be the boy whose name had not been mentioned, whom she had taken no notice of, yet of whom, with a jealous, angry consciousness, she had felt the presence through all.

'You have made few changes,' she said, involuntarily, as she turned the chair he had placed for her half round, so as not to see the shelf with its range of little volumes. The

book-room was perhaps the most comfortable in the house, but for that faint mustiness. The walls were well lined with books. It had been a good collection twenty years ago, and, though there had been few additions made, it was still a good collection, and the fading of the gilding and a little raggedness of binding here and there did not injure the appearance of the well-covered walls.

Mr. Penton lighted the two candles on the writing-table, which seemed to add two little inquisitive eldritch spectators, blinking their little flames at the human actors in this drama, and watching all they did and said.

'No, there are no changes to speak of, I have had other things to think of than making changes,' he said, with a little abruptness, perhaps thinking that she was making a contrast between the unalterable circumstances of his poverty and all that had been done in the great house. But she had no such meaning, nor did she understand the tone of almost reproach in which he spoke.

'You must have a great deal to do, with your

family; but there are cares which many people count as happiness.'

'I am making no complaint,' he said.

And then there was a pause. There had been struck a wrong note which rang jarring into the air, and made it more difficult to begin again.

'You must have been surprised,' she said, 'to find me here to-day.'

'I don't know that I was surprised; perhaps it was more surprising, if I may speak my mind, Alicia, that so long a time has passed without seeing you here. I never harmed you, that I know.'

'No,' she said, 'you never harmed us; it has been a miserable mistake altogether. For years past I have felt it to be so; but we are the slaves of our own mistakes. I never seemed to have the courage to take the first step to make it right.'

She had neither meant to say this, nor in cold blood would she have allowed it to be true; but she was carried away by the subtle influence of the familiar place, by the sight of

the books she used to borrow, and many an indefinable recollection and influence besides.

He gave a little short laugh.

'That is the second time to-night,' he said, 'that I have heard the same thing said.'

If she had but known who the other was who had said it, the old man breaking stones, who had been so glad of his twopence! Mr. Penton could not restrain the brief comment of that laugh.

'It does not matter who says it,' said Alicia, 'it is true. A thing is done in passion, in misery, and then it is hard to descend from our pride, or to acknowledge ourselves wrong. And you will think, perhaps,' she added, quickly, with rising colour, 'that it is a selfish motive which brings me here to-day.'

Edward Penton shook his head.

'A selfish motive would mean that I could be of use to you: and I don't think that is very probable,' he said.

Mrs. Russell Penton coloured still more.

'Edward,' she said, faltering a little, 'it is curious, when there is an object on which one

has set one's heart, how one is led on to do things that only in the doing appear in their true colours. I have let you think I came to renew old friendship—to see your children, your girls.'

She grew more and more agitated as she went on, and there came out in her a hundred tones and looks of the old Alicia, who had seemed to him to have no connection with this mature, dignified, self-important woman—looks and tones which moved him as the old books in the corner, and all the associations of the place, had moved her.

'It does not matter why you have come; I am glad you have come, anyhow; and if I can do anything—' he made a pause and laughed again, this time at himself. 'It doesn't seem very likely, looking at you and at me; but you know I was always your faithful servant,' he said.

'There is only one thing I have to say for myself, Edward—I would not allow the proposal to be made by anyone but me.'

'What is it?' he asked. There was a pro-

posal then, and it was something to benefit her! Edward Penton's bosom swelled with perhaps the first pleasurable sense of his own position which he had felt for years. Penton had always been an excitement to him, but there had been little pleasure in it. For a moment, however, now, he felt himself the old, the young Edward Penton, who had been the faithful servant of Alicia. He could not imagine anything which he could have it in his power to do for her, but still less could he imagine anything which he would refuse.

She went on with a hesitation which was very far from being natural to her.

'You know,' she said, 'that when my father dies, which is an event that cannot be far distant, I shall have to give up—the only home I have ever known.'

His attention was fully aroused now. He looked at her, across the gleam of the inquisitive candles, with a startled look. Was she going to ask him to give up his inheritance? He was too much surprised to speak.

'You will think this an extraordinary begin-

ning: but it is true. I have never lived anywhere else. My marriage, you know, fortunately, has made no difference. Of course I am my father's heir in everything but what is entailed. It has occurred to us—we have thought that perhaps——'

'What have you thought, Alicia?' he cried, with a sudden sharp remonstrance in his tone: 'that I was just, as in former times, ready for anything that you——What have you thought? that I was in the same position as of old—that there was no one to consult, no one to consider—except my devotion to you?'

'You mistake me altogether,' she crie 'Your devotion to me—which no doubt is ended long ago—was never taken into consideration at all. We thought of an entirely different motive when we talked it over, my father and I. You will remember that I am only asking a question, Edward. I wanted to ask only if a proposal might be made to you, that was all.'

'And what was the motive which you supposed likely to move me?' he said.

He had risen up from his seat, and came and

stood by the mantelpiece, leaning on it, and looking down upon her. There was a great commotion in his mind—a commotion of the old and of the new. He had grown soft and tender a few minutes before, feeling himself ready to do anything for her which a lady could ask of a man. But now, when it appeared to him that she had gone far beyond that sphere, and was about to ask from him the sacrifice of everything—his property, his inheritance, the fortune of his children—a sudden hot fountain of indignation seemed to have risen within the man. He felt as the knight did in the poem when his lady lightly threw her glove among the lions—an impulse to give her what she asked, to fling it in her face, doing her behest in contempt of the unwomanly impulse which had tempted her to strain her power so far. This was how he felt. No reasonable sentiment of self-defence, but a burning temptation to take his heirship, his hopes, all that made the future tolerable, and fling them with an insult in her face.

'Edward,' she said, 'I came to you in confidence that you would hear me—that you would

let me speak plainly without offence: I mean none,' she said, with agitation. 'But we have both come to a reasonable age, and surely we may talk to each other without wounding each other—about circumstances which everybody can see.'

'Speak freely, Alicia. I only want to know what you wish, and what there is in me to justify the proposal, whatever it may be, that you have come to make.'

'I have begun wrong,' she said, with a gesture of disappointment. 'It is difficult to find the right words. Will you be angry if I say it is no secret that you—that we—for heaven's sake don't think I mean to hurt you—plainly, that I, with all my father can leave, will be in a better position for keeping up Penton than you who are the heir-at-law.'

He stood for some time with his arm on the mantelpiece making no answer, looking down at the faint redness of a fire which had almost burnt out.

'So that's all,' he said at last, with the tremulous note of a sudden laugh; and drawing a

chair close up to it, began to gather together the scraps of half-consumed wood into a blaze. All that he produced was a very feeble momentary glimmer, which leaped up and then died out. He threw down the poker with another short laugh. 'Significant,' he said, 'symbolical! so that is all, Alicia? You are sure you want no more?'

'You have not heard me out; you don't understand. Edward, I know the first effect must be painful, but every word you will listen to will lessen that impression. I am, if you will remember, a little older than you are.'

'We were born, I think, in the same year.'

'That makes a woman much older. I told you so when it meant more. And I am a woman, more feeble of constitution than you are—not likely to live so long.'

'On the contrary, if you will allow me to interrupt you; women, I believe, as a rule, are longer-lived than men.'

She drew back with a pained and irritated look.

'You make me feel like a lawyer supporting

a weak case. It was not in this way that I wanted to talk it over with you, Edward.'

'To talk over the sacrifice of everything I have ever looked to—my birthright, and the prospects of my children. This is rather a large affair to be talked over between you and me after five-o'clock tea, Alicia, over a dying fire.'

'Then,' she said, 'it would have been better I had not meddled at all, as my father always said. He thought it should have been made a business proposal only, through a solicitor. But I—I, like a foolish woman—remembering that we had once been dear friends, and feeling that I had been guilty of neglect, and perhaps unkindness—I would not have anything said till I had come myself, till I had made my little overture of reconciliation, till I——'

'If there is to be frankness on one side there should be frankness on both. Till you had put forth the old influence, which once would have made me do anything—give up anything—to please you.'

'You said,' she cried, provoked and humiliated, 'not five minutes since, though I did not wish

it—never thought of it—that you were my faithful servant still!'

'Yes,' he said; 'and do you know what I should like to do now? You have come to ask me for my inheritance as you might ask for a flower out of my garden—if there were any! I should like to fling you your Penton into your apron—into your face—and see you carry it off, and point at you, like—you were always fond of poetry, and you will remember—the fellow that jumped among the lions for a glove: only a glove—only his life, don't you know!'

It was not often that Edward Penton gave way to passion, but it was brutal this that he said: but for a moment he had lost all control of himself.

She rose up hurriedly from her chair.

'That was no true man!' she cried. 'Supposing that the woman was a fool too, she used him only according to his folly, to show how false he was.' She paused again, breathless, her heart beating with excitement and indignation.

'I am not asking you for your inheritance; I

came to ask you—whether an arrangement might be proposed to you which should be for your advantage as well as mine. Let us speak frankly, as you say. I am not a girl, to be driven away by an insult, which comes badly—oh, very badly! —from you, Edward. If I have wounded you, you have stung me bitterly; so let us be quits.' She looked at him with a smile of pain. 'You have hit hardest, after all; you ought to be pleased with that!'

'I beg your pardon, Alicia,' he said.

'Oh, it is not necessary. It was business, and not sentiment, that brought me here. And this is the brutal truth, Edward—like what you have just said to me. You are poor and I am well off. Penton would be a millstone round your neck; you could not keep it up. Whereas to me it is my home—almost the thing I love best. Will you come to terms with us to set aside the entail and let me have my home? The terms shall be almost what you like. It can be done directly. It will be like realising a fortune which may not be yours for years. I ask no gift. Do you think I am not as proud as

you are? I would not ask you for a flower out of your garden, as you say, much less your property—your inheritance! Ah, your inheritance! which twenty years ago, when we used to be here together, was no more likely to be yours—! If we begin to talk of these things where shall we end, I wonder?' she added, with another pale and angry smile. 'You understand now what I mean? And I have nothing more to say.'

'Wait a moment,' he said; 'I am not sure that I do understand you now. It is not what I thought, apparently, and I beg your pardon. I thought it was something that would be betweeu you and me. But if I hear right it is a business transaction you propose—something to be done for an equivalent—a bargain—a sale and barter—a——'

'Yes, that is what I mean; perhaps my father was right, and the solicitors were the people to manage it, not you and me—'

'To manage it—or not to manage it, as may turn out. Yes, I think that would be the better way. These sort of people can say what they like to each other and it never hurts, whereas

you and I— Are you really going? I hope you are very well wrapped up, for the night is cold. But for this little squabble, which is a pity, which never ought to have been——'

'I cannot think, Edward, that it was my fault.'

'They say that ladies always think that,' he said, with a smile, 'otherwise this first visit after —how long is it?—went off fairly well, don't you think? At forty-five, with a wife and children, a man is no longer ready to throw anything away; but otherwise when it comes to business——'

'I was very foolish not to let it be done in the formal way,' she said with an uneasy blush and intolerable sense of the sarcasm in his tone. But she would not allow herself to remain under this disadvantage. 'Shall I tell my father that you will receive his proposal and give it your consideration?'

'My consideration? Surely; my best consideration,' he replied, with still the same look of sarcastic coolness, 'which anything Sir Walter Penton suggests would naturally com-

mand from his—successor. I cannot use a milder word than that. My position,' he added, with gravity, 'is not one which I sought or had any hand in bringing about: therefore I can have no responsibility for the changes that have happened in the last twenty years.'

'It is I who must beg your pardon now. You are quite right, of course, and there was no fault of yours. Good-night and good-bye. I hope you will at least think of me charitably if we should not meet again.'

'We shall certainly, I hope, meet again,' he said, opening the door for her. 'The girls will not forget your invitation to them. They have never seen Penton, and they take an interest, which you will not wonder at——'

'Oh, I don't wonder—at that or anything,' she added, in a lower tone; and, as ill-luck would have it, Wat, standing full in the light of the lamp which lit the hall, tall in his youthful awkwardness, half antagonistic, half anxious to recommend himself, stood straight before her, so that she could not, without rudeness, refuse his attendance to the door where the carriage

lamps were shining and the bays pawing impatiently. She gave his father a look of mingled misery and deprecation as she went out of sight. He alone understood why it was she could not bear the sight of his boy. But though her eyes expressed this anguish, her mouth held another meaning.

'You will hear from Mr. Rochford in a day or two,' she said, as she drove away.

He sent her back a smile of half sarcastic acquiescence still; but then Edward Penton went back to his library and shut himself in, and disregarded all the appeals that were made to him during the next hour, to come to tea. First the bell: then Ally tapping softly, 'Tea is ready.' Then Anne's quicker summons, 'Mother wants to know if we are to wait for you?' Then the little applicant, whom he was least able to resist, little Mary, drumming very low down upon the lower panels of the door, with a little song of 'Fader! fader!'

To all this Mr. Penton turned a dull ear. He had been angry—he had been cut to the quick: that his poverty should be thus thrown back

upon him—that he should be expected to make merchandise of his inheritance, to give up for money the house of his fathers, the only fit residence for the head of the family! All this gave a sharp and keen pang, and roused every instinct of pride and self-assertion. But when the thrill of solitude and reason fell on all that band of suddenly unchained demons, and he thought of the privations round him—the shabbiness of the house; the damp; the poor wife, who could not now at all hold up her head among the county people; the girls, who were little nobodies and saw nothing; Wat, whose young life was spoiled: and Osy—Osy! about whom some determination must be come to. To see a way out of all that and not to accept it; for pride's sake to shut up, not only himself, that was a small matter, but the children, to poverty! The fire went out; the inquisitive candles blinked and spied ineffectually, making nothing of the man who sat there wrapped up within himself, his face buried in his hands. He was chilled almost to ice when his wife stole in and drew him away to the fire in the drawing-

room, from which the young ones withdrew to make place for him, with looks full of wonder and awe. And then it was, when he had warmed himself and the ice had melted, then he drew the family council together, and laid before them, old and young, the proposal which Alicia Penton had come to make.

CHAPTER IX.

FAMILY COUNSELS.

MR. PENTON drew his chair towards the fire, which was not a usual thing for him to do. When he felt chilly he went to the book-room, where in the evening there was always a log burning. In the drawing-room it was the rule that nobody should approach the fire too closely; Mr. Penton said it was not good for the children, it gave them bad habits, and it scorched their cheeks and injured their eyes. The moral of which probably was that, as there were so many of them, they could not all get near it, and therefore all had to hold back.

But this evening everything was out of rule.

The little ones had been sent to bed. The basket of stockings was pushed aside on the table. Mrs. Penton indeed, unable to bear that breach of use and wont, had taken a stocking out of it furtively and pulled it up on her arm. It was a grey stocking, with immense healthy holes the size of half-a-crown. She could not get at her needle and worsted without disturbing the family parliament, but at least she could measure the holes and decide how best to approach them, and from what side. Walter had placed himself on the other side of the fire, opposite his father, feeling instinctively that his interests must be specially in question; the girls filled up the intervals between their mother and Wat on the one side, their father on the other. The fire had been stirred into a blaze and danced cheerfully upon all the young faces. The lamp with its smell of paraffin was put aside too, as if it were being punished and put in the corner, for which vindictive step, considering how it smelt and smoked, there was good cause.

'You will understand,' said Mr. Penton, 'that

the visit we have just received must have had some special motive.'

'I don't see why you should be so sure of that, Edward,' said Mrs. Penton, 'unless she said something. It might be just civility. Why not?'

'It was not just civility; I knew that from the first.'

'My dear, perhaps you know your own family best: but if it had been one of mine I should have thought it quite natural: to see the children, and hear how we are getting on.'

To this Mr. Penton made no reply; the idea of some one coming to see how he and his family were 'getting on' did not gratify him as perhaps it ought to have done.

'I think,' said Ally, softly, 'that Aunt Alicia came out of kindness, papa.'

'To herself, I suppose,' he said, quickly; then added, 'From her point of view it might appear kindness to us too.'

There was again a pause, and they all waited with growing curiosity to know what it was.

Mr. Penton sat in silence, balancing himself in his chair, knitting his brows as he gazed into the fire. Mrs. Penton pulled the stocking farther up upon her arm and made a searching study of the holes.

'You all know,' he said at length, 'that Penton has been a long time in our family, and that I am the heir of entail.'

At this Walter moved a little, almost impatiently, in his chair, with a quick start, which he restrained at once, as if he would have interfered. And he did feel disposed to interfere —to say that it was he who was the heir of entail. His father's priority of course was understood, but it seemed hardly worth while to insist upon it. Nevertheless, after the first impulse Walter restrained himself.

'I,' said his father, rather sharply, with a certain comprehension and resentment of the impulse, of which, however, he was not minded to take any notice, 'am the heir of entail. It is tied down upon me, and can't, in the nature of things, go to anyone else.'

'Unless the law were to be changed,' interrupted Anne, remembering too well the discussion of the morning.

He waved his hand with an expression of impatience.

'We need not take any such hazard into consideration; it is most improbable, and quite out of the question. As things are, I am the heir of entail. That has been, I don't doubt, a thorn in Sir Walter's flesh. He can't alienate an acre, nor, at his time of life, in honour, cut down a tree.'

'I have always said it was hard upon him,' Mrs. Penton observed, in an undertone.

They all gave her a look—the look of partisans, to whom any objection is an offence—all except Anne, who kept up an attitude of impartiality throughout the whole.

'I don't know why he has put off so long if he had the mind to make such an offer. If it had been further off, perhaps I might have been more tempted; but as it is—Alicia wants me to join with her father and break the entail.'

The female part of the committee did not im-

mediately see the weight of this statement. It took some time to make them understand: but Walter saw it in a moment, and sprang to his feet in quick resentment.

'Father, of course you will not listen to it for a moment!' he cried.

'To break the entail?' said the mother; 'but I thought nothing could do that, Edward.'

'Except,' said Anne, 'a change in the law.'

'There is no question of any change in the law,' said Mr. Penton, angrily. 'How should there be a change in the law? None but demagogues or socialists would ever think of it. The law is too strong in England. As for empirics and revolutionaries—' He snapped his fingers with hot contempt. The suggestion made him angry, although he had himself dwelt upon it in the morning. Then he came back to the real matter: 'Yes, there is one way in which it can be done; that is what they want me to do. If I joined with Sir Walter in taking certain steps, the entail could be broken: and Penton would go to Alicia, which it appears is his desire.'

'Father!' Walter cried.

It was such an unspeakable blow to him, striking at the very root of his personal importance, his dreams, his propects, everything that was his, that the young man was, what did not always happen, the first to seize upon this terrible idea. He could not keep his seat, but stood up tremulous, leaning upon the mantelpiece, looking down with an angry alarm at all their faces, lighted up by the fire. It seemed to Walter that in this slowness to understand there was something of the indifference which those who are not themselves affected so often show in the threatening of a calamity. Their unawakened surprised looks, not grappling with the question, had a half-maddening effect upon him. They did not care! it did not affect them.

'But, Edward, why should you do that—to please Sir Walter—to please—your cousin? Well, I should always like to keep on good terms with my relations, and do what I could for them; but to give up what we have been looking forward to so long—and the only thing

we have to look forward to! I am sure,' said Mrs. Penton, tears getting into her voice, 'I should be the last person to say anything against relations, or make dispeace, but when you think that it is the only provision we have for the children—the only—and when you remember that there's Walter—' She stopped, unable to go any further, bewildered, not knowing what to think.

'Father does not mean that. It is not that, whatever it may mean.'

'Of course I do not mean that. You take up all sorts of absurd ideas and then you think I have said it. Sir Walter and Alicia are my relations, it is true, but they don't set up a claim on that score, neither am I such a fool. Try to understand me reasonably, Annie. Property is different from everything else; you don't give up your rights to please anybody. Here's how it is. When the heir is willing to step in and break the entail, of course he has compensation for it. Sir Walter is a very old man, the property in all human probability will soon be in my hands, therefore my compensation would be at

a heavy rate. They are rich enough,' said Mr. Penton, in a sort of smile, 'they could afford that.'

'They would give father the money,' said Anne, in a way she had before found effectual in clearing her mother's ideas; 'and he would let them have the land.'

'Edward, is that what it means?'

'Yes, strictly speaking; if you put feelings and pride and everything to one side, and the thought of one's family, and of all we've looked forward to for years.'

'You can't put them to one side,' cried young Walter, sharply, in the keen, harsh, staccato tones of bitterness and fear. 'You can't! No money would make up for them, nothing could be put in their place. Father, you feel that as well as I?'

'*I* feel that as well as you! To whom are you speaking? What are you in the matter?—a boy that may never—that might never—whereas I've thought of it all my life; it has been hanging within reach of my hand, so to speak, for years. I've built everything on it. And a bit of a boy

asks me if I feel that—like him! Like him! What is he that he should set himself as a model to me?'

'Oh, father!' cried Ally, with her hand upon his arm.

'Of course,' said Mrs. Penton, in her quiet voice, quenching this little eddy of passion far more effectually than if she had taken notice of it, 'that makes a great difference. They would give you the money, and you would let them keep the land? There is justice in that, Edward. I do not say it is a thing to be snapped at at once, although we do want money so much. But still it is quite just, a thing to be calmly considered. I wish you would tell us now exactly what your cousin wants, and what she would give instead of it. It is like selling a property. I am sure I for one should not mind selling *this* property if we could get a good price for it; and, as we have no associations with Penton and have never lived there, nor——'

'Mother!' Could the old house have been moved by hot human breath as by a wind of

indignation, it would have shook from parapet to basement; but Mrs. Penton, on her deep foundation of sense and reason, was not shaken at all. She took no notice of the outcry.

'No, we can have no associations with it,' she said, calmly. 'I have dined there three or four times in my life, and the children have never been there at all. It would not matter much to us if it were to be swallowed up in an earthquake, so long as its value remained.'

The girls did not take their mother's prosaic view. Each on her side, they consoled and smoothed down the gentlemen—the young heir hot with the destruction of hopes that were entirely visionary, that had never had any reality in them—and the immediate heir, to whom this one thing was the sole touch of romance or of expectation in life.

'Tell us about it, father,' and 'Oh, Wat, be quiet; nothing's done yet!' was what they said.

'Your mother takes it all very easy. She was not born a Penton,' said the father. 'Yes,

I'll tell you all about it, though she's settled it already without any trouble, you see. It is not so simple to me. Women can be more brutal than anyone when they take it in that way. Alicia was disposed to see it in the same light. She said she had been born there, and never had lived anywhere else, so that her feeling to it must be quite different from mine. Different from mine! to whom it has been an enchantment all my life.'

'What your cousin said was quite natural, Edward. I should have said the same thing myself.'

'You have just done so, my dear,' he said, with a sarcasm which went quite wide of its mark. 'Yes, I'll tell you all about it, children. Alicia and her father, it appears, have been thinking it over. They think—they know, to be sure, for who can have any doubt on the subject?—that I am poor. I am a poor man, with a number of children. A man in my position cannot do what he likes, but what he must. I need money to bring you all up, to set you out in the world. Eight of you, you

know; that's enough to crush any man,' he said.

The girls looked at each other with a look which was half-indignant, yet half-guilty. They felt that somehow they were to blame for being there, for crushing their father. Walter had no such sensation, but yet he recognised the truth of the complaint. He was the eldest, a legitimate, even a necessary party to this question, since but for his existence, in his own opinion, his father's heirship would have been unimportant. But the others were, he allowed to himself, so much ballast on the other side, complicating the question, making a difficulty where there should be none.

'I should have thought,' he said, indignantly, 'that Sir Walter would have seen how mean it was to take advantage—what a poor sort of thing it was to trade upon a man's disabilities—upon his burdens—upon what he cannot throw off, nor get rid of.'

Mrs. Penton's mind had been travelling meanwhile upon its own tranquil yet anxious way.

'Was there any offer made you, Edward? Did she say how much they thought?—wouldn't that be one of the first things to think of? We might be troubling ourselves all for nothing, if they were intending to take advantage, as Walter says. But, then, how should Walter know? They would never take him into their confidence. Was any sum mentioned? for that would show whether they meant to take advantage. I never heard they were that sort of people. Your cousin Alicia has the name of being proud, but as for taking advantage——'

'Can't you see,' he cried, with irritation, 'that you are driving me distracted, going over and over one set of words. Walter's a fool. Do you suppose the Pentons are cheats? To make such an offer at all was taking an— If we had been as well off as they are they never would have ventured. That's all about it. I never supposed they would try to outwit me in a bargain.' After this little blaze of energy he sank into his more usual depression. 'If it hadn't been for you and the children of course I shouldn't have listened, not for a moment.'

'Why should you do it for us, father? We don't cost so much. We could go away and be governesses rather than be such a burden!'

Mrs. Penton put down the hand upon which she had drawn the stocking to give Anne a warning touch, while her father took no notice except with a passing glance.

'A man can do himself no justice when he's weighted down on every side. It has always been my luck. I wonder, for my part, now that they have had the assurance to propose it at all, why they didn't propose it years and years ago.'

'What a thing it would have been!' said Mrs. Penton; 'many an anxiety it would have saved us, Edward. Why, it would make you a rich man! We have always looked forward so to Penton, and nobody ever supposed Sir Walter would live till eighty-five; but I have never thought of it as such a paradise. For, in the first place, it would want a great deal of money to keep it up.'

'Yes, it would take money to keep it up.'

'Everybody says it is kept up beautifully. You never could reconcile yourself to neglecting anything, and hearing people say how different it was in Sir Walter's time. Then the house is such a grand house, and it would come to us empty or nearly empty. Oh, I've thought it all over so often. Gentlemen don't go into these matters as a woman does. Of course, your cousin Alicia would take away all the beautiful furniture that suits the house. Her father would leave it to her; for *that's* not entailed, you know. We should go into it empty, or with only a few old sticks; what should we do with the things we've got, in Penton?' She looked round with an affectionate contempt at the well-worn chairs, the table in the middle, the old dingy curtains with no colour left in them. 'The first thing we should have to do would be to furnish from top to bottom, and where should we find the money to do that?'

Mr. Penton did not say anything. He made a little impatient wave of his hand, but he did not contradict or even attempt to stop her soft, slow, gentle voice as she went on.

'And then the gardeners! they are a kind of army in themselves. To pay them all their wages every week, the men that are in the houses, and the men that are outside, and the people at the lodges, and the carpenters, and the men that roll the lawns; where should we find the money? If we could have the rents and go on living *here*, of course I don't say anything against it, we should be rich. But to live at Penton we should just be as poor as we are now—as poor but much grander—obliged to give parties and keep horses—and dress. If I ever had ventured to tell you my opinion, Edward, I should have told you, instead of looking forward to Penton it has been my terror night and day. I always thought,' she continued, after a pause, 'that I should try to persuade you to let it, until, at least, we had a little money to the good.'

'To let Penton!' The cry burst from them all in every variation of tone, indignant, angry, astonished. To let—Penton! Penton, which had been the golden dream of fancy, the paradise of hope, the one thing which consoled every-

body, from Mr. Penton down to Horry, for all that went amiss in life.

'Well?' said the mother, lifting her mild eyes, looking at them for a moment. 'I have always thought so, but I would not say it, for what was the use? You all worship Penton, both you and the children. But I never was taken in by it. I have always seen that, however pleasant it might be, and beautiful and all that—and everybody's prejudices in its favour—we never could keep it up.'

She turned round, having delivered her soul, and drew her basket towards her, in which were her needles and the worsted for her darning. She had settled exactly how these big holes were to be attacked, how the threads of the stocking went, and that it must be done in an oblique line to keep the shape. Without a little consideration beforehand neither stockings can be mended nor anything else done. She had said her say, and no doubt, however it was settled, she would do her best, as well for Penton as for the stocking. And the others watched her without knowing they were watching her.

She settled to her work with a little sigh of relief, glad to escape into a region where there could be no two opinions, where everything was straightforward. There was something in this which had a great effect upon the young ones, especially upon Walter, who was the most resistant, the most deeply and cruelly disappointed. There came upon him a great, a horrible consciousness that in all likelihood she was right.

Mr. Penton, as was natural, was not so much impressed.

'All that,' he said, with a little wave of his hand, 'is a truism.' He paused, then repeated it again with a sense that he had got hold of a new and impressive word. 'It is a truism,' he said. 'Everybody was aware from the beginning that to keep up Penton as it has been kept up would be impossible. My uncle and Alicia have made a toy of Penton. It would be really better, it would look more like the old house it is, if it were not cleaned up like that, shaven and shorn like a cockney villa. If I were a millionaire I should not choose to do it.

So I don't think very much of that argument.' Walter's spirits rose as he followed eagerly his father's utterance. But after a moment Mr. Penton continued, 'There is no doubt, on the other side, that living would cost a great deal more than—more than perhaps we—have ever contemplated. There would be the furnishing, as your mother says—I had not thought of that.'

He made the children a sort of jury, before whom the pro and the con were to be set forth.

'It is beautifully furnished at present—every one says so, at least; that would be a great charge to begin with. And we might have a good deal to put up with in the confusion that would be made between the poor family and the rich. Your mother is quite right so far as that is concerned; what she doesn't take into consideration is the family feeling—the traditions, the sense that it is ours, and that nobody can have any right to it except ourselves. Alicia, to be sure, is a Penton too, and, as she says, she has been born there and never has

known any other home. But still, as a matter of fact, she has entered another family. It would be an alienation. It has always gone in the male line. To give it up would be—would be——'

'Father,' said Walter, 'you couldn't think of it. It would be like tearing body and soul asunder. Give up Penton! I think I would rather die.'

'What has dying to do with it?' cried the father, impatiently. And then he sat silent for a moment, staring into the fire and twiddling his thumbs, unconscious of what he was doing. The young ones watched him anxiously, feeling with a certain awe that their fate was being decided, but that this question was too immense for their interference. At length he got up slowly and pushed back his chair. 'We'll sleep upon it,' he said.

CHAPTER X.

AN ADVENTURE.

BUT Walter, for his part, could not sleep upon it. He followed his father out of the room, he scarcely knew with what intention; perhaps with a hope of further discussion, of being able to open his own mind, of convincing the wavering mind of Mr. Penton. It seemed to him that he could set it all forth so clearly if only the permission were given him. But Mr. Penton gave his son no invitation to accompany him. He asked where Walter was going, what he meant to do moving about at that hour of the night.

'I think I will take—a little turn, sir,' the young man said.

'You are always taking turns!' said Mr. Penton, with irritation. 'Why can't you do something? Why can't you be going on with your Greek?'

There had been nothing said about Greek for some time. What could he mean by alluding to it now? Walter's foreboding mind at once attached significance to this. He thought that his father meant to suggest a return to his abandoned studies by way of preparing for something serious to come of them. But his dismay at the suggestion was not so ungenerous as the looker-on might have supposed. It was not that he was afraid of being made to work. What he was afraid of was that this was but another sign of the abandonment of Penton—of turning aside to other purposes and other views than those which had been in some sort the religion of his life.

It need scarcely be said that no such idea was in Penton's mind. He took up the Greek, a missile lying ready to his hand, and tossed it at Walter as he would have flung a stone at a dog which had come in his way in the present

perturbed state of his spirits. Having done this, he thought no more of it, but went into his book-room and shut the door with a little emphasis, which meant that he was not to be troubled, but which to Walter seemed to mean that he declined further argument and had made up his mind.

The boy stood for a moment groping for his hat, following his father with his eyes, and then rushed out into the night in a turmoil of feeling —indignation, misery, surprise. He had been taken so entirely at unawares. Such a thought as that of being called upon to relinquish Penton had never entered into his mind; it had never occurred to him as a possibility. He knew well enough, whatever anyone might say, that to abolish entail was not a thing to be done in a minute. Revolutions in law take time. It was not likely that a man of eighty-five would live long enough to see a change like this accomplished. He had dismissed that idea with scorn; and from what other quarter could any attack come?

Walter had felt himself invulnerable—un-

assailable in his own right. No son could be more dutiful, more affectionate, less likely to calculate upon his father's death; yet, oddly enough, his father had appeared to him only as a secondary person in this matter—a man with a temporary interest; it was he who was the heir. And—without any fault of his, in complete independence of him, without asking his opinion any more than as one of the children, any more than that of Ally or Anne—his birthright was about to be given away!

A dim evening, soft and damp, and with little light in it, had succeeded the brilliant watery sunset. There was a moon somewhere about, but she was visible only by intervals from among the milky clouds. A sort of pale suffusion of light was in the atmosphere, in which all the chief features of the landscape were visible, but more clearly the house, with all its matted-work of creepers, the lights in the windows, the bare branches rising overhead, with a little sighing wind in them, a wind that moaned and murmured of rain. More rain!—rain that would fill up higher the link of darkly-

shining water which all but surrounded Penton Hook. The sky was full of it, the atmosphere was full of it; the branches glistened with damp; the very gravel, where you had made an indentation with your heel, filled up with the oozing water, of which the soil was full: and the wind kept sighing with its little lugubrious tone among the branches saying,

'More rain! more rain!'

There was a certain moral chill in the air by reason of this, but it was not cold; it was what is called 'muggy' on Thames-side.

Walter was so well used to it that he made no remark to himself on the damp, nor did he feel the chill. He went crunching along the gravel in his boots, which made a great many indentations, and left a general running of little stray water-gleams behind him, to a certain bench which he had himself made under the tall poplar close to the river-bank. It had not been put there because there was shade to be had in the season when shade is wanted, and when it is pleasant to sit out and see the river at one's feet. It was put there for quite a dif-

ferent reason, because when you knew exactly where to look, there was one small corner, the angle of a chimney at Penton, visible among the trees. And there he seated himself to think.

The mother had been right when she said that they had worshipped Penton. The children had all been brought up in that devotion. It was a sort of earthly paradise, in which they took refuge from all the immediate humiliations and vexations of their lot. To be poor, yet to belong to the class which is rich, is not a comfortable position. Those who in his own estimation were Walter's equals were in every external circumstance more separated from him than were the young farmers about; and yet the farmers would have been put out by his presence among them, and he would have found himself entirely out of his element. He was thus a young solitary belonging to nobody, at home with none of his compeers, without companions or friends of his age. The farmers, had he taken to them or they to him, were better off than he ; they had horses to ride, they followed

the hunt, they kept dogs that ran in coursing-matches. Wat had nothing except, if he pleased, a share now and then of the solid sturdy little pony-of-all-work, and Elfie, the shaggy little terrier.

What youth of twenty could live in the country and see Fred Milton, who had been in his division at Eton, and little Bannister, go by in pink and not feel it? He felt it, and so did Ally feel it when she read Eva Milton's name among the list of the young ladies who were presented and who had been at the court ball. Do you suppose Ally did not wish to see what a ball was like as well as the rest? The farmers' daughters had their dances too, and got beautiful white tulle dresses for them as well as their superiors in rank, But Ally got nothing; neither the one nor the other. They were shut out of everything, these poor young people, and felt it, being made but of ordinary flesh and blood.

But Penton had been amid all this the refuge of their imaginations. They had been told indeed that even when they were in Penton they would be poor. But poverty in such cir-

cumstances would be transformed. They would no longer be shut out of everything, they would come within the range of the people who were 'like themselves.' Walter seated himself at the foot of the poplar-tree, with the river running far too close to his feet,—for it was very high, sweeping round with an ominous hurry and murmur, preparing floods to come, and the bare branches overhead rustling and whispering in the wind—and directed his eyes to the high wooded bank, the belt of trees, the Penton chimney corner. He could not see it with his bodily eyes, but in his soul he saw it dominating the landscape, and saw as in a panorama everything it involved.

Sir Walter Penton of Penton was a power in the county, he was not a mere squire like Fred Milton's father, or a lordling of yesterday like Bannister's ennobled papa. Sir Walter Penton of Penton—not the old man who lived shut up in his library, who was taken out for a drive on these fine days. Young Walter meant no harm to the old man, but he was himself the Sir Walter whom he had seen in his dreams. What

was it he had looked for? Was it only the vulgar improvement, more money to spend, better dinners, horses, travels, all that a young man wants? He had wanted these things, but something more. He had wanted first of all to find himself in his place; to be somebody, not nobody; to recover the importance which was his right, to have all the evils of fortune made up to him. Is not that what the young dream everywhere, whatever their circumstances may be?—to have everything set right, to do away with all the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes. Those who spurn you may not be unworthy, and your own merit may not be patent, or even you may not be conscious that you are not meritorious at all. But still we dream, even without such a tangible occasion for dreaming as Walter, of everything being set right.

And now in a moment this hope was all to be cut away. Penton was to be made nothing —nothing to him, no more than any house about, no more than Bannister's fictitious abbey with its new Strawberry Hill cloister which was

founded upon nothing but wealth, whereas there had been Pentons of Penton since the thirteenth century, and most likely long before. And he was the representative of them all! In his veins was concentrated the essence of theirs, and yet he was to be cut off; he was to stand stupid and look on, without even a right to say no, though it was his inheritance. Walter felt the very possibility of thought taken from him in this dreadful catastrophe. He had nothing to do with it! that was what everybody would say. He was not one-and-twenty, but even if he had reached that age he had nothing to do with it, though it meant his very life.

The tumult of these thoughts overwhelmed the poor young fellow. They carried him away as the river carries everything away when it is in flood, and turned him over and over and dashed him against stones and muddy projections, and poured waves of bitterness over his head. He sat and bit his nails, and gnawed his under lip, and thought and thought, if there was any way to get out of it, if he could say anything, make any protest to his father, declare his own readi-

ness to go anywhere, do anything, rather than suffer this sacrifice. He might go to Australia —in Australia people make fortunes quickly. He might soon be able to make money, to send home something for the children ; or to India, or to the goldfields somewhere where nuggets were still to be had. These thoughts can scarcely be called disinterested, for it was how to save what was more to him than nuggets or fortune that Walter was thinking of: but at all events it was not for himself in the first place that he meant to labour. It was for an ambition altogether visionary after all—for Penton, which meant to him the something better, the something loftier, the ideal of life. As he sat musing, the clouds cleared away a little; there began to be a clear place in the sky: it grew lighter but he did not remark it—until all at once, without a word of warning, the moon suddenly struck out, and made an outburst of radiant reflection upon the river at his feet which called his attention in spite of himself. He looked up instinctively, by the instinct of long habit, and lo! everything was clear over

Penton; the moon shining full, the clouds all floating away in masses of fleecy whiteness, and a weather-cock somewhere blazing out, as if it were made of gold and silver, to the right.

This sudden revelation was too much for the boy. He gave a cry of insupportable indignation, a loud protest and utterance of despair, and then hid his face, as if the white light had blinded him, in his hands.

'Stay, Martha, look! there's some one on the bank. If it's one of the family what shall I do? or if it's a tramp? Look! either he's gone to sleep and he'll catch his death of cold, or else he's blinded with the moonlight, as people say.'

It was a pretty voice that spoke, with a little catch in it as of mingled fright and audacity: and then followed a slight stir on the gravel as though the speaker had started back at sight of the unlooked-for figure under the tree.

'Oh, Martha! what shall I do? I've no business to be here at this time of the night.'

'You're doing no harm,' said Martha. 'The missis will think I was showing a friend round

the grounds to look at the moon, and she'll never say a word. It's Master Walter. Hush! Don't you take no notice, and he'll take none. He's often here of nights.'

'But he's gone to sleep, and he'll catch his death of cold,' the stranger said. 'Oh, Martha, you that you know him, go and wake him up!'

'Husht, then, come along. It's not cold, only a bit damp, and we're used to that in this house. Come along,' Martha said.

Walter heard with an acuteness of hearing which perhaps, had it been only Martha, would not have been his; but the other voice was not like Martha's—he thought it sounded like a lady's voice. And he was pleased by the solicitude about himself. And he was very young, and in great need of some new interest that might call him out of himself. He rose up suddenly, and took a long step after the two startled figures, which flew before him as soon as he was seen to move.

'Hi, Martha! where are you off to? Come back, I tell you. Do you think I'll do you any harm, that you run from me?'

'Oh no, sir, please, sir; it's only me and a friend taking a turn by the river afore she goes up to the village. It's a friend, please, sir, as is staying with us at 'ome.'

'There's no harm done,' said Walter. 'You need not run because of me. I'm going in.'

The two young women had come to a pause in a spot where the moon was shining clearly, showing in a little opening, amid all the tracery of interlacing boughs, of which she was making a shadow pattern everywhere, the square figure of Martha, standing firm, with another lighter, shrinking shadow, slim and youthful, beside her. There was something romantic to Walter's imagination in this unknown, who had shown so much interest in himself.

'Going to the village at this hour!' he added. 'I hope she is not going by herself.'

'Oh, it's of no consequence, sir,' said Martha, pulling rather imperatively her companion by the gown.

'Is it a bad road, or are there tramps, or—anything? Oh, Martha!' the other said, in a voice which sounded very clear, though subdued.

'Oh, nonsense, Emmy! It's just like any other road. It's a bit dark and steep to begin with. But there's nothing to be frightened of.'

'Oh, why did I stay so late!' said the other. 'How silly of me not to think! No lamps, nor —nor shops, nor people. I never was out on a country road in the dark. Oh, why didn't I think——'

'Don't be a silly! It's as safe as safe; there's never no accidents here.'

'You had better keep your friend with you all night, Martha; my mother will not mind.'

'Oh!—but *my* mother, sir! she would go out of her senses wondering what had come to me.'

'Emmy, don't be a silly. I tell you it's as safe——'

'I have nothing particularly to do,' said Walter, good-humouredly. 'Since she is so frightened, I will walk with her as far as the turnpike. You can see the lights of the village from there.'

'Oh, Mr. Walter, I couldn't let you take that trouble. I'd rather go with her myself. I'll run and get Jarvis. I'll——'

'You need not do anything. It's turned out a lovely night,' said Walter, 'and I shall be all the better for the walk.'

It was all settled in a moment, before he himself knew what was being done, with the carelessness, the suddenness which sometimes decides an all-important event. Walter was seized just at the moment when his own evil fortune seemed overwhelming, when fate seemed to be laying hold on him, with a force which nothing could resist. He was seized by a kind impulse, a good-natured wish to be of use to somebody, to escape from himself in this most legitimate, most virtuous way, by doing something for another. He was pleased with himself for thinking of it. A sense of being good came into his mind, with a little surprise and even amusement such as only an hour ago would have seemed impossible to him. It was like what his mother or one of the girls might have done, but such impulses did not occur readily to himself. He walked round towards the gate by which Martha and her friend stood and whispered together. Martha he could see did

not like it; she was shocked to think of her young master having the trouble. The trouble! that was the thing that made it pleasant. He felt for the moment delivered from himself.

'If I am walking too fast for you, tell me,' he said, when he found himself upon the road with the small, timid figure keeping a respectful distance at his side.

'Oh, no, sir,' she said, but with a little pant of breathlessness.

'I *am* going too fast—how thoughtless of me! Is that better? And so you are not used to country roads?'

'I am only a little cockney, sir. I have never been out of London before. It's a bad time to come to the country in the winter: for one forgets how short the days are, and it's silly to be frightened. I am silly, I suppose.'

'Let us hope not about other things,' said Walter. 'The road is very dark, to be sure.'

'Yes, sir,' she said, with a little shiver, drawing closer. They were still in the hollow, and the hedges were high on either side, and the darkness was complete upon their path, though

a little way above the moon penetrated, and made the ascent as white as silver and as light almost as day.

'Should you like,' he said, with a little laugh of embarrassment, yet an impulse which gave him a curious pleasure, such as he was quite unfamiliar with, 'to hold on by me?—would you like to take my arm?'

'Oh, no, sir!'

The suggestion seemed to fill her with alarm, and she shrank away after coming so close. Walter was, on the whole, relieved that she did not take his offer, but he was pleased with himself for having made it, and immensely interested in this little modest unknown, who was unseen as well—this little mysterious being by his side in the dark.

'The wood is very pretty,' he said, 'although you can't see it, and there are no lamps.'

'You are laughing at me, sir; but if you consider that I never was out of the reach of the lamps before. Hampstead is the farthest I have been, and there are lamps there even on the heath. The darkness is one of the things

that strikes me most. It is so dark you can feel it. It's black.' She gave another little shiver, and said, after a moment, 'I do so love the light.'

Her tone, her words, the ease with which she spoke, filled Walter with surprise—a surprise which he expressed without thinking, with a frankness which perhaps he would not have displayed had his companion not been Martha's friend.

'And what,' he said, 'can you be doing in our village, and at old Crockford's? I can't understand it. You are a—you're not a——'

He began to recollect himself when he came this length. To say 'You're a lady' seemed quite simple when he began to speak; but as he went on it did not prove so easy. If she was a lady, how could he venture to make any such remark?

She gave a little soft laugh which was very pretty to hear.

'Old Crockford is—a sort of an uncle of mine,' she said.

'Your uncle!'

'Well, no—not quite my uncle, but something a little like it. When I am humble-minded, I call him so; when I am not humble-minded——'

'What happens then?'

'I say as little about it as I can; I think as little about it as I can. No,' she said, with a little vehemence, 'I'm not a lady, and yet I'm not a—Martha Crockford. I am a poor little London cockney girl. You shouldn't be walking with me, sir; you oughtn't to see me home, you, a gentleman's son. People might talk. As soon as we get into the moonlight there, where it is so bright, I will release you and run home.'

'Home!' said Walter, incredulous; 'it is not possible. Whoever you are—and of course I have no right to ask—I am sure you are a lady. You are as little like the Crockfords as anyone could be. No doubt you must have some reason——'

'Oh, yes,' she said, with a laugh, clasping her hands, 'a mysterious reason; how can you doubt it? I am a heroine, and I have got a

story. I am in hiding from Prince Charming, who wants to run away with me and make me his queen; but I won't have him, for I am too high-toned. I could not have him shock his court and break the queen mother's heart. Every word I say makes you more certain what sort of person I am. Now doesn't it?' she cried, with another laugh.

'I can't tell what sort of a person you are,' said Walter, 'for I am sure I never talked to anyone like you before.'

'Well,' she said, with a quick breath which might have been a sigh, 'I hope that is a compliment. I have been talking to Martha all night, dropping my h's and making havoc with my grammar. It is nice to do the other thing for a little and bewilder some one else. Yes; I am sure this is a pretty road when there is light to see it. One can't see it in the moonlight, one can see nothing for the moon.'

'That is true,' said Walter; 'just as in summer you can't see the grass for flowers.'

'I don't exactly catch the resemblance. What is that lying under the hedge? The shadow is

so black, so black now we have got into the light. Look, please; I feel a little frightened. What is that under the hedge?'

'Nothing,' said Walter; 'only a heap of stones. If you will look back now we have got up here you will see the river and all the valley. The view is very pretty from here.'

He hoped to see her face when she should turn round, for, though the moonlight is deceiving, it is still better than darkness. Even though she had her back turned to the light, he could now see something—the round of what must be a pretty cheek.

'I am sure there is something there under the hedge, something that moved.'

'I will look to satisfy you,' said Walter; 'but I know there is nothing. Ah!——'

A quick rush, a little patter of steps flying along the white road, were the first indications he had of what had happened. Then, before he could recover himself, a laughing 'Good-bye, good-bye, sir. Thank you; I see the village lights,' came to him down the road. He made a few steps in pursuit, but then stopped,

for the little figure flying was already out of sight. And then he stood looking after her *planté là*, as the French say. Why, it was an adventure!—such a break as had never happened before in his tranquil life.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GIRLS' OPINION.

THE girls in the drawing-room not only met with no adventure, but they did not even know that the damp atmosphere had cleared up and the moon come out. They did not know what had become of Walter. They were as unaware of his despair as of the sudden amusement which had come to him to console him in the midst of it. They thought—hoped rather—that he had gone to the book-room with Mr. Penton and was there talking it over, and perhaps undoing the effect of what their mother had said. It did not, indeed, seem very likely that Walter should be able to do this, but yet they were so much on the side of Penton in their hearts that

a vague hope that it might be so, moved them in spite of themselves. Walter against mother seemed a forlorn hope; and yet when all your wishes are in the scale it is difficult to believe that these will not somehow help and give force to the advocate.

Ally and Anne had taken their places at the table when the gentlemen went away. They were making little pinafores for the children; there were always pinafores to be made for the children. Anne, who was not fond of needle-work, evaded the duty (which to her mother appeared one of the chief things for which women were made) as much and as long as she could, but, being beguiled by promises of reading aloud, did submit in the evening. The little ones used so many pinafores! Ally was always busy at them, except when she was helping in the more responsible work of making little frocks. This evening there was no one to read aloud, but no one blamed Walter for going out; no one even thought of the book, though they were at the beginning of the third volume. Penton for the moment was a more

interesting subject than any novel. The girls had not thought so much of it as Walter had done, but still it had been a prominent feature in their dreams also. The idea of being Pentons of Penton could not be indifferent to them; of taking their place among the aristocracy of the county; of going everywhere, having invitations to all the parties, to tennis in summer, to the dances, all the gaieties, of which now they only heard. Secretly in their souls they had consoled themselves with the thought of this when they heard of the great doings at Milton and all that was done when little Lord Bannister came of age. Anne, indeed, had exclaimed, 'If they don't think proper to ask us now they may let us alone afterwards, for I shan't go!' But Ally, more tolerant, had taken the other side. 'They don't know anything about us; it would be going out of their way to ask us. If they knew we were nice, and didn't ask us because we were poor, that would be horrid of them; but how can they tell whether we are nice or not?' Anne would have none of this indulgent argument; she had made up her mind when they

came to advancement to revenge all these wrongs of their poverty, so that it was equally hard upon her to have to consent to do without that advancement after all.

Thus they had plenty to talk about as they made their little pinafores. These were made of coloured print, which looked cheerful and clean (when it was clean), and wore well, Mrs. Penton thought. Brown holland, no doubt, is the best on the whole, and there is most wear in it, but it is apt to look dingy when it is not quite fresh, and when it is once washed gets such a blanched, sodden look; even red braid fails to make it cheerful. So that Mrs. Penton preferred pink print and blue, which are cheaper than brown holland. The table looked quite bright with those contrasting hues upon it; and the young faces of the girls bending over their work, though they looked more grave and anxious than usual, were pleasant in their fresh tints. Mrs. Penton herself went on with her darning. She had filled up all those great holes, doing them all the more quickly because she had studied the 'lie' of them, and how the threads went, before.

'I have never said anything about it,' said Mrs. Penton, 'for what was the use? I saw no way to be clear of Penton; but I've had this in my mind for years and years. You don't know what an expense it would be; even the removal would cost a great deal: and, though we should have a larger income, we should have no ready money—not a farthing. And then you know your father, he would never be content to live in a small way, as we can do here, at Penton; he would want to keep up everything as it was in Sir Walter's time. He would want a carriage, and horses to ride. He might even think of going into Parliament—that was one of his ideas once. Indeed, I see no end to the expense if we were once launched upon Penton. We should be finer, and we should see more company, but I don't think we should be a bit better after a while than if we had never come into any fortune at all.'

'But it would always be something to be fine and to see more company, and to have a carriage, and horses to ride,' said Anne.

'At the cost of getting into debt and leaving

off worse than we were before!' said the mother, shaking her head.

Ally let her work drop on the table and looked up with her soft eyes. There was a light unusual in them, which shone even in the smoky rays of that inodorous lamp.

'Oh,' she said, with a long-drawn breath, 'mother! it's wicked, I know; and if it made things worse afterwards——'

'She thinks just as I do!' cried Anne—'that to have a little fun and see the world, and everything you say, would be worth it, if it were only for a little while!'

'Oh, girls!' said Mrs. Penton—a mild exasperation was in her tone—'if you only knew what I know——'

'We can't do that, mother, unless we had experience like you; and how are we to get experience unless we risk something? What can we ever know here?—the hours the post goes out, though we have so few letters, the times they have parties at the Abbey, though we're never asked. The only thing we can really get to know is how high the river rises

when it's in flood, and how many days' rain it takes to make it level with our garden. Oh, how uncomfortable that is, and how chill and clammy! What else can we ever know at Penton Hook?'

'Oh, girls! said Mrs. Penton again.

Si jeunesse savait! But this is what we will never be till the end of the world. And at the same time there was something in her maternal soul that took their part. That they should have their pleasure like the other girls; that they should have their balls, their triumphs like the rest; that to dress them beautifully and admire their bright looks might be hers, a little reflected glory and pleasure for once in her dim, laborious life—her heart went out with a sigh to this which was so pleasant, so sweet. But then afterwards? To give it up was hard—hard upon those who had not discounted it all as she had done, taking the glory to pieces and deciding that there was no satisfaction in it. She felt for her husband and the children, though for them more than for him—but her feeling was pity for a pleasant delusion

which could not last, rather than sympathy. Penton in itself was to her nothing; she disliked it rather than otherwise as something which had been opposed to her all her life.

'If your father accepts this offer,' she said, after a time, 'we need not stay in Penton Hook. We might let it; or at least we might leave it in the winter and go to some other place. We might go to London, or we might even go abroad; then you would really see the world. If your father had to give up Penton without any advantage that would be a real misfortune. But of course they would give him a just equivalent. Our income would be doubled and more than doubled. Oswald could stay at Marlborough; Walter might go to Oxford. We should be better off at once without waiting for it, and we should be free, not compelled to keep up a large place or spend our money foolishly. You might have your fun, as you call it. Why shouldn't you? We would be a great deal better off than at Penton, and directly—at once. You know what everybody says about waiting for dead men's shoes. Sir Walter may

live for ten years yet. When a man has lived to eighty-five he may just as well live to ninety-five. And I am sure, if we could only get a little more money to live on, none of us wishes him to die.'

'Oh, no,' said the girls, one after another. 'If it is any pleasure to him to live,' Anne added, reflectively, after a pause.

'Pleasure to live? It is always a pleasure to live, at least it seems so. No one wishes to die so long as he can help it. I wonder why, myself; for when you are feeble and languid and everything is a trouble, it seems strange to wish to go on. They do, though,' said the middle-aged mother, with a sigh. She thought of Sir Walter as they thought of her, with a mixture of awe and impatience. They felt that their own eager state, looking forward to life, must be so far beyond anything that was possible to her; just as she felt her own weary yet life-full being to be so far in the range of vitality above him. She drew the stocking off her arm as she spoke, and smoothed it out, and matched it with its fellow, and rolled them both up into that tidy

ball which is the proper condition of a pair of stockings when they are clean and mended, and ready to be put on. 'I think I will go up to the nursery and take a look at the children,' she said. 'Horry had a cold; I should like to see that there is no feverishness about him now he is in bed.'

Ally and Anne dropped their work with one accord as their mother went away, not because her departure freed them, but because their excitement, their doubt, their sense of the family crisis all intensified when restraint was withdrawn, and they felt themselves free to discuss the problem between themselves.

'What do you think?' they both said instinctively, the two questions meeting as it were in mid-career and striking against each other. 'I think,' said Anne, quickly, not pausing a moment, 'that there is a great deal in what mother says.'

'Oh, do you?' said Ally, with an answering look of disappointment; then she added, 'Of course there must be, or mother would not say it. But would you ever be so happy anywhere

as you would be in Penton? Would you think anywhere else as good—London, or even abroad —oh, Anne, Penton!'

And now it was that Anne showed that sceptical, not to say cynical spirit, that superiority to tradition which had never appeared before in any of her family.

'After all,' she said, 'what is Penton? Only a house like another. I never heard that it was particularly convenient or even beautiful more than quantities of other houses. It is very large —a great deal too large for us—and without furniture, as mother says. Fancy walking into a great empty, echoing place, without a carpet or a chair, and pretending to be comfortable. It makes me shudder to think of it, whatever you may say.'

Ally was chilled much more by Anne's saying it than by the vision thus presented to her. She began hurriedly,

'But Penton——' and then stopped, not knowing apparently what to say.

'I begin to be dreadfully tired of Penton,' said Anne, giving herself an air of superiority

and elderly calmness. 'Everybody romances so about that big, vulgar house. Well, anything's vulgar that pretends to be more than it is. One would suppose it was the House Beautiful or else a royal palace at the very least, to hear you all speak. And then poor Sir Walter, to grudge him his little bit of life! I feel like a vampire,' cried Anne, 'every day wishing that he may die.'

'I am sure,' cried Ally, moved almost to tears, 'I don't wish him to die.'

'You wish to be at Penton, and you can't be at Penton till he dies,' said Anne, triumphantly. 'Poor old gentleman! his nice warm rooms that he has taken so much trouble with, and all his pretty things! And to think that a lot of children who will pull everything to pieces should be let in upon them, and his own daughter, who is like himself, and who would keep everything just as he liked to see it, should be driven away!'

'I never thought of it in that light before,' said Ally, in a troubled voice.

'Nor I,' said Anne; 'but it is fair to put your-

self in another person's place and think how you would feel if—Mrs. Russell Penton must hate us, naturally. I should if I were she. Fancy if there was some one whose interest it was that father should die!'

'Oh, Anne!'

'It is just the very same, only that father is not so old as Sir Walter. Suppose there were no boys, but only you and me, and some other horrible people were the heirs of the entail. How I should hate them! I think I should try to kill them!'

Anne loved an effect, and Ally's softer spirit was the instrument upon which she played. Ally cried, 'No, no, no!' with a horrified protest against these abominable sentiments. A cloud of trouble gathered over her face; her eyes filled with tears. She put up her hands to stop those dreadful words as they flowed from her sister's mouth.

'To hate anyone would be terrible. I could not do that, nor you either, Anne.'

'Not if they wished that father might die?'

This awful supposition overwhelmed Ally altogether. She melted into tears.

'Well, then, come along out into the garden, and don't let's think of it any more. I want a little air—the lamp is so nasty to-night—and I'll finish my pinafore to-morrow. It is very nearly done, all but the button-holes. Do come out and see if the river is rising. That is one good thing about Penton, it is out of reach of the floods. But look, what a change! It is almost as clear as day, and the moon so beautiful. If I had known I should not have stayed indoors in the light of that horrid lamp.'

'We *must* do our work some time,' said Ally, faintly, allowing herself to be persuaded.

It was rather cold, and very damp; but the moon had come out quite clear, dispersing, or rather driving back into distance the masses of milky clouds which had lost their angry aspect, and no longer seemed to foretell immediate rain. Rain is disagreeable to everybody (except occasionally to the farmers), but it is more than disagreeable to people who live half surrounded by a river; it made their hearts rise to see that

the rain-clouds seemed dispersing and the heavens getting clear. And then it takes so very little to lighten hearts of seventeen and eighteen! The merest trifle will do—the touch of the fresh air, even the little nip of the cold which stirred their blood. As they came out Walter appeared, coming back from the gate, a dark figure leaning against the light.

'Oh, Wat, where have you been? Have you been up to the village without telling us? And I did so want a run! Why didn't you call me?'

'Don't, Anne,' said Ally; 'he is not in spirits for your nonsense. Poor Wat! he cannot throw it off like you.'

'Ah,' said Walter, reflectively; but it seemed to the girls that he had to think what it was he could not throw off. 'I have not been up to the village,' he said; 'only round the dark corner. Martha was there with a little girl who was in a terrible funk. She thought there were lions and tigers under the hedge. I just saw her round the corner.'

'How kind of you, Wat! A little girl! But who could she be?'

'I don't know a bit,' said Walter, demurely. 'It was too dark to see her face.'

He thought his own voice sounded a little strange, but they did not perceive it. They came to either side of him, linking each an arm in his.

'Come and look at Penton in the moonlight,' said Anne, she who was so indifferent to Penton. But somehow to all of them the sting was taken out of it, and there was no pain for them in the sight.

CHAPTER XII.

A NEW FACTOR.

Mrs. Russell Penton did not let the grass grow under her feet. In two or three days after the above events, before Mr. Penton had made up his mind to give any answer, good or bad, another emissary appeared at the Hook. He was a messenger less imposing but more practical than the stately lady who had perhaps calculated a little—more than was justified by the effect produced—upon her own old influence over her cousin. No influence, save that of mutual interest and business-like arrangement, was in the thoughts of the present negotiator. He drove up to the door in a delightful

dog-cart with a fine horse and the neatest groom, a perfectly well-appointed equipage altogether, such as it is a pleasure to see. He was as well got-up himself as the rest of the turn-out—a young man with a heavy moustache and an air—Anne, who at the sound of this arrival could not be restrained from moving to the window and looking out behind the curtains, pronounced him to be 'A guardsman, I should think.'

'A guardsman! how should you know what a guardsman is like? and what could he want here?' Walter had said, contemptuously. But he too had peeped a little, ashamed of himself for doing so. 'A bagman, you mean, coming for orders,' he cried; to which his sister retorted, with equal justice, 'How do you know what a bagman is like? and what orders could he get here?'

The two young people were considerably discomfited when the stranger, in all his smartness and freshness, with a flower in his button-hole (in the middle of winter), was suddenly shown in upon them by Martha with the murmur

of a name which neither of them caught, and which, as Anne divined, their hand-maiden had mumbled on purpose, not comprehending what it was.

The stranger made his bow and explained that he had come to see Mr. Penton on business; and then he displayed an amiable willingness to enter into conversation with the younger branches of the family.

'Your roads are not all that could be desired,' he said, finding upon his coat-sleeve an infinitesimal spot of mud. 'I am afraid it must be pretty damp here.'

'No, it is not damp,' said Walter, promptly.

'Oh!' said the other; and then after a moment he hazarded the observation that the house, though pretty, lay rather low.

'It is not lower than we like it to be,' Walter replied.

He did not show his natural breeding. He felt somehow antagonistic to this visitor without any reason, divining what his errand was.

'Oh!' said the stranger again; and then he addressed himself to Anne, and said that the

weather was very mild for the season, an assertion which the most contradictory could not have denied.

Anne had been looking at him with great curiosity all the time. She did not know how to classify this spruce personage. She was not at all acquainted with the *genus* young man, and it was not without interest to her. He was neither a guardsman nor a bagman, whatever that latter order might be. Who was he? She felt very desirous to enquire. Her reply was,

'I am afraid father must be out. Did he expect you to come?' thinking perhaps in this way the stranger might be led into telling who he was.

'I don't know that he expected me. I came on business. There are certain proposals, I believe; but I need not trouble you with such matters. I hope I may be permitted to wait for Mr. Penton, if he is likely to return soon.'

'The best way,' said Walter, with an air of knowledge which deeply impressed his sister, 'is to write beforehand and make an appointment.'

'That is most true,' said the other, with suppressed amusement, 'but I was told I was almost sure to find Mr. Penton at home.'

At this moment the door flew open hastily, and Ally appeared, not seeing the stranger as she held the door.

'Oh, Wat,' she cried, 'father has gone out and some one has come to see him. Mamma thinks it is some dreadful person about Penton. She wants you to run out and meet him, and tell him— What are you making signs to me for?'

As she said this she came fully into the room and looked round her, and with a sudden flush of colour, which flamed over cheek and brow and chin, perceived the visitor, who made a step forward with a smile and a bow.

'I am the dreadful person,' he said. 'I don't know what I can say to excuse myself. I had no bad intention, at least.'

Ally was so much discomposed that after her blush she grew pale and faint. She sank into a chair with a murmur of apology. She felt that she would like to sink through the floor; and for

once in her gentle life would have willingly taken vengeance upon the brother and sister who had let her commit so great a breach of manners, and of whom one, Anne, showed the greatest possible inclination to laugh. Walter, however, was not of this mind. He took everything with a seriousness that was almost solemnity.

'My sister, of course, did not know you were there,' he said. And then, with that desire to escape from an unpleasant situation which is common to his kind, 'Since you are in a hurry and your business is serious, I'll go and see if I can find Mr. Penton,' he said.

And he had the heart to go, leaving the stranger with Ally and Anne! the one overwhelmed with confusion, the other so much tempted to laugh. It was like a boy, they both reflected indignantly, to leave them so. Between Ally, who would have liked to cry, and Anne, who restrained with difficulty the titter of her age, the young man, however, felt himself quite at an advantage. He asked with quiet

modesty whether he might send his horse round to the stables.

'I can send him up to the village, but if you think I might take the liberty of putting him up here——'

They were so glad to be free of him, even for a moment, that they begged him to do so, in one breath.

'But for goodness' sake, Ally, don't look so miserable, there is no harm done,' said Anne, in the moment of his absence; 'it will show him how we feel about it.'

'What does it matter how we feel? but to be rude is dreadful; let me go and tell mother——'

'What, and leave me alone with him? You are as bad as Wat. You shan't stir till father comes. Fancy a strange young man, and an enemy——'

'He need not be an enemy, he is only a lawyer,' Ally said, always ready to see things in the most charitable light.

'And what is a lawyer but an enemy? Did

you ever hear of a lawyer coming into the midst of a family like this but it was for harm? It was very funny, though, when you bolted in. Wat and I were making conversation, when you suddenly came like a thunderbolt with your "dreadful person."'

In the absence of the injured, Ally herself did not refuse to laugh in a small way.

'He does not look dreadful at all,' she said; 'he looks rather—nice, as if he would have some feeling for us.'

'I don't think his feeling for us could be of much consequence. We have not fallen so low as that, that we should need to care for an attorney's feeling,' said Anne. But then her attention was distracted by the fine horse with its shining coat, the dog-cart all gleaming with care and varnish, notwithstanding the traces of the muddy roads. 'He must be well off,' she said, 'at least,' with a little sigh.

'He is in the law,' said Ally; 'that doesn't mean the same thing as an attorney. An attorney is the lower kind; and I'm sure it may matter a great deal that he should have

feeling. Think of poor Wat's interest. It is Wat that is to be considered; even mother, who is so strong on the other side, and thinks it would be so much better for the rest of us, is sorry for Wat.'

'Hush! he is coming back,' Anne said.

There was something strangely familiar in the return of the visitor through the open door without any formalities, as if he were some one staying in the house.

'It is very fortunate that the weather is so fine,' he said, coming back. 'The situation is delightful for the summer, but you must find it unpleasant when the floods are out.'

'It is never unpleasant,' said Anne, 'for it is our home. We like it better than any other situation. Penton is much grander, but we like this best.'

'We need not make any comparison,' said Ally. 'Cousin Alicia prefers Penton because she was born there, and in the same way we—'

'I understand,' the stranger said. But the girls were not clever enough to divine what it was he understood, whether he took this pro-

fession of faith in the Hook as simply genuine, or perceived the irritation and anxiety which worked even in their less anxious souls. He began to talk about the great entertainment that had taken place lately at Bannister. 'It was got up regardless of expense,' he said, 'and it was very effective as a show. All that plaster and pretence looks better in the glow of Bengal lights—of course, you were—What am I thinking of? It is not your time yet for gaieties of that kind.'

'We were not there,' said Anne, in a very decisive tone. Disapproval, annoyance, a little wistfulness, a little envy were in her voice. 'We don't go anywhere,' she said.

'Not yet, I understand,' said the stranger again. There was a soothing tone about him generally. He seemed to make nothing of the privations and disabilities of which they were so keenly conscious. 'I have a sister who is not out,' he went on. 'I tell her she has the best of it: for nothing is ever so delightful as the parties you don't go to, when you are very young.'

They paused over this, a little dazzled by the appearance of depth in the saying. It sounded to them very original, and this is a thing that has so great a charm for girls. He went on pleasantly:

'There are to be some entertainments, I hear, at Penton when everything is settled. I hope I may have the pleasure of meeting you there.'

'At Penton! we are never at Penton,' they cried in the same breath; but then Ally gave Anne a look, and Anne, being far the more prompt of the two, made an immediate diversion.

'There is father coming through the garden,' she said. It was a principle in the family to maintain a strict reserve in respect to Penton, never permitting anyone to remark upon the want of intercourse between the families. It is needless to say that this was a very unnecessary reserve, as everybody knew what were the relations between Sir Walter and his heir. But this is a delusion common to many persons more experienced in the ways of the world than the poor Pentons of the Hook.

Mr. Penton came in making a great noise with

his big boots upon the tiles of the hall. He opened the door of the drawing-room and looked in with a nod of recognition which was not very cordial.

'Good morning, Mr. Rochford,' he said; 'I am sorry I have kept you waiting. Perhaps you will come with me to my room, where we shall be undisturbed.'

The young man hesitated a little. He made the girls a bow more elaborate than is usual with young Englishmen.

'If I am not so fortunate as to see you again before I go—' he said, with his eyes on Ally— —and how could Ally help it? She was not in the habit of meeting people who looked so. She blushed, and made an inclination of her head, which took Anne, who gave him an abrupt little nod, quite by surprise.

'Why,' the girl cried, almost before the door closed, 'Ally, you gave him a sort of dismissal as if you had been a queen.'

'What nonsense!' Ally said; but she blushed once more all over, from the edge of her collar to her hair. 'I wonder,' she said, 'whether

Cousin Alicia can leave us out, if she is going to give entertainments as he says.'

'When everything is settled—what does that mean? when everything is settled,' cried Anne.

'It means, I suppose,' said Walter, gloomily, 'when Penton has been given over, when we have fallen down among the lowest gentry, just kept up a little (and that's not much) by the baronetcy which they cannot take away. Father can't sell that, I believe. Mrs. Russell Penton may be a very great lady, but she can't succeed to the baronetcy. Leave us out! Do you mean to say that—over my body, as it were, you would go!'

'Oh, Walter, don't take it like that! If father settles upon doing this, it will be because both together they have decided that it is the best.'

'And no one asks what I think,' cried the lad, 'though after all it is I——'

He stopped himself with an effort, and without another word swung out again, leaving the door vibrating behind him. And the girls looked at each other with faces suddenly

clouded. Fifty looks to twenty so remote an age, so little to be calculated upon. After all, it was Walter, not Mr. Penton, who was the heir. And no one asked what he thought!

The door of the book-room closed upon the negotiations which were of such importance to the family. There came a hush upon the house —even the winterly birds in the trees without, who chirped with sober cheerfulness on ordinary occasions, were silent to-day, as if knowing that something very important was going on. Those who passed the door of the book-room—and everybody passed it, the way of each individual, whatever he or she was doing, leading them curiously enough in that direction—heard murmurs of conversation, now in a higher, now in a lower key, and sometimes a little stir of the chairs, which made their hearts jump, as if the sitting were about to terminate. But these signs were fallacious for a long time, and it was only when dinner was ready, the early dinner, with all its odours, which it was impossible to disguise, that the door opened at last. The three young people were all about the hall door,

Walter hanging moodily outside, the two girls doing all they could to distract his thoughts when this occurred. They all started as if a shell had fallen amongst them. By the first glimpse of Mr. Penton's face they were all sure they could tell what had been decided upon. But they were not to have this satisfaction.

'Tell your mother,' he said, keeping in the shade, where no one could read his countenance, 'to send in a tray with some luncheon for Mr. Rochford and me.'

And then the door closed, and the discussion within and the mystery and anxiety without continued as before.

CHAPTER XIII.

MAN AND WIFE.

'HOWEVER it goes,' said Mr. Russell Penton, 'I don't think you can help taking some notice of the young people. In the first place it is right, but that I allow does not count much in social matters; and next it is becoming and expedient, and what the world will expect of you, which is of course much more important.'

'Gerald,' said his wife, 'what have I done to make you speak to me like that?'

'I don't know that you have done anything, Alicia. It is of course your affair rather than mine. But I think it is hard upon your cousins. It is like that business about the birth-right,

you know—you have got the mess of pottage, and they—the other thing, half sentimental, half real.'

'I wonder at you, Gerald,' cried Mrs. Penton. 'What true sentiment can they have in the matter? They never lived here; their immediate ancestors never lived here. False sentiment, if you like, as much of that as you like, but nothing else; and the real advantage will be immediate, as you know.'

'Yes, I know. I never said it was the sentiment of acquisition; it is the sentiment of personal importance, which perhaps is even more telling. Apart from Penton, they will feel themselves nobodies.'

'As they are, as they have always been.'

'Well, my dear,' said Mr. Russell Penton, with a shrug of his shoulders, 'I have always said it was your affair and not mine.'

'You never said that you disapproved. You have heard all the conversation that has gone on about it, and yet you have never said a word. How was I to know that you disapproved?'

'I don't disapprove. It is a question between you and Sir Walter and your relations. It would not become me to thrust in my opinion one way or the other.'

Tears came into Mrs. Penton's eyes.

'When you say such things, Gerald, you make me feel as if I were no true wife to you.'

'Yes, you are my true wife, and a very dear one,' he said, after a momentary pause, without effusion, but with serious kindness. 'But we knew, Alicia, when we married that the position was different from that of most husbands and wives. I am a sort of Prince Consort, to advise and stand by you when I can; but it is my best policy, for my own self-respect as well as your comfort, not to interfere.'

'The Prince Consort was not like that,' she said; 'he was the inspiration of everything. It was not in the nature of things that anything could be done or thought of without him.'

'I have not that self-abnegation,' he said; 'there is but one like that in a generation; be-

sides, my dear, you are not the Queen. You must defer to another's guidance. What is settled between Sir Walter and you is for me sacred. I make any little observations that occur to me, but not in the way of advice. For example, I permit myself to say that it is hard on your cousin, because I think you don't quite appreciate the hardship on his side—not to prevent you carrying out your own purpose, which I don't doubt is good and very likely the best.'

She shook her head doubtfully.

'You are very kind and very tolerant, Gerald, but all you say makes me see that you would not have done this had you been in my place.'

He paused a little before he replied,

'It is very difficult for me to imagine myself in your place, Alicia. A man cannot realise what it would be to be a woman, I suppose. But I'll tell you what I should have done, had I been in Sir Walter's place, with one dear daughter and an heir of entail—I should have moved heaven and earth to kick him out or buy him

out. There can be no doubt as to what I should have done in that case.'

Alicia took his hand and held it in both hers. She looked gratefully into his face, and said, 'Dear Gerald!' but yet she turned away unsatisfied, with a haunting suspicion. Being Sir Walter, that was what he would have done. But he thought the woman who was his wife should not have done it. In no way had Russell Penton intimated this to be the case. He had never said that a woman should have a different standard of duty set up for her. But Alicia had intuitions which were keener than her intelligence, just as she had longings for approval and sympathy which went far beyond her power of communicating the same. He would have liked her better if she had not grasped at Penton. Without any aid of words, this was what she divined. The blank of the doubt which was in her made her heart sore. She wanted to carry his sympathy with her, at any cost. She called after him as he was going away:

'As you are so much concerned about those

young people, I will ask them. I will ask them, to please you; if you like, next week, when the Bromley Russells are here.'

He looked at her for a moment with something like a stare of surprise; then his countenance relaxed; a smile came over his face.

'Why not?' he said.

'Why not? There can be no reason against it, if you wish it.'

This time Russell Penton laughed out.

'No,' he said, 'no reason; the other way. Let the young fellow have his chance.'

'What chance?' Alicia stiffened in spite of herself. His laugh offended her, but she would not show her offence, nor inquire what he meant, in case that offence might be increased. 'I was not thinking,' she added, 'of any young fellow. I was thinking of the girls.'

'If my wish has weight with you, let the boy come too. The sisters will want a chaperon, don't you know?'

'The sisters?' said Mrs. Penton. An inexpressible sense of dislike, of displeasure, of repugnance came over her, as if some passing

wind had carried it. 'Not that sharp girl,' she said, with a look of fastidious dissatisfaction—something that moved the lines of her nostrils as if it offended a sense.

'Not the sharp girl, and not the boy,' said Russell Penton. 'But, then, who is left?'

'My godchild is left, Alicia, the one I like best; or, rather, whom I——'

'Dislike least,' said her husband, with his laugh. 'I cannot see, now that everything is likely to be settled to your satisfaction, what possible reason there can be for disliking them at all.'

'There is none,' she said, with an effort. 'I am the victim of a state of affairs which is over; I cannot get my feelings into accordance with the new circumstances. You cannot blame me, Gerald, more than I blame myself.'

He said nothing at all in reply to this, but turned away as he had done with the intention of going out, when she called him back. Once more she recalled him, with the same dull sense of his disapproval aching at her heart.

'Gerald, after all, you see I do not even wait

till things are settled to ask the children. Give me a little credit for that.'

'You said, Alicia, that it was to please me.'

'And so it is! and so are many things—more, a great deal more, than you think.'

He put his hands upon her shoulders and looked into her face.

'You are always very good, very kind, and ready to please me. Is it for that I am to give you credit? or for generosity towards your young cousins? You are not very logical, you see.'

'Women are not supposed to be logical,' she said.

He gave a grave smile as he took his hands away.

'Women are more logical than they acknowledge,' he said. 'It is a convenient plea.'

And this time there was no recall. He went out without any further hindrance, not much pleased with himself, and perhaps less with her. He was not, as she divined, satisfied at all. Rich Mrs. Penton's husband had as little devotion to Penton as had poor Mr. Penton's wife. He

felt that he would have been more at his ease in any other house, and a subtle sort of rivalry with Penton, antagonism partly irrational, and disappointment in the thought that Sir Walter's death, when it came, would bring him no enfranchisement, filled his mind with an irritation which it was not always possible to keep under. He did not want her to do this scanty justice to her young relations, her only relations, in order to please him. They had done no harm: why should it be an offence to her that they had in their veins a certain number of drops of kindred blood?

Presently, however, this irritation turned into displeasure with himself. He had been hard upon Alicia; he had asked that the young Pentons should be invited, vaguely, without any particular meaning; and she had said she would ask them at once, along with the heiress, the great prize for whom so many were contending. It had jarred upon her when he laughed, and it now occurred to him that his laugh had been ill-timed and out of place; yet, all alone as he was, when it came back to his mind he laughed again. Why not? he had said—and why not?

he repeated, with a gleam of humour lighting up thoughts which were not particularly pleasant in themselves. He, a poor scion of the Russells, had carried off the Penton heiress; why should not young Penton, the poor and disinherited, have a try at the other, the Russell heiress?

But if Alicia saw the reason of his merriment, no wonder that it had jarred upon her. It was in bad taste, he said to himself. To compare her with the little Russell girl was a thing which even in thought was offensive. He did not wonder that she was offended by his laugh, that it made her stiff and cold. He sighed a little as all inclination to laugh died out of him. It would have suited him better to have had a mate of a lighter nature, one who would have let him laugh, who would have been less easily jarred, less serious, less full of dignity; but this was a thing that Russell Penton was too loyal even to say to himself. It might touch the surface of his thoughts, but only to be banished. It was because of this inevitable jar, this little difference, which was so little yet was fundamental, that he sighed.

And she sighed too, she who did so many things to please him—more, far more than he had any idea of. She was ready to do almost anything to please him; almost, yet with a great reserve. Instinctively she was aware that Penton stood between them—that the bondage of the great house which was not his, and the burden of representing a family of which he was only, so to speak, an accidental member, lay very heavy upon the easy mind and cheerful, humorous nature of her husband. He was not born to be the head of a house. What he liked was the ease of a life without responsibilities, without any representative character. A cheerful little place with all its windows open to the sun, where he could do what he liked, where no man could demand more of him than to be friendly and agreeable, which he could leave when he chose and come back to as he pleased,—that would have been his ideal home. She said to herself that the wife whom he had taken to such a little house would have been very happy, and sometimes, in the days when she still indulged in dreams (which women do

in the strangest way, long after the legitimate age for it), she had seen that tiny place in a vision with children about it and no cares (as if that were possible !), and Gerald's countenance always beaming with genial content.

But the woman who was so happy, who was at her ease, whom no troubles touched, who was Gerald's other self, was not Alicia. She had to sigh and turn away, feeling that this could never be. Her life had been already settled when she married. There was no change or escape for her; indeed, what was stranger still, though she perceived the happier possibilities in the other lot, she knew that it had never been possible to her. The ease would have wearied, perhaps even disgusted her. Attending that vision of happiness would come revelations of the slipshod, glimpses of what ease and happiness so often come to when they grow to over-luxuriance. No, the difference was very slight, but it was fundamental.

And in this, as in so many other contradictions of life, the woman had the worst of it. Russell Penton was tolerant by nature, and he

had trained himself to still greater tolerance. He made an observation, as he said, now and then, but it was possible to him to stand by and look on, without worrying himself about that which he could not change. He would say to himself that it was no business of his; he could even refrain from criticism except in so far as we have seen, when he made a good-natured protest in defence of some one wronged, or avenged another's injury by a laugh. But Alicia, on her side, was not so easily satisfied. She wanted him to approve; his acquiescence, his plea that it was not his affair, his declaration that he would not interfere, were to her gall and bitterness. She could not adopt his light ways, nor take things easily as he did. Following her own course, acting upon her own principles, his concurrence, his approval, were the things she longed for before all others. When he said, 'You are quite right,' she was happy, though even then never without a sense that he must have added within himself, 'right from your own point of view.'

The curious thing, however, and one which

she was also aware of with a strange double consciousness, was that she never thought of adopting his point of view, or attempting even any compromise between his and hers. She had placed herself so completely in her own groove that she could not get out of it, and had no wish to get out of it. But yet she wanted his approval all the same. She wanted it passionately, with an insistance which even her own complete enlightenment as to the difference between them never affected. Having her own way, even in the supreme question which now at the last had been opened only to promise the most satisfactory solution, she yet would have no real pleasure in it unless he approved. And his mode of passing it over, his assent which meant no approval, took the pleasure out of everything. What could she do to please him more than she was doing? But she never had it, that satisfaction of the heart.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TRANSITION PERIOD.

Mr. Penton's long interview with the young solicitor had ended in this,—and, though it did not seem exactly a settlement of the question, it had been taken for granted by both families as such: that he consented to treat with Sir Walter Penton. The terms might take a longer time to arrange, and there were conditions—some of a rather peculiar character, as his opponents thought—which Mr. Penton insisted upon. But upon the general question he was supposed to have yielded. It had taken him a great deal of thought, and he was not happy about it. He went about the house and his fields with

a moody countenance, avoiding every turn or point of view which revealed Penton—those points of view which had once been his happiness. This fact alone took a great deal of the pleasure out of his life. It had been his relief in former days to mount the road to that corner where the view was, or go out and sit on the bench under the poplar-tree: but now he turned his back upon these favourite places. When he was low, he had no longer this way of escaping from himself.

Of all points of the compass, that on which Penton lay had become the most distasteful to him. He would have liked to have had it blotted out from the landscape altogether; there was nothing but pain in the sight of it, in the mere knowledge that it was there. And winter is cruel in this particular. It spares you nothing—not even a chimney. The weathercock, glowing through the bare trees, seemed to catch every ray of light and blazon it over the whole country: the windows that faced the south were in a perpetual scintillation. The great house would not be hidden; it made no

account of the feelings of those who were in the act of parting with it for ever; though its aspect was now a reproach and humiliation to them instead of a pride, it seemed to force itself more and more on their eyes.

Walter felt this almost more strongly than his father, if that were possible. He too went about moody, with the air of a man injured, turning his back on the once favourite quarter where the sunset was. He said in his haste that he never wanted to see a sunset again, and, when the girls called his attention to all the stormy gorgeous colours of the winter afternoon, he would turn his back upon them and declare that the reflection in the river, the secondary tints in the cold grey of the east, were enough for him. He said this with a vehemence which his father did not display.

But Walter had solaces and alleviations of which his father was incapable; and Mr. Penton was the one who felt it most deeply after all. In his middle-aged bosom the tide of life was not running high. He had few pleasures; even few wishes. It no longer moved him in his

habitual self-restraint that he had no horses, no means of keeping his place among his peers. All that had dropped away from him in the chill of custom—in that acceptance of the inevitable which is the lowest form of content. But there had always been Penton in which his imagination could take refuge. Penton was still an earthly paradise into which one day or other he should find entrance, which nobody could close from him. And now that too was closed, and his fancy could no longer go in and dwell there. He said very little about it, but he felt it to the bottom of his heart. It was the sort of thing of which he might have died had the floods been out or the atmosphere deleterious as it sometimes was; but happily it was not an exceptionally wet season, and the river had not as yet been 'out' that year.

The ladies from the first had taken it better, and they continued to do so. Mrs. Penton began to make calculations—with bated breath and many a 'hush!' when either father or son were nigh—of what she would now be able to do. She thought it would be well for them all,

as soon as matters were settled, to go away: for, though the waters were not out yet, it was scarcely to be hoped for that they should not after Christmas, in February at the latest, have their way: and a separation from the scene of their disappointment would, she thought, be good both for Mr. Penton and Wat. Mrs. Penton said this with a sigh, feeling already all that was involved in a removal in the middle of winter; but it would be good, she felt, for Horry and the rest to be out of the damp, and it would be very good for Wat. The thing for Wat would be to go to Oxford without delay: fortunately he was not too old, and that would take him off thinking about Penton if anything would.

As for the father, there was no such panacea for him. What can be done to distract or divert a man who has outlived the ordinary pleasures, and cannot have his mouth stopped or his heart occupied with any new toy? A horse or two such as he would now be able to afford would have done a great deal for him once; but now he had got out of the habit of

riding, and might not care to take it up again. It was easier to think of the young ones whose life lay all before them, and who would enter the world now under so much better conditions, though not those they had calculated upon. Mrs. Penton made up her mind that if all was settled on the terms proposed she would be able to give the girls 'every advantage.' They should be taken to see a great many things; they should have clothes and surroundings that suited their condition; they might even 'see a little of the season' when the proper time came round.

All these things were pondered aud decided upon in the many hours when the feminine portion of the household sat together, which were more than had ever been before. For Wat did not care to have his sisters constantly with him as he once had done; they set it down to his disappointment about Penton, and the disturbance of his temper and of his life which had ensued—which, when they accused him of it, he agreed in with a sort of satisfaction. But when Anne said, without

thought, 'One would think Wat had found somebody else to go with him,' he was very angry, and grew very red, and demanded to know who else? who was he likely to have else? with an indignation which the provocation did not justify.

Thus it will be seen that the circumstances of the household were much changed. They had not been in a very flourishing condition when they first discussed the law of entail and the possibility that it might be attacked by a reforming parliament and their birthright taken from them; but somehow that simple time of expectation and depression, which now looked as if it might be years ago, had been, with all its straitenedness, a happier time than now. A certain agitation had got into all their veins; the girls and their mother sat mostly alone in the evenings. There was no reading aloud. Wat was out almost always, taking a walk, he said; or when he was not out he was in the book-room, grinding, as he told them, at his Greek, which was quite necessary if he was going up to Oxford in the beginning of the

year. The girls would have thought this state of affairs insupportable a little while ago, but in the commotion of the approaching change they found so much to talk of that they were partially reconciled to making pinafores all the evening in the light of the paraffin lamp, though it smelt badly, and there was no one to read to them. They had a great deal to talk about.

As for Mrs. Penton, her mouth was opened as it had never been in her life before. She talked of balls, and theatres, and of the 'things' they must get as soon as ever matters were settled. She recounted to them her own experiences—the dances she had gone to before her marriage, and all the competition there had been to secure her for a partner.

'They said I was as light as a feather,' she said, with her eyes fixed upon the stocking she was darning, and without raising her head; 'and so they will say of Ally, for Ally is just the same figure I was. But you must have some lessons when we go to town.'

She was pleased thus to talk, recalling old

recollections, to which the girls listened with astonishment: for they had never supposed that their mother knew anything of those gaieties, which to themselves were like the fables of golden isles unknown to men; but they were not displeased to listen, weaving into the simple story as it flowed the imaginations, the anticipations which filled that unknown world upon the threshold of which they stood. It was even more absorbing than the stories of the good and fair heroines (for Mrs. Penton was very particular in her choice of the books which were read by them) to which they had been in the habit of listening. But they missed Wat, to whom, however, they allowed the narration of mother's tales might have seemed a little flat had he been there. Wat up to the present moment had shown very little interest in anything of the kind: but it was a little strange now that he should so often be 'taking a turn' even when the moon was not shining, and when the country roads were so dark.

Mr. Rochford, the solicitor, came on several occasions during this time of transition. He

came often enough to make the children quite familiar with that trim and shining dog-cart, and the horse which was so sleek and shining too. Horry had been driven round and round in it, nay, had been allowed to drive himself, making believe, before it was put up: and he and his smaller brother assisted at the harnessing and unharnessing of this famous animal with the greatest enthusiasm every time he came. Young rustic lads attending at a monarch's levée could not have been more interested than were these babes. And Mr. Rochford made himself more or less agreeable in other ways to the whole family, except Wat, who did not take to him, but kept him at a distance with an amount of unfriendly temper which he showed to no one else.

There was no idea now of a tray carried into the book-room when this visitor came. He was introduced to the early dinner where all the children sat in their high chairs, and where the food was more wholesome than delicate—a meal which was too plainly dinner to be disguised under the name of luncheon. Mr. Rochford

made himself quite at home at this family dinner. He praised everything, and declared that he was always most hungry at this hour, and ate so heartily that Mrs. Penton took it as a personal compliment; for, though Mrs. Penton sometimes made a little moan about the appetites of the children, she yet was much complimented when visitors (who were so few at the Hook) ate well and seemed to relish the simple food.

'Roast mutton may be simple,' she said, 'but there is roast mutton and roast mutton—a big, white, fat leg half cooked is a very different thing from what is set on our table: for I must say that Jane, if she is not much to look at, is an excellent cook.'

She liked to see people eat; not Horry getting three helps and gorging himself: that was a different matter altogether; but a visitor who could appreciate how good it really was.

And after dinner was over Mr. Rochford would ask whether he might not be taken round the garden to see, not the flowers, for there were none, but the floodmarks of different years, and how high the river had come on the last

occasion when the waters were 'out.' He had a great interest in the floods—more than Mr. Penton, who got weary of his guest's enthusiasm, and stole back to the book-room, leaving him with the girls; and more than Anne, who heard her mother calling her, or found she had something to do in the poultry yard, every time this little incident occurred. Ally was the most civil, the most long-suffering, and it soon became evident that there was only one who had patience to conduct Mr. Rochford to see the floodmarks.

'I have been used to them all my life,' the young lawyer said. 'I have an old aunt who lives as close to the river as this, and who has the water in her garden every year. I used to be sent on visits there when I was a child, and oh! the transports of the inundation and the old punt in which we used to float about. To come up under the windows in that punt was bliss.'

'You could not do that here,' said Ally, with that pride in the Hook which was part of the family character. 'The water never comes

above the garden. I showed you the highest floodmark was on a level with the terrace round the house.'

'Yes,' said the visitor, with an implicit faith which was not universal among those who heard this tale. 'What a piece of good fortune that is! You must feel as if you were in an oasis in the midst of the desert.'

Ally felt that the metaphor was not very appropriate, but of course she knew what he meant. She said,

'The little boys are as fond of seeing the floods as you were when you were a boy.'

'It would be difficult work if at any time the house was cut off—I beg your pardon,' said Rochford, 'that is nonsense, of course; but do you know I dreamt the other night that the river was higher than ever had been known, and was sweeping all round the Hook, and that the family were in danger? I got out in my boat on the wildest whirling stream, and steered as well as I could for your window. Which is your window, Miss Penton? I knew quite well which it was in my dream, and steered for it.

That one! why then I was right, for that was where I steered.'

'You frighten me,' said Ally, 'but the water has never come near the house.'

'It did on this occasion. There were people at all the windows, but I steered for yours. I heard myself calling Miss Penton, and you wouldn't let me save you. You kept putting the children into my arms, and I could not refuse the children—but I shall never forget the horror with which I woke up, finding that you always delayed and delayed and would not come.'

'How kind of you,' said Ally, laughing, but with a little blush, 'to take so much trouble even in your dream.'

'Trouble!' he cried, 'but yet it was great trouble, for you would not come. I heard myself calling, trying every kind of argument, but you always pushed some one in front of you to be saved first, and would not come yourself. I awoke in a dreadful state of mind, crying out that it was my fault, that it was because of me, that if it had been any one else you would have come.'

'How ungrateful you must have thought me,' said Ally, blushing more and more, 'but of course I should have put the children first. You may be sure that is what I shall do if it should ever come true.'

'I am forewarned,' he said, laughing. 'I shall know how to beguile you now that I am informed.'

'I hope you may never have the occasion,' she said.

'Of helping you? Do you think that is a kind wish, Miss Penton? for it is a thing which would be more delightful than anything else that could happen to me.'

Ally, being a little confused by this continuance of the subject, led him round by the edge of the river to the poplar-tree and the bench underneath.

'We used all to be very fond of this seat,' she said, 'because of the view. If Penton is going now to be nothing to us, we must take the bench away.'

'Can it ever cease to be something to you? It is the home of your ancestors.'

'Oh, yes; but one's father is more near one than one's ancestors, and if he is to have nothing to do with Penton——'

'You regret Penton,' said the lawyer, fixing his eyes upon her; 'then I wish my hand had been burned off before I had anything to do with the business.'

'Oh, what could that matter?' cried Ally. 'I am nobody; and besides,' she added, with gravity, 'I do not suppose it could have been stopped by anything that either you or I could do.'

This made the young man pause; but whatever was disagreeable in it was modified by the conjunction 'you and I.' Was it only civility, or had she unconsciously fallen into the trap and associated herself with him by some real bond of sympathy? He resumed, after a pause,

'Perhaps we might not be able to cope with such grandees as your father and Mrs. Russell Penton, but there is nothing so strong as—as an association—as mutual help, don't you know?'

Ally did not know, neither did he, what he

meant. She replied only, 'Oh!' in a startled tone, and hurriedly changed the subject.

'Will it take a long time to draw out all the papers, Mr. Rochford? Why should it take so long? It seems so simple.'

'Nothing is simple that has to do with the law. Should you like it to be hurried on or to be delayed? Either thing could be done according as it pleased *you*.'

There was the slightest little emphasis upon the pronoun, so little that Ally perceived it first, then the next moment blushed with shame at having for a moment allowed herself to suppose that it could be meant.

'Oh, we could not wish for either one thing or another,' she said. 'I shall be sorry when it is altered, and I shall be glad. Naturally it is Walter that feels it most.'

'Ah, he is the heir.'

'He *was* the heir, Mr. Rochford. I feel for him. He has to change all his ways of thinking, all that he was looking forward to. But why should we talk of this? I ought not to talk of it to any stranger. It is because you have so much to do with it, because you——'

'Because I am mixed up with it from the beginning,' he said, regretfully. 'How kind you are to receive me at all, when it was I whose fate it was to introduce so painful a subject. But one never knows,' he went on, in a lower tone, 'when one drives up to a door that has never been opened to one's steps before, what one may find there; perhaps the most commonplace, perhaps'—he turned his head away a little, but not enough to make the last two words, uttered in a lowered but distinct voice, inaudible to Ally—'perhaps one's fate.'

The girl heard them, wondered at them, felt herself grow pale, then red. There is something in words that mean so much, which convey a sort of secondary thrill of comprehension without revealing their meaning all out. Ally, who was unprepared for the real revelation, felt that here was something which was not usual to be said, which concerned her somehow, which made it impossible for her to continue the conversation calmly. She turned away to examine some moss on the trunk of the nearest tree. Did he mean her to hear that? Did he mean her not to hear? And what did it mean? His

fate—that must mean something, something more than people generally said to each other while taking a turn round the garden, whether it might be to see the roses or to examine the floodmarks.

At this moment the most fortunate thing occurred—a thing which ended the interview without embarrassment, without any appearance of running away upon Ally's part. Mrs. Penton suddenly appeared in the porch, which was within sight, holding a letter in one hand and beckoning with the other. She called, not Ally, but 'Alice!' which in itself was enough to mark that something had occurred out of the common. Her voice thrilled through the still damp air almost with impatience; its usual calm was gone; it was full of life, and haste, and impetuosity—more like the quick voice of Anne than that of the mother. And then little Horry came running out, delighted to escape out of doors in his pinafore, without cap or greatcoat or any wrap, his red stockings making a broken line of colour as he ran along the damp path, his curls of fair hair blowing back from his forehead.

'Ally! Anne!—Ally! Anne!' he cried, 'mother wants you! Ally-Anne! mother wants you!—she wants you bovf. She's got news for you bovf. Ally-Anne! Ally-Anne!' shouted the small boy.

'I'm coming, Horry!' cried the girl; and from the other side of the house came the same cry from her sister. Ally entirely forgot Mr. Rochford and his fate. She ran home, leaving him without another thought, encountering midway Anne, who was flying from the poultry yard, in which she had taken refuge. What was it? At their age, and in such simplicity as theirs, a letter suddenly arrived with news might mean anything. What might it not mean? It might mean that the Queen had sent for them to Windsor Castle. It might mean that some very great lady unheard of before had invited them on the score of some old unknown friendship. It might mean that somebody had left them a fortune. The only thing it could not mean was something unimportant. Of that only they were assured.

Mrs. Penton stood at the door in her excite-

ment, with the letter in her hand. Her tall figure was more erect, her head borne higher than usual. When she saw the girls running from different directions she turned and went indoors, and presently Walter appeared in answer to another summons, walking quickly to the door. Young Rochford, standing under the poplar looking at them, felt ridiculously 'out of it,' as he said. It would have pleased him to feel that he had something to do with the family, that their consultations were not entirely closed to him. He had been so much mixed up with it—all the details of their future means, every bit of land which they relinquished, every penny of that which they got as compensation, would pass through his hands. He had been feeling of late as if he really had a great deal to do with the Pentons. But here arose at once a matter with which he had nothing to do, upon which he could not intrude himself, to which he was left as much a stranger as though he did not know exactly what their income would be next year. He went slowly into the book-room, with feelings that were utterly unreasonable, though not

without the excuse of being natural. The book-room, that was his place, and Mr. Penton and the formal business. But he must not even ask what was the other business which was so much more interesting, the letter which had been sent to Mrs. Penton, which the young ones had been in such excitement to hear, and no doubt to give their opinions on. He had certainly no right to have an opinion on the subject, whatever it might be. He was only the solicitor managing an external piece of business—and treated with great civility and kindness—but nothing more. How could he be anything more?

CHAPTER XV.

THE INVITATION.

MRS. PENTON was in a condition of excitement such as had never been seen in her before. She could not lay down the letter. She could not speak. She went at length and seated herself in the high chair—in the chair which her husband occupied at any great domestic crisis, when a council of the whole family was called. As her usual seat was a low one, and her usual aspect anything but judicial, there was no change which could have marked the emergency like this. It was apparent that in Mrs. Penton's mind a moment had arrived at which some important decision had to be come to, and for which she herself and not her husband was the natural

president of the family council. The young ones were a little awed by this unusual proceeding. There was not a stocking, nor a needle, nor even a reel of cotton within reach of her. She had given herself up to the question in hand. It might be supposed that the decision about Penton, which she took her share in powerfully, while considering all the time how to do that darning, was as important a matter as could come within her ken; but in her own opinion the present issue was more exciting. She had taken that calmly enough, though with decision; but about this she was excited and anxious, scarcely able to restrain herself. The girls ran in, saying,

'What is it, mother?' but she only motioned to them to sit down and wait; and it was not till Walter had followed with the same question that Mrs. Penton cleared her throat and spoke.

'It is a letter I have just had,' she said—'I have not even talked it over with your father. You were the first to be consulted, for it concerns you.'

And then she stopped to take breath, and slowly unfolded her letter.

'This,' she said, 'is from Mrs. Russell Penton. It is an—invitation; for two of you: to go to Penton upon a visit—for three days.'

There was a joint exclamation—joint in the sense that the sound came all together, like a piece of concerted music, but each voice was individual. 'An invitation—to Penton!' cried Anne. 'From Cousin Alicia?' said Ally; and 'Not if I know it!' Walter cried; from which it will be seen that the one quite impartial, and ready to consider the matter on its merits, was Anne alone.

'Don't come to any hasty decision,' said Mrs. Penton, hurriedly; 'don't let it be settled by impulse, children, which is what you are so ready to do.'

'Surely,' said Walter, 'when it's a mere matter of amusement, impulse is as good a way of deciding as another. I say "Not if I know it," and that is all I mean to say.'

'And unless you say I'm to go, mother, I think like Wat,' said Ally, with unusual courage.

'Children, children! In the first place it's not amusement, and your cousin has never asked you before. She is a great deal richer, a great deal better off than we are. Stop a little, Ally and Wat. I don't say that as if being rich was everything: but it is a great deal. You will meet better society there than anywhere else. And, even though your father is going to part with Penton, you never can separate yourselves from it. We shall be called Pentons of Penton always, even though we never enter the house.'

'Mother,' said Wat, 'you don't feel perhaps as I do; that is the best of reasons why I should never enter the house. So long as I was the heir, if they had chosen to ask me it might have been my duty; but NOW—' cried Wat, his voice rising as if into a salvo of artillery. Unutterable things were included in that 'now.'

'Now,' said his mother, 'because we are giving up, because we are leaving the place, so to speak, it is now much more necessary than ever it was. Your cousins have done nothing that is wrong. They don't mean to

injure you; they are doing a very natural and a very sensible thing. Oh, I am not going to argue the question all over again; but unless you wish to insult them, to show you care nothing for them, that their advances are disagreeable to you, and that you don't want their kindness——'

'Mother,' said Walter, 'not to interrupt you, that is exactly what I want to do.'

And Ally had her soft face set. It did not seem that the little face, all moveable and impressionable, could have taken so fixed a form, as if it never would change again.

'You want to insult the people, Walter, who are, to begin with, your own flesh and blood.'

'Cousins—and not full cousins—are scarcely so near as that,' said Anne, with an air of impartial calm.

'To insult anybody is bad enough, if they were strangers to you—if they were your enemies. What can be nearer than cousins except brothers and sisters? I say, Mrs. Russell Penton is your own flesh and blood, and I don't think it is very nice of you, on a subject which

I must know better than you do, to contradict me. Your father calls Sir Walter uncle. How much nearer could you be? And if you live long enough, Wat, you will be Sir Walter after him. In one sense it is being grandson to the old gentleman, who lost his own two sons, as you know well enough. And is it him you would like to insult, Wat?'

This made an obvious and profound impression. The audience were awed; their mutinous spirit was subdued. The domestic orator pursued her advantage without more than a pause for breath.

'I never knew the boys: but when I saw the Pentons first everybody was talking of it. Your father had never expected to succeed, oh, never! It was a tragedy that opened the way for him. They had no reason to expect that a young cousin, a distant cousin' (this admission was no doubt contradictory of what she had just said, but it came in with her present argument, and she did not pause upon that), 'should ever come in. If they had hated the very sight of those who were to take the place of their own,

who could wonder? I should if—oh, Wat, if it were possible that—Osy and you'—she paused a little—'I feel as if I should hate Horry even in such a case.'

The impression deepened, especially as she stopped, with a low cry, to wring her hands, as if realising that impossible catastrophe. Walter was entirely overawed. He saw the unspeakable pathos of the situation in a moment. Supposing Horry—*Horry!* should come in to be the heir, something having happened to Oswald and to himself!

'Don't agitate yourself, mother,' he said, soothingly; 'I see what you mean.'

'And yet you would like to insult these poor people, to refuse to see how hard it was for them, and what they have had to bear, oh, for so many years!'

Having thus broken down all opposition, Mrs. Penton made a pause, but presently resumed.

'And then from our side, children, there's something to be said. I wish you to accept the invitation. I wish it because after all it's your

own county, and you're of an age to be seen, and you ought to be seen first there. When all this is settled, your father will be in a position to take you into society a little. We shall be able to see our friends. If I have never gone out, it has been for that—that I could not invite people back again. Now I may have it in my power more or less to do this. And I want you to be known—I want you to be seen and known. It is of great importance where young people are seen first. I can't take you to court, Ally, which is the right thing, for we never were in circumstances to do that ourselves. And the next best thing is that you should be seen first in the house of the head of your family. Now all that is very important, and it has got sense in it, and you must not allow an impulse, a hasty little feeling, to get the better of what is sensible and reasonable—you must not indeed. It would be very unkind to me, very foolish for yourselves, very harsh and unsympathetic to the Pentons. And you have a duty to all these. To them? oh, yes, to them too, for they are your relations and they are old, and though

they are prosperous now, things went very badly with them once. Besides, it would be as if you disapproved of what your father was doing and envied them Penton; which I suppose is the last thing in the world you would have them to see.'

'Disapproving father is one thing,' said Wat, 'but all the rest I do, and I don't care if they know it or not. Penton ought to be mine. You and my father don't think so—at least you think there are other things more important.'

Mrs. Penton looked at her boy from her husband's judicial chair with a mild dignity with which Wat was unacquainted.

'Penton would not be yours,' she said, 'if Sir Walter were dead now. Would you like to step into what is your father's, Wat? Would you like to say he is only to live five or ten years because the inheritance is yours? Your father will probably live as long as Sir Walter. I hope so, I am sure. He is fifty now, and that would be thirty-five years hence. Would Penton be yours, or would you be impatient for your father to die?'

'Mother!' they all cried, in one indignant outcry, the three together.

'It looks as if you meant that. You don't, I know—but it looks like it. Sir Walter may as well live ten years longer, and your father thirty years after that, so that you would be sixty before you succeeded to Penton. Is it so much worth waiting for? Is it worth while showing yourself envious, dissatisfied with what your father is doing, unkind to your relations, because, forty or fifty years hence, perhaps—'

Walter got up from his chair, as a man is apt to do when the argument becomes intolerable.

'Mother,' he said, 'you know very well that not one of those intentions was in my mind. I don't want to become bosom friends with people who are injuring us for their own advantage; but as to wishing my father a single hour, a single moment less—or even Sir Walter—' the youth cried, with a break in his voice.

'Oh,' cried Anne, with impatience, 'as if mother did not know that! Mother, the others are dreadfully unreasonable. I'll go.'

Mrs. Penton paused a little and cleared her throat.

'I am afraid you are just the one that is not asked. I daresay your cousin thinks that you are not out, Anne: and no more you are, my dear.'

'She is as much out as I am, and we have always said when we went anywhere we should go together. Mother, if you wish it, of course I'll go.'

'And equally of course I will go too,' said Walter, somewhat indignant to be left out, 'when my mother puts it like that.'

'Well, children dear,' said Mrs. Penton, sinking at once into an easier tone, 'how could I put it otherwise? As long as you will go pleasantly and friendly, and make no reflections. It is such a natural thing, so right, so exactly what should be, both for them to ask and for you to accept. Well, now,' she added, briskly, coming down from her high chair, drawing forward her own natural seat, putting out an accustomed hand for her work-basket, 'now that this is all settled there are the preparations to

think of. Walter, you must go up at once to your father's tailor—to his grand tailor, you know, whom he only goes to now and then—and order yourself some new suits.'

'Some new suits!' they all cried, with widely opened eyes.

'Yes,' said Mrs. Penton, who had never been known to enter into any such schemes of extravagance before. 'Indeed, we may all go to town together, for I must look after Ally's things, and there is no time to be lost.'

'My—things, mother!' The plural in both cases was what petrified the young people, who had been used to get only what could not be done without.

'You must have a nice tweed suit for the morning, Wat, and some dress clothes, and your father will tell you whether you should get any other things for Oxford, for of course I am not an authority as to what young men require. And it is so long since I have seen anything that is fashionable,' said Mrs. Penton, 'that I don't really know even what girls wear. Girls are really more troublesome than boys, so far as

dress is concerned. You can trust a good tailor, but as to what is exactly suitable to a girl's complexion and style, and the details, you know—the shoes, and the gloves, and the fans, and all that——'

'Mother!' cried Ally. The girl was awe-stricken; pleasure had scarcely had time to spring up in her. She was overwhelmed with the glories which she had never realised before.

'Yes, my dear; there are a great many things involved in a girl's toilet which you would never think of; the dress is not all, nor nearly all. I have been so long out of the world, I have not even seen what people are wearing; but it will be easy to get a few hints. And what if we make a day of it, and go to town all together? Anne shall come too, though Anne is not going to Penton. I don't often allow myself a holiday,' said Mrs. Penton, with her hands full of pinafores, 'but I think I must do so for once in a way.'

The idea of this wonderful outing, which was much more comprehensible, besides being far more agreeable, than the visit to Penton, filled them all with pleasure.

'For we know that will be fun!' said Anne. 'Penton, I wish you joy of it, you two! You will have to be on your best behaviour, and never do one thing you wish to do. I shall have the best of it—the day in town, and the shopping, which must be amusing, and to see everything; and then when you are setting out for Penton, and feeling very uncomfortable, I shall stay at home, and be the eldest, and be very much looked up to. Mother, when shall we go?'

'And oh, mother! how, how——'

'Is it to be paid for, do you want to know, Ally? My dear, we are going to have four times as much income as we ever had before. Think of that! And can you wonder I am glad? for I shall be able to do things for all of you that I never dared think of, and instead of only having what you couldn't do without—enough to keep you decent—I can now give you what is right for you and best for you. Oh, my dears, you can't tell what a difference it makes! What is a place like Penton (which I never cared for at all) in comparison with being able to get whatever they want for your

children? There is no comparison. It has not come yet, it is true, for the papers are not ready, but still it is quite certain. And I can venture to take you to town for a day, and we can all venture to enjoy ourselves a little. And I am sure I am very much obliged to Mrs. Russell Penton for taking such a thing into her head.'

To this even the grumblers had nothing to say; even Wat himself, who perhaps was less impressed by the idea of two new suits from the tailor's than his sisters were about their new frocks. A new suit of evening clothes can scarcely be so exciting to a boy as the thought of a ball dress, with all its ribbons and flowers and decorations, and those delightful adjuncts of shoes and gloves and fan all in harmony, is to a girl. Ally's imagination was so startled by it that she could scarcely realise the thought in any practical way, and her enjoyment was nothing to Anne's, who mapped it all out in her mind, and already began to suggest to her sister what she should have, with a perception which must have been instinct; since Anne had not

even that knowledge of an evening-party which any one of the maids who had assisted at such ceremonials might possess, though in a humble way. Martha, for instance, in her last place, had helped to dress the young ladies when they were going out, and had got a glimpse of Paradise in the cloak-room when her former mistress had a ball. But, alas! such possibilities had never come to Ally and Anne. They knew nothing about the fineries in which girls indulged. Anne, however, by intuition, whatever the philosophers may say, knew, never having learned. Perhaps she had got a little information to guide her out of novels, of which, in a gentle way, Mrs. Penton herself was fond, and which had opened vistas of society to the two girls.

'You must have a white, of course,' she said to her sister, 'blues and pinks, and that sort of thing may go out of fashion, but white never. Mother thinks you must have two.'

'We are only asked for three days,' cried Ally, 'and that only means two evenings. Why should I have more than one dress for only two evenings?'

'Why, just for that reason, you silly!' cried Anne. 'Do you think mother would like to send you to Penton with just what was necessary, to make them think you had only one frock? Oh, no! If you were staying for a fortnight of course you would not want something different every night; but for two days——'

'I should much rather you had the second one, Anne.'

'I daresay! as if there was any question about me. I shall have what I require when my time comes. Don't you know we are going to be well off now?'

'Oh, Anne! it is rather poor to think of being well off only as a way of getting new frocks.'

'It is a great deal more than that, of course, but still it is that too. It is nice to have new frocks when one wants them, instead of waiting and waiting till one can have the cheapest possible thing that will do. We have always had things that would do. Now we are to have what we require—what we like. I wish Wat and you, Ally, would see it as mother and I do. Perhaps it may be nice to be the chief people of

one's name, and be able to snub all the rest, even Cousin Alicia, but——'

'I never wished to snub anyone, much less Cousin Alicia,' cried Ally, with indignation.

'That is really what it comes to. We wanted to be the grandest of the family, to be able to say to Mrs. Russell Penton, "Stand aside, you're only a woman, and let Sir Edward walk in." And why should she be disinherited because she's a woman? I am going in for women, for the woman's side. I don't believe father is as clever as she is. Oh, to be sure, I like father a great deal better. How could you ask such a question? But he rather looks up to her; he is not so clever; he couldn't set one down as she does, only by a look out of her eyes. No, no, no; a new frock when one wants it, and to go to town for the day, and even to the theatre, or to have a dance at home—all that is far, far better than snubbing Couisin Alicia. But,' added Anne, with sudden gravity, 'for you that have got to go and stay there, it is rather dreadful after all.'

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PRIMROSE PATH.

WALTER PENTON had been the most satisfactory of sons and brothers. He had not rebelled much even against the discipline of reading aloud. He was only twenty, and there was nothing to do in the neighbourhood of the Hook, especially in the evening, so that circumstances had helped to make him good. He had, to tell the truth, taken a great interest in the novels, so much as to be tempted often to carry off the current volume and see 'how it ended,' by himself, which the girls thought very mean of him. But very rarely, except in summer, or when there was some special attraction out-of-doors, had he declined to aid the progress of the pinafores, in

his way, by reading. But lately he had not been so good. Perhaps it was because there was a moon, and the evenings had been particularly bright; but he had not asked the girls to share his walks, as formerly it had been so natural to do. Sometimes he did not come into the drawing-room at all after tea, but would intimate that he had 'work' to do, especially now, when, if he were really going to Oxford, it was necessary for him to rub up his Greek a little. Nobody could say that this was not perfectly legitimate, and in fact laudable; and, though the ladies were disappointed, they could make no complaint, especially as, in the general quickening of the family life, there was, for the moment, many things to talk of, which made reading aloud less necessary.

For instance, on the evening of the day which they had spent in town, there was no occasion for reading. The most exciting romance could not have been more delightful than the retrospect of that delightful day. They all went up together by the early train. Mr. Penton himself had said that he thought he might as well

go too, and accompany Walter to the tailor's, as that was a place in which ladies were inadmissible; and accordingly they parted at the railway, the mother and the girls going one way, and the father and his boy another—both parties with a sense of the unusual about them which made their expedition exhilarating.

To spend money when you feel (and that for the first time) that you can afford it is of itself exhilarating, especially (perhaps) to women who have little practice in this amusement, and to whom the sight of the pretty things in the shops is a pleasure of a novel kind. It was a matter of very serious business indeed to the ladies, carrying with it a profound sense of responsibility. Two evening dresses, for a girl who had never had anything better than the simplest muslin! and a 'costume' for morning wear of the most complete kind, with everything in keeping, jacket and hat and gloves. The acquisition of this could scarcely be called pleasure. It was too solemn and important, a thing the accomplishment of which carried with it a certain sensation of awe; for what if it should

not be quite in the fashion? what if it should be too much in the fashion? too new, too old, not having received the final approval of those authorities which rule the world? Sometimes a thing may be very pretty, and yet not secure that verdict; or it may be *mal porté*, as the French say, worn first by some one whose adoption of it is an injury.

All these things have to be considered; and when the purchasers are country people, ignorant people, who do not know what is going to be worn! So that the responsibility of the business fully equalled its pleasantness, and it was only when the more important decisions were made, and the attention of the buyers, at too high a tension in respect to other articles, came down to the lighter and easier consideration of ribbons and gloves, that the good of the expedition began to be fully enjoyed.

And then they all had luncheon together, meeting when their respective business was executed. Mr. Penton took them to a place which was rather a dear place, which he had known in his youth, when all the places he had

known were dear places. It was, perhaps, a little old-fashioned too, but this they were not at all aware of. And the lunch he had ordered was expensive, as Mrs. Penton had divined. She said as much to the girls as they drove from their shop to the rendezvous. She said,

'I know your father will order the very dearest things.' And so he had; but they enjoyed it all the more. It was such a thing as had never happened in all their previous experience; a day in town, a day shopping, and then a grand luncheon and a bottle of champagne.

'If we are going to be so much better off, they may as well get the good of it,' Mr. Penton replied, in answer to his wife's half-hearted remonstrance.

For she too found a pleasure in the extravagance. Her protest was quite formal: she too was quite disposed for it once in a way—just to let them know, in the beginning of their mended fortune, what a little pleasure was.

And when they came home, bringing sugarplums and a few toys for the young ones, they were all a little tired with this unusual, this ex-

traordinary dissipation. After tea the pinafores did not make much progress; they were too much excited to care to go on with their reading. They wanted to talk over everything and enjoy it a second time more at their leisure. They had shaken off the sense of responsibility, and only felt the pleasure of the holiday, which was so rare in their life. Mr. Penton himself was seduced into making comparison of the London of which they had thus had a flying glimpse with the London he had known in the old days, and into telling stories of which somehow the point got lost in the telling, but which had been, as he said, 'very amusing at the time;' while the girls listened and laughed, not at his stories so much as out of their own consciousness that it had all been 'fun,' even the inconveniences of the day, and the prosiness of those inevitable tales.

Mrs. Penton was the one who subsided most easily out of the excitement. But for a little look of complacence, an evident sense that it was she who had procured them all this pleasure, there was less trace in her than in any of the

others of the day's outing. She drew her work-basket to her as usual after tea. She was not to be beguiled out of her evening's work; but she smiled as she went on with her darning, and listened to the father's stories, and the saucy commentaries of the girls, with a happy abandonment of all authority in consideration of the unusual character of the day. The only thing that brought a momentary shadow over the party was that Walter was not there.

'There is no moon to-night, but Wat is off again for one of his walks. I wonder what has made him so fond of walks, just when we want him at home?' the girls cried. And then a little mist came over his mother's eyes. She said, 'Hush! he is probably at his Greek;' but whether she believed this or not nobody could say.

Walter, it need scarcely be said, was not at his Greek. He went up the road towards the village with long strides devouring the way, though there was no moon nor any visible inducement. The village was as quiet a spot as could be found in all England. The only

lights it showed were in a few cottage windows, or glimmering from behind the great holly-bushes at the rectory; a little bit of a straggling street, with an elbow composed of a dozen little houses, low and irregular, which streamed away towards the dark and silent fields, with the church, the natural centre, rising half seen, a dark little tower pointing upward to the clouds. There was scarcely anyone about, or any movement save at the public-house, where what was quite an illumination in the absence of other lights—the red glow of the fire, and the reflection of a lamp through a red curtain—streamed out into the road, making one warm and animated spot in the gloom.

Wat, however, did not go near that centre of rustic entertainment. He stopped at a low wall which surrounded a cottage on the outskirts—a cottage which had once been white, and had still a little greyness and luminousness of aspect which detached it from the surrounding darkness. A few bristling dry branches of what was in summer a bit of hedge surrounded the low projection of the wall. Walter paused there,

where there was nothing visible to pause for. The night was dark. A confused blank of space, where in daylight the great stretch of the valley lay, was before him, sending from afar a fresh breath of wind into his face, while behind him, in the nearer distance, shone the few cottage lights, culminating in the red glow from the 'Penton Arms.'

What did he want at this corner with his back against the wall? Nothing, so far as anyone could see. He made no signal, gave forth no sound, save that occasionally his feet made a stir on the beaten path as he changed his position.

They got tired, but Walter himself was not tired. Presently came the faint sound of a door opening, and a flitting of other feet—light, short steps that scarcely seemed to touch the ground—and then the gate of the little garden clicked, and, heard, not visible, something came out into the road.

'Oh, are you here again, Mr. Walter? Why have you come again? You know I don't want you here.'

'Why shouldn't you want me? I want to come; it's my pleasure.'

The voice of the young man had a deeper tone, a manlier bass than its usual youthful lightness coming through the dark, and the great space and freedom of the night.

'It's a strange pleasure,' said the other voice. 'I should not think it any pleasure were I in your place. If even there was a moon! for people that are fond of the beauties of nature that is always something. But now it is so dark'—there seemed a sort of shiver in the voice. 'The dark is a thing I can't abide, as they say here.'

'For my part, I like it best. Come this way, where the view is, and you would think you could see it—that is, you can feel it, which is almost more. Don't you know what I mean? The wind blows from far away; it comes from miles of space, right out of the sky. You could feel even that the landscape was below you from the feel of the air.'

'That is all very pretty,' she said, and this time there was the indication of a yawn in her

tone, 'but if it is only for the sake of the landscape, one can see that when it's day, and feeling it is a superfluity in the dark. If that was all you came for——'

'I did not come for that at all, as you know. I came for—it would be just the same to me if there was no landscape at all, if it was a street corner——'

'Under a lamp-post! Oh, that is my ideal!' with a little clap of her hands. 'What I would give to see a lamp again, a bright clear, big light, like Oxford Street or the Circus! You think that vulgar, I know.'

'Nothing is vulgar if you like it. I should like lamp-posts too if they had associations. I saw plenty of them to-day, and I wished I could have had you there to take you for a walk past the shop windows, since you are so fond of them.'

'Oh, the shop-windows! Don't talk to a poor exile of her native country that she is pining for! So you were in town; and what did you see there?'

'Nothing,' said Wat.

'Nothing!—in London! You must be the very dullest, or the most obstinate, or prejudiced —Nothing! why, everything is there!'

'You were not there; that makes all the difference. I kept thinking all the time where I should have found you had you been in London. You never will tell me where you live, or how I can see you when you go back.'

'I am not going back yet, worse luck,' she said.

'But that is no answer. I kept looking out to-day to see if I could find any place which looked as if you might have lived there. The only place I saw like you was in Park Lane, and that, I suppose——'

'Park Lane!' she cried, with a suppressed laugh; 'that was like old Crockford's niece. I could receive all my relations then.'

'You are not old Crockford's niece?'

'No, I told you—I am a heroine in trouble,' she said. Her laugh was perhaps a little forced, but if Walter observed that at all it only increased the interest and fascination of such a paradox as might have startled a wiser man.

'And is town very empty?' she said. 'But the streets will be gay and the shop windows bright because of Christmas—there is always a little movement before Christmas, and things going on. And to think that I should see nothing—not so much as a pantomime—buried down here!'

'I thought most people came to the country for Christmas,' said Wat.

'Oh, the sw——; why shouldn't I say it right out?—the swells, you mean; but we are not swells in my place. We enjoy ourselves with all our hearts.'

'I am sorry you think it so dull in the country,' said poor Wat. 'I wish you liked it better. If you had been brought up here, like me—but of course that is impossible. Perhaps when you get better used to it——'

'I shall never be used to it; I am on the outlook, don't you know? for some one to take me back.'

'Don't say that,' said Walter, 'it hurts me so. I should like to reconcile you tc this place, to

make you fond of it, so that you should prefer to stay here.'

'With whom? with old Crockford?' she said.

Walter was very young, and trembled with the great flood of feeling that came over him. 'Oh, if I only had a palace, a castle, anything that was good enough for you! but I have nothing—nothing you would care for. That is what makes it odious beyond description, what makes it more than I can bear.'

'What is more than you can bear?'

'Losing Penton,' cried the young man; 'I told you. If Penton were still to be mine I know what I should say. It is not a cottage like Crockford's, nor a poor muddy sort of place like the Hook. It is a house worthy even of such as you. But I am like the disinherited knight, I have nothing till I work for it.'

'That is a great pity,' she said; 'I have seen Penton; it is a beautiful place. It seems silly, if you have a right to it, to give it up.'

'You think so too?' he cried; 'I might have known you would have thought so; but I am

only my father's son, and they don't consult me. If I had anyone to stand by me, I might have resisted—anyone else, whose fortune was bound up in it as well as mine.'

'Yes: what a pity in that case that you were not married,' she said.

'I might be still,' cried Walter, with tremulous vehemence, 'if you would have faith in me—if you would forget what I am, a nobody, and think what, with such a hope, I might be.'

'I!' there was a sound of mocking in the laughing voice; 'what have I got to do with it? What would those great swells at Penton think if they knew you were saying such things to old Crockford's niece?'

'It is they who have nothing to do with it.' he cried. 'Do you think if you were to trust me that I should care what they— But oh, don't, don't call yourself so, you know it is not true; not that it matters if you were. You would to me, all the same, be always yourself, and that means everything that a woman can be.'

There was a pause before she replied, and her voice was a little softened.

'They will never know anything about me at Penton, or anywhere else. I have come here in the dark; you have scarcely seen me in daylight at all, for all you are so silly.'

'Yes, a hundred times,' cried Walter. 'Do you think you can go out that I don't see you? I live about the roads since you have been here.'

'It is a pity,' she said, with a little sharpness, 'that you have nothing better to do;' then, resuming her lighter tone, 'If you don't soon begin to do something a little more practical, how are you ever to be—that somebody which you were offering to me?'

'It is true,' he said, 'it is true; but don't blame me. I am going to Oxford next month, and then, if I do not work—'

'To Oxford! But that's not work, that's only education,' she cried, with a faint mixture of something like disappointment in her voice.

'Education is work; it opens up everything. It gives a man a name. I have been kept back;

but, oh, now, if you will say I may look forward —if you will say I may hope.'

'Look forward to what?' she said; 'to come up here every evening, and invite me out to talk in the cold at the corner of old Crockford's wall? I do not mind, for I've nothing else to amuse me now: and you have nothing else to amuse you, so far as I can see; but presently I shall disappear like a will-o'-the-wisp, and what will you look forward to then?'

'That is what I say,' he said. 'I feel it every day. You will go away, and what am I to do, where am I to find you? Every morning when I wake it is the first thing I think of—perhaps she may be gone, and not a trace, not an indication left behind, not even a name.'

'Oh, it is not so bad as that. You know my name, bnt I tell you always it is a great deal better you should know no more, for what is the use? You are going to Oxford, where you will be for years and years before you can do anything. And at present you are the disinherited knight and I am a will-o'-the-wisp. Very well. We play about a little and amuse each other,

and then you will ride off and I shall dance away.'

'No, no, no; for the sake of pity, if not love—'

'What has a will-o'-the wisp to do with these sort of things, or a young man at college? At college! it is only a schoolboy a little bigger. Ride off, ride off, sir disinherited knight; and, as for me, it's my part to go dancing, dancing away.'

And she was gone, disappearing with no sound but the little click of the gate, the pat of those footsteps which scarcely touched the ground, snatching from him the hand which he had tried to take, the hand which he had never yet been allowed to hold for a moment. He stood for a time at the corner of the wall, tantalised, tremulous, trying to persuade himself that she was not really gone, that she would appear again, a shadow out of the darkness. This was all he had seen of her except in distant glimpses, although their intercourse had gone so far. He was ready to pledge his life to her, and yet this was all he knew.

Walter thought to himself as he went slowly down the hill, all thrilling with this interview, that never had there been such a courtship before. He was proud of it, poor boy. There was something rapturous in its strangeness, in the fact that he did not even know her name, nothing but Emmy, which he had heard Martha call her. Emmy did not mean much, yet it was all he knew. He called her in his heart by names out of the poets—Una, Rosalind, Elaine. She was as much a creature of romance as any of them. He dreamt, in those sweet dreams awake which are the privilege of youth, of seeing her flash out upon him from unimaginable surroundings, a princess, a peerless lady, something noble and great, something not to be put on the level of ordinary women. What she was doing in this cottage he scarcely asked himself—she who belonged to so different a sphere. But it was sweet to him to think that his love was so original, unlike that of anyone else. His head was full of an intoxication of pleasure, of pride and wonder. Nobody had ever had such a story. Ah, if he had but

Penton to take her home to! But anyhow he could conquer fortune for the sake of this swee unknown.

This was how Walter spent his evenings while the others sat round the household lamp. He had the best of it. While Ally was thinking only of the visit to Penton, or at least of nothing else that she allowed even to herself, Wat, only two years older, felt himself standing on the threshold of an illimitable future full of everything that was wonderful and sweet.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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