

A POOR GENTLEMAN

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'IT WAS A LOVER AND HIS LASS,' 'THE LAIRD OF NORLAW,'
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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1889.

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823
223p
1889
v. 2

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CHAPTER I.

GOING INTO THE WORLD.

It was near Christmas when Walter and Ally went to Penton on the visit which had caused so much excitement. It had been arranged that on Christmas Eve they should return, for to spend that day away from their family was impossible, a thing not to be done had the invitation come from Royalty itself. They went with all their new things so nicely packed, and their hearts beating, and many warnings and recommendations from the most careful of mothers.

‘Wat, be careful that you never, never let

them see, if it was only by a look, that you do not agree with what your father is doing. You must not let him down among his relations. You must let them see that what he does— Oh, Wat, you must be very particular to show a proper pride. Don't look as if you had any grudge; don't let them suppose——'

'I hope I am not quite a fool,' said the indignant youth.

'A fool! I never thought you were a fool; but you are young, my dear boy, and you feel strongly. And, Ally! mind you don't show you are unaccustomed to the sort of service and waiting upon that is natural there. If your cousin offers to send her maid to help you, don't you come out with, "Oh, no; I do everything for myself at home." I don't want you to say anything that is not true. But, as a matter of fact, you don't do everything for yourself at home. What does it matter to Mrs. Russell Penton whether you have a maid or whether it is Anne and I that help you? You always are helped, you know. Say, "Oh, I think I can manage quite well," or something of that sort.'

‘But, mother, Cousin Alicia must know how we live, and that I have no maid at home.’

‘Oh, they never think, these great ladies; they take it for granted that everybody has everything just as they have. Most probably she would think it was my fault if you had no maid. And, Ally! don’t be so shy as you usually are; don’t keep behind backs; remember that the only thing you can do for people who wish you to stay with them is to be as friendly as possible, and to talk, and help to amuse them.’

‘I—to amuse Cousin Alicia, mother!’

‘Well, dear, as much as you can. Amuse perhaps is not the word: but you must not sit as if you were cut out of wood or stone. And, Wat! if there is shooting or anything going on, just do what the other gentlemen do. I have always heard that Mr. Russell Penton was very nice; you will be quite right if you keep your eye upon him.’

‘One would think we were going to court, where there are all kinds of etiquettes, to hear you speak, mother.’

‘Well, my dears, there are all sorts of etiquettes everywhere; and in one way it is easier at court, for if you don’t understand there is nothing wonderful in that, and everyone is willing to tell you: whereas in a grand house you are supposed to know everything by nature. I don’t doubt at all that things will go on quite comfortably and all right. But, Ally dear——’

‘Mother, don’t bother her any more,’ cried Anne. ‘She will be so frightened she will never venture to open her lips at all, for fear she should say something wrong. I wish it was only me.’

‘Oh, so do I,’ cried Ally, from the bottom of her heart.

‘And I,’ said Wat; ‘anyone may have my share.’

‘That is just how things are—always contrary, as Martha says. I should have rather enjoyed it. I should have liked to see everything. Cousin Alicia might have put on her icy face as much as she liked, she would not have frozen me. But we can’t change places now at the last moment, and the fly will have to be paid for

if it waits. Come, Ally, come! for sooner or later you know you must go.'

Anne and her mother stood and watched the reluctant pair as they drove away with a mingled sense of envy and relief. The fly from the village was not a triumphal chariot; the grey horse had a dilapidated aspect; the day was damp and rainy.

'We may be afloat before you come back,' said Anne, waving her hand.

And then they left the door and the house out of sight, and departed into the unknown. Into the unknown! If it had been to Russia it could not have been farther away, nor could the habits and customs of a foreign country have been more alarming to the young adventurers. They were so much overawed that they said little to each other. Ally drew back into the corner of the carriage, Walter looked out of the opposite window. They were in a moment separated by half a world, though the same rug was tucked round both their knees.

The boy looked out with an eagerness which he could scarcely conceal for something

tangible, something of which his mind was full. The girl drew back into a vague, delightful world of dreams in which there was nothing definite. Who was it that had said to her something about driving up unthinking to a door within which you might meet your fate? Who was it? she asked herself, and yet she remembered very well who it was: and as she drove along there rose before her a whole panorama of shifting, changing pictures. She was standing again by the muddy, turbid river, and hearing, as in a dream, the first words of wooing, the suggested devotion, the under-current of an inference which made her the chief interest, the centre of the world; which is such a thing as may well startle any girl into attention. And then the scenery changed, and the world opened, and other, vaguer figures, yet more wonderful, appeared about her, some of them with that same look in their eyes.

How did Ally know what might be waiting for her in that home of romance, that wonderful house of Penton, with which all the visions of her life had been connected? Sometimes when

one is not thinking one drives up to a door and finds inside one's fate. What does that mean— one's fate? Young Rochford had given her to understand that he had found his when he arrived at Penton Hook, and the words had vaguely seized upon Ally's imagination, filling her with a curious thrill of sensation. His fate! She did not think of this with compunction or regret, as one who more thoroughly recognised what was meant might have done. It moved her rather to an excited, half-awed sense of power in herself which she did not understand before, than to any sympathy for him. She thought in the keen consciousness of awakening of herself, and not of him. It was wrong; it was a guilty sort of selfishness; but she could not help it. His words which had first opened her eyes—his looks, which perhaps a little earlier had lighted a spark of perception, had been like the sounding of the *réveillé*—like the rising of a morning star. She was not to blame for it; she had done nothing which could connect her with his fate, as he called it. It was a summons to her to behold and recognise her own position,

the wonderful, mysterious position, which a woman—a girl—seemed to be born to, which she had been thrust into without any doing of hers.

When the fancy is first touched, the thoughts that follow are sweet—sweeter perhaps than anything that can succeed—in their perfectly indefinite exhilaration and vague sense of a personal beatitude that scarcely anything else can bring. This does not always mean love, which is a different effect. Ally knew nothing about love; she only felt in all her being the new and wonderful power of awakening emotion in others, of which nobody had ever told her, and which she had never dreamt of as appertaining to herself. She had read of it as being possessed by others—by the beautiful maidens of romance, by ladies moving in those dazzling spheres of society which were altogether beyond the reach and even the desires of a little country girl.

But Ally knew very well that she was not a great beauty, nor so clever and gifted as those heroines were who in novels and romances

brought all the world to their feet. She entertained no delusions on this subject. She was not beautiful at all, nor clever at all. She was only Ally: and yet she had it in her power to bring that look into another's eyes. It was more strange, more thrilling, sweet, confusing than words could say.

As for Walter, his imaginations were far more definite. They were very definite indeed, distant as every anticipation was. He looked out to see one figure, one face, which he could not look out upon calmly, with a spectator by his side, which he longed yet feared to behold in the daylight, in the midst of a world awake and observant, with Ally looking on. He expected nothing but to be questioned on the subject—to be asked what he was looking for, why he leaned out of the window, what there was to see.

When it dawned upon him that Ally meant to ask no questions, that she had the air of taking no notice, he became suspicious and uneasy, thinking that she must mean something by her silence, that there was more in it than met the

eye. By nature she would have asked him a hundred questions. She would have looked, too, wondering what he could possibly expect to see on the road or in the village that could be interesting. Walter said to himself that some report must have reached home of those expeditions of his to Crockford's cottage, and that Ally must have been told to watch, not to excite his suspicions by questioning, to be on the alert for whatever might happen.

He turned his back to her and blocked up the window with his head and shoulders as they drove past Crockford's. And there, indeed, was the face he longed to see looking from the cottage window, staring at him maliciously, with a smile which was not a smile of recognition, defying him, as it seemed, to own the acquaintance. A great panic was in Walter's heart. To betray this secret, to make it visible to the eyes of the world—*i.e.*, to the old rector, who, as ill-luck would have it, was strolling past at the moment, taking his afternoon walk, and of Ally watching him from her corner—was terrible to the young man. And to expose himself to

be questioned—to be asked who she was (which he did not know), and where he had met her, and a hundred other details; perhaps to be solemnly warned that he must see her no more!

All these reflections flashed through Walter's spirit. She was evidently in the mind to take no notice of him, to own no acquaintance; and there were so many temptations on his side to do the same, to make his eyes do all his salutations, to avoid giving any satisfaction to the spies about. But his instincts as a gentleman were too much for Walter. He leaned a little farther out of the window and took off his hat. How could he pass the place where she was, and look at her and make no sign? It was impossible! Walter took off his hat with a heroism scarcely to be surpassed on the perilous breach. It might be ruin; it might mean discovery, betrayal; he might be sent away, banished from his gates of paradise; but, whatever happened, he could not be disrespectful to her.

She did not return the salutation, but she

opened the window and looked out after the carriage, putting out into the damp air what Walter within himself called her beautiful head. It was not strictly speaking a beautiful head, but it had various elements of beauty—dark eyes full of light; a crop of soft brown silky hair, clustering in curly short luxuriance; a complexion pale and clear, but lightly touched with colour; and a mouth which was really a wonder of a mouth beside the ordinary developments of that universally defective feature. She looked after him with mockery in her eyes, which only attracted the foolish boy the more, and made him half frantic to spring from his place in the sight of the village and put himself at her feet. It would have cost her nothing to give him a smile, a wave of her hand; and there was no telling what it might cost him to have taken off his hat to her; but she was immovable. He gazed, as long as he could see anything, out of the carriage window. At least, if he had sacrificed himself he should get the good of it, and look, and look, as long as eyes could see.

‘How d’ye do?—how d’ye do?’ cried the rector, waving his hand towards the carriage. Perhaps he thought that the salutation was for him, the old bat. Walter drew in his head again, and looked with keen suspicion at his sister in her corner, who raised her eyes, which seemed heavy (could she have been asleep?), with a dreamy sort of smile, totally unlike the smile of a spy maturing her observations, and asked,

‘Who was that?’

‘Who was what?’

‘The voice,’ said Ally, ‘in the street—“How d’ye do?”’

‘It was the rector—who else should it be? Do you mean to say you did not see him going along the road?’

‘No, I did not see him,’ said Ally, with that dreamy, imbecile sort of smile. She had seen nothing, noticed nothing! And the rector had taken it for granted that the greeting had been for himself, and thought young Walter was very civil; and all had passed over with perfect safety, as if it had been the most natural thing

in the world. Walter fell back into the other corner, and thus the brother and sister swung and jolted along, each in a beatitude and agitation of his (and her) own. Perhaps there was a subtle sort of sympathy in the silence. They did not say anything to each other until they had turned in at the gates, and were stumbling along the avenue at Penton under the pine-trees, all bare and moaning. This roused them instinctively, although their dreams were more absorbing than anything else in earth or heaven.

‘Here we are at last,’ said Ally, rousing herself, but speaking under her breath.

‘Not yet; don’t you know the avenue is nearly a mile long? And don’t be frightened—remember what mother said.’

‘Oh, not frightened,’ she cried, but caught her breath a little. ‘Wat, I wish it was over, and we were going home.’

‘So do I, Ally: but we must go through with it now we are here.’

‘Oh, I suppose so. Will she be waiting at the door, do you think, or come to meet us? or

will they tell us she is out, and offer to show us our rooms, and send us tea?’

‘As they do in novels to the poor relations? I hope they will have better taste,’ said Walter, growing red, ‘than to try the poor relation dodge with us. Oh, no! Mrs. Russell Penton knows that she is still more or less in our power.’

‘I wish the first was over,’ said Ally; ‘it may not perhaps seem so dreadful after that.’

And in this not ecstatic state of mind they drew up at the door, where the footman who came out looked with contempt at the shabby village fly. Mrs. Russell Penton had been walking, and was coming in at that moment, with a little chubby-faced girl by her side. Cousin Alicia and her companion took in every feature of the shabby fly, the old horse, the driver with his patched coat, as they came forward. It was almost more dreadful than what Walter called ‘the poor relation dodge,’ though Mrs. Russell Penton was so civil as to come to the door of the fly, which was difficult to open, to receive her visitors. Already, before even they

entered the house, their poverty had thus been put to shame. Neither of them, indeed, made much account of the little round-faced stranger who stood looking on, with her mouth a little open, watching their disembarkation. Nothing could look more insignificant than this little girl did. She might have been a little waiting-maid, an attendant, not smart enough for a soubrette; even Mrs. Russell Penton took no notice, did not introduce her, but left her standing as if she were of no importance, while she herself conducted Ally upstairs. Walter himself, in the confusion of the arrival, had nearly followed without thinking. But fortunately (which was a great satisfaction to him afterwards) that habit of good-breeding which would not let him pass Crockford's cottage without taking off his hat, inspired him to stand back, and let the little maid, as he thought her, pass in before him. She did this with a little blush and shy bow, and ran through the hall out of sight, as a little person in what was presumably her position would do; and Walter followed his sister upstairs. He felt that there was nothing

to complain of in the matter of their reception, at least. They were not being treated as poor relations. Whatever might happen afterwards, there was a certain soothing in that.

CHAPTER II.

PREPARATION FOR THE GUESTS.

THE arrival of the visitors had not been unattended with excitement at Penton itself. Little Mab Russell, the great heiress, had reached the house only a few days before, and, as her uncle's stately wife was an object of some alarm to her, the prospect of a companion of her own age was doubly agreeable. Mab was the daughter of a brother of Mr. Russell Penton's, who had never been of much account in the family, who had gone abroad and made a great fortune, and died, leaving this one little girl rich enough to cause a flutter in whatever society she came into, as good as an estate, much better

than most appointments for any young man in want of an establishment.

Russell Penton had taken from the first a whimsical sort of interest in her, which did not show itself in the way in which interest is usually exhibited by elderly relations. To shield her from fortune-hunters, to find some equal match in which the advantage should not be altogether on the gentleman's side, did not seem to be a thing which entered into his thoughts. He spoke of her with a faint laugh full of humour and a realization of all the circumstances such as few men would have made apparent. With the charitable and amused eyes of a man who had himself, being poor, married an heiress, he looked at all the flutterers who had already appeared in Mabel's youthful train. He was tolerant of the young men. He laughed half-abashed, half-sympathetic, at their little wiles, asking himself had he made his intentions so transparent as that? and putting forth his little measures of defence without any of the hard words that generally accompany such precautions. When other people warned the little

girl against the dangers to which she was subject—and she had already received many warnings to this effect, even from Mrs. Russell Penton herself, who was one of the most anxious of her advisers—Mabel had been greatly comforted to find that her uncle Gerald only laughed. The little girl did not quite understand the combination; for, when Gerald laughed, his wife grew more grave than ever and anxious to protect the heiress.

‘Why does Uncle Gerald laugh?’ she had asked one day. And Mrs. Russell Penton had grown very red, and said something about his inclination to see a joke in the gravest subjects, which Mabel, who was very fond of her uncle, thought severe. And their several accounts of the unexpected visitors perplexed her more and more.

‘I hope, my dear,’ Mrs. Russell Penton said, ‘that you will find my godchild pleasant. I can give you very little information about her, I am ashamed to say. We have been so much out of England—and, though they are relations, they are rather out of our sphere.’

‘Poor,’ said her husband, ‘but not the less agreeable for that.’

‘I would not go so far,’ said Alicia, in her grave way. ‘To be poor is of course nothing against them, but unfortunately poverty does affect the training, and manners, and ways of thinking. I should have preferred not to have them when you were here, but circumstances which I could not resist——’

‘It is kind of you, Alicia, not to say over which you had no control: for the circumstances, I fear, were your unworthy uncle, Mab. I wanted them; and my wife, who is very good always, and ready to please me, gave in, which is generally more than I deserve.’

‘Why did you want them, Uncle Gerald?’ Mab inquired.

‘There is a big question!’ he answered laughing; ‘am I to lay bare all my motives to this little thing, and let her see the depths of my thoughts?’

‘And why did Aunt Gerald not want them?’ pursued Mab.

She had no genius or even much intelligence

to speak of; but the fact of being an heiress has a very maturing influence, and little Mab was aware of a thing or two which has not been formulated in any philosophy. She inspected the two people who were so much older and wiser than she with very shrewd and wide-open eyes.

‘My motives are clear enough,’ said Mrs. Russell Penton, with a look at her husband which would have been angry if she had not had so much respect for him, and warning if she had not known how impracticable he was. ‘I felt it my duty to your family, my dear, that you should make no unsuitable acquaintances, nor run the risk perhaps of contracting likings, I mean friendships—I mean becoming perhaps attached to people who would not prove to be the kind of people you ought to know: in my—in our house.’

This very complicated sentence, so unlike the lucidity of Mrs. Russell Penton’s usual conversation, was entirely due to the fact that her husband’s eyes, with a laugh in them, were upon

her all the time she was speaking. Mab exclaimed, in astonishment,

‘But your relations, Aunt Gerald—I have always heard that your family——’

‘I can scarcely say that these young people belong to my family. They are the children of a distant cousin. Their mother I scarcely know. They have not been brought up as—you have been, for instance. They will not know any of the people you know. In short—but, of course, as they will only be here for three days, it cannot make much difference. What is it, Bowker? My father?——’

Mrs. Russell Penton got up very reluctantly to answer Sir Walter’s summons. She gave her husband an almost imploring look. She wanted to do more than put the heiress on her guard against these young people. She wanted Mab, in fact, to be set against them. The idea of any untoward complication happening, of the Russell family having it in their power to reproach her with inveigling their heiress into a connection with one of her own name, was in-

tolerable to Alicia, all the more from the circumstances of her own marriage, which moved her husband so entirely the other way.

‘One would think,’ said little Mab, with her shrewd look, ‘that Aunt Gerald did not like her relations; but you, uncle, I think you do.’

‘This is a problem which your little wits are scarcely able to solve unassisted,’ he said, ‘though you make very good guesses, Mab. My wife is not fond of her relations because they are her relations in the first place.’

‘Uncle Gerald!’

‘Such a statement is very crude and wants a great deal of clearing up. You never heard your aunt’s story, did you, Mab?’

‘Story?’ said Mab, faltering. ‘I—I did not know that there was any story—except——’

Russell Penton began to speak.

‘Oh, yes, it was this.’ And then he was infected by Mab’s embarrassment. He stopped, laughed, but awkwardly, even grew red, which, for a man of his years and experience, was inconceivable, and said, ‘No, no; not in that way. The story is not perhaps what you would call a

story. It concerns not anything in the shape of lover, so far as I know——’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon, Uncle Gerald!’

‘There is no harm done. She was not born to inherit all her father could leave to her, like you. There were brothers at first; and the heir of entail who succeeds now, who takes what should have been theirs, is the father of these two young ones. Don’t you see? There is nothing for a good strong family repugnance like a cousin who is the heir of entail.’

Mabel paused a little, employing her faculties upon this question, which was new to her. Finally she delivered her judgment.

‘Perhaps—at least, I think I can understand. But the children haven’t done anything, have they? It is not their fault?’

‘It is nobody’s fault, as is the case with so many of the worst complications of life. And this is something a little worse still than the heir of entail. It is the heir whom you are buying out, whom you are persuading to part with his rights. Well, perhaps they are a bad kind of rights. I prefer not to give an opinion. To

bind up a property for generations so that it shall descend only in a certain way may be wrong; neither you nor I are capable of clearing up such high questions, Mab. It is good for the family, but bad for the individual, as "Nature, red in tooth and claw," is, according to the laureate. But Mab, my little Mab, this boy Walter is the one that is to be done out of it. Don't you see? It is quite fair between Alicia and his father, but the boy has no voice, and he is done out of it. I think it is rather hard upon the boy.'

'There was nothing said about a boy,' said little Mab, demurely. 'I only heard of a girl.'

'That was because you are not supposed to take any interest in boys,' said her uncle, with a laugh; 'not such a boy either in your eyes—over twenty, poor fellow, and no doubt having thought of the time when he should be the heir. He will be Sir Walter Penton in his turn, if he lives, but otherwise he is out of it. I, who never was in it, who am only a spectator, so to speak, I feel very much for young Wat.'

‘Poor boy!’ said Mab, under her breath.

By effect of nature she took, as was to be expected, her uncle’s view. Perhaps he ought not to have thus sacrificed his wife and her cause. But he had a motive, this man devoid of all sense of propriety—a bad, dreadful motive, such as any correcter judgment would have condemned. He wanted to interest the heiress in a penniless, prospectless young man. Could anything be more wicked and dreadful? He wanted to surround young Walter Penton with a halo of romance in Mabel’s eyes, to call forth in his favour that charm of the unfortunate, that natural desire of the very young to compensate a sufferer, the very sentiments which he ought to have exorcised had they come by themselves into being. His eyes lighted up when this breath of pity came from Mab’s lips. A humorous sense of the balance in favour of the race of Penton which he thus meant to create, diminishing so far his own obligations, tickled his imagination. He would have liked to have some one to laugh with over this good joke.

Perhaps even underneath the enjoyment there was something which was not so enjoyable, a sense of worthlessness of wealth, and that poverty was by no means such a drawback as people thought. But that was altogether private, unopened in his own soul; and he had not even anyone who could appreciate the joke which was on the surface, and the pleasure he felt in raising rebellions in little Mab's mind, in prepossessing her in Wat's favour, in thwarting Alicia. He would not have thwarted her in anything else; he had the greatest respect for his wife, and it wanted only different circumstances, a change of position, to have made him the husband of husbands. But to thwart her on this point was delightful to him. He had set his heart upon it. It would be turning the tables also on his own people, which was agreeable too.

‘Yes,’ he said, more seriously. ‘Poor boy! all the more that he will not know how little, in reality, he loses by the bargain that is being made over his head.’

‘What do you mean, Uncle Gerald? I thought

you said you were so sorry for him—that he was losing so much.’

‘More in idea than in fact—much, everything in imagination, this house—which he calls, no doubt, the house of his fathers.’

Mab looked round on the stately drawing-room which was full of a hundred beautiful things, a long room with a row of windows looking out over the wide landscape, divided and kept in proportion by pillars supporting a roof which, it had been the pride of a previous generation to tell, was painted by an Italian artist in the best taste of his century.

‘But isn’t it the house of his fathers?’ she said.

‘I suppose so, for as much as that is worth.’

‘Oh, Uncle Gerald! although we had always very nice houses, papa never thought there was anything equal to——’

‘Yes, I know,’ he said, hurriedly, and paused a moment to remember. He went on by-and-by, with a voice slightly broken, ‘We were all brought up there from our childhood. Even that, Mab, is more in appearance than in reality.’

A man may get very little satisfaction even out of the place where he was born.'

Mab regarded him closely with her shrewd eyes. They were not beautiful eyes, they were rather small, but very blue, with a frosty keenness in them; and they saw a great deal. 'You don't take a very bright view of things in general,' she said.

Upon which he laughed and told her that he was an old grumbler, and not to be listened to.

'Suppose I was to tell you that a ball every night (or half a dozen of them) would not make you perfectly happy, and that even your first season might bore you—'

'Uncle Gerald, I have always heard that you were very fond of society. Did *your* first season bore you?' she asked.

'Not at all, not half enough, and—I am not sure that it would now, which is a confession to make at my age. Hush! not a word about that. I wish you to be kind to the young Pentons, remember, that is all. The little girl will be shy and the poor boy may be morose, I shouldn't wonder.'

‘But you have taken them under your protection,’ the girl said, looking at him fixedly. ‘What could they have better than that? as if it mattered about me!’

Mr. Russell Penton shook his head, but he said nothing more. He went out of the room shortly after, when his wife came back. He was not a man to allow for a moment that there was anything in his position he did not like, or that his protection would not be effectual in his own, nay, in his wife’s, or rather in his wife’s father’s house. But as he went out with his hands in his pockets, and the remains of a philosophical shrug keeping his shoulders rather nearer his ears than usual, he could not help being aware that it was so. It was a curious fact enough, and he would have been as well pleased that little Mab had not divined it; but still it was all in the day’s work. He had known what the disadvantages would be when he accepted the position of Prince Consort, as he said to himself often. On the whole, it was a position not without its alleviations, but (like most others in this world) it had to be

taken with all its drawbacks, without any discussion and still more without any complaint. There was no one who had not something to bear, some in one way, some in another, his own perhaps not by a long way the worst. And then with a sort of grim amusement he began to wonder how, if his little plan should come to anything, young Wat would adapt himself to it. Young Wat, a foolish boy, mourning over his loss of this big house with all its French finery, its renaissance front, its drawing-room roof by Sugero (this was his 'joke upon the great Italian decorator's name), its waterworks all out of order, what a thing it would be for him should he marry the Russell heiress with all her money-bags. And afterwards how would he agree with it?

Russell Penton was very loyal, but yet he felt that were he Wat, in all the freedom of opening life, with the whole world before him, he would neither bind a great shell like Penton upon his shoulders nor himself to a crown matrimonial. If the boy but knew what it was to be free! if he could realise the happiness of going

where he would and doing what he pleased ! To be sure he would probably have to work for that freedom, and he had not himself at any period of his career been a man who understood work. It was a thing he had no genius for. To take up the labours of a profession was more entirely out of the traditions and capabilities of his soul than the *rôle* which he had adopted. He was quite aware of this, and, knowing it, was very willing to promote Wat's interest in the same way which had, as people say, made his own fortune—judging Wat to have been in all likelihood spoiled for other kinds of advancement like himself. He had become even eager about this, determined that Wat should have his chance with the best, and that the Pentons should thus be even with the Russells, each family contributing a Princess Royal and each a fortunate consort ; but in the midst of this benevolent scheme, of which his wife so entirely disapproved, he reserved to himself this subject of humorous curiosity—how Walter would take to the place, in which he was himself so loyal and patient, but yet never without a

consciousness of all there was to bear and to do.

Mab, who was so shrewd, with all her wits about her, questioned Alicia closely when they were alone together. She knew already that the visitors were not much in the good books of the mistress of the house; but that she was a little ashamed of the feeling and anxious to have it understood that there was no reason for it.

‘I will not conceal from you,’ Mrs. Russell Penton repeated, ‘that I did not wish you to meet them: not from anything wrong in them—the girl is a nice gentle little thing, I have no doubt; and the boy—I know no harm of the boy: but I should have preferred that you had not met them here.’

‘Why, Aunt Gerald? do tell me why.’

But this was what Mrs. Penton could not or else would not do. She said,

‘Because they are not in our sphere. They are very nice, I don’t doubt. There are, of course, just the same race as myself, so it is not for that; but you that have been brought up in the lap of luxury, and this girl, who probably

has had the life of a nursery-maid (for the children are endless), how could you have anything to say to each other? There is too great a difference. This is what I always felt.'

'And the boy,' said Mab, in a little voice which was somewhat hypocritical, 'is not he any better? Is he quite a common boy?'

'The boy is not worth considering,' said Mrs. Russell Penton. 'He is a hobbledohoy, neither boy nor man, don't you know. I don't suppose he has had more education than his sister, and I don't think he will amuse at all. But they are only coming for three days, and I hope you will not mind for that short time.'

'Oh, I shall not mind,' said Mab; 'I like seeing people of all kinds.'

And thus the conversation dropped. But it need not be said that all this was the very best introduction possible of the two young Pentons to the notice of the little heiress. She did not indeed resolve to make to Wat an offer of her hand and fortune. But the thought of the heir who was an heir no longer, and of how the mere fact of being 'out of it,' while still so pro-

foundly concerned, must work upon the mind, and all the traditional miseries of the poor gentleman, took possession of her imagination. And fancy took the side of the unfortunate, as a young fancy always does. Accordingly when the poor old broken-down fly drove up, and the portmanteaux were taken down, and the two timid young people stepped out of the mouldy old carriage, Mab, though she saw the ludicrous features of the scene, felt not the least desire to laugh. She looked at them keenly, standing by, acting as audience to this little drama, and saw Ally's anxious look at her brother as she passed into the house, and Walter's keen consciousness of the footman's scorn and Mrs. Penton's toleration. He did not notice herself, and evidently thought her a person of no importance, which for the moment piqued Mab. But when he paused to let her, a little nobody, as he thought, pass before him, all her romantic sympathies came back to her mind. And so it came to pass that it was not Ally who was the most excited of the young persons thus brought together in what seemed

an accidental way ; nor, perhaps, could their hearts have been seen, was it she who was the most likely to have met her fate.

CHAPTER III.

RECKONING WITHOUT THEIR HOST.

MRS. RUSSELL PENTON was not without her share of the general embarrassment. There was never any quarrel in the stately well-regulated house. An angry look, a hot word, were things unknown. But still she knew very well when her husband was not in accord with her. His smile was quite enough. Matters had gone very far indeed before he whistled, but sometimes things did even go so far as that.

This time there was no such climax. His lips had never even formed themselves into the shape of a whistle; and in his countenance there was no suspicion of a sarcastic meaning. But she knew that his thoughts were not as her thoughts.

She knew even, which was a rare thing, that he was against her, that he meant to act more or less in a contrary sense. The young people whom she had invited against her will, to whom she meant to be—not unkind, that was not in her nature, but to treat at least no better than was necessary, he meant to take up and show the greatest attention to. She was aware of this and it troubled her.

How was it possible that it should not trouble her? It was an accusation, nay, more, a verdict delivered against herself. And she saw even that little Mab was of the same way of thinking, that she was interested in the new comers, that her questions had a meaning, and that even that little thing was critical of her attitude, and blamed her, actually blamed her, though of course she did not venture to say anything. This made Alicia Penton angry and sore within herself; and there was something still more disagreeable, which lent a sting to all the rest; and that was, that she was her own worst critic, and felt herself poor and small and petty, and acting an ignoble part.

But there was yet a deeper depth to which she never had expected to descend. Sir Walter in his great age changed his habits for nobody. He was never seen in the drawing-room except on rare occasions for an hour after dinner, when he felt better than usual. He thought the library the most cheerful as well as the warmest room in the house, and when visitors came it was expected that they should pay their respects to him there. Sir Walter had been a little restless on the day the young Pentons arrived. It had not seemed to Alicia that they were important enough to be presented to her father in a solemn interview.

‘There is no reason why you should trouble about them,’ she said. ‘You will see them at dinner, that will be soon enough.’ And the old gentleman had made no particular reply.

Therefore when they arrived, as has been related, Mrs. Penton led them upstairs to the drawing-room and gave them tea. The room was very light, very bright, with its long range of large windows, of which the great breadth of the landscape below seemed to form a part, and

the pillars which divided it into a sort of nave and aisles gave occasion for many separate centres for conversation and the intercourse of congenial groups in a large company.

Ally and Walter entered the room with dazzled eyes. It was to them as a dwelling of the gods. Had this visit been paid only a few weeks before they would have secretly taken possession, imagining how here and here each should have their special corner. The effect it produced on Walter now, as he looked round, too proud to show that it was new to him, too intent upon keeping all trace of anger out of his countenance to be otherwise than preternaturally grave, and on Ally, regarding its grandeur with an awe that was beyond words, was very different, but in both places it was very profound. Ally thought with a movement of mingled regret and thankfulness how right mother was! What could we have done, she said to herself, in this great room? It would have been delightful indeed for the children who on wet days would never have wanted to go out with such a place to play in. But then

how could anyone have had the heart to give this up to the children? She could not talk to Mrs. Penton, who maintained a little formal conversation, her mind was so full of this thought. It was beautiful. It was a magnificent room. It was wonderful to think that it might have belonged to *us*. But mother was right—oh, how right mother was! What could we have done with it? How could we even have furnished it? Ally said to herself; but she knew that Wat was annoyed when she allowed herself to say,

‘What a lovely room!’

‘It is a very handsome room. I don’t think there is anything like it in the county,’ said Mrs. Russell Penton. ‘I ought not perhaps to say so, for we have done a great deal to it ourselves. But I may allow that it is very perfect. You have never seen it before?’

‘The view is fine,’ said Wat, going to the window before his sister could answer; ‘it is so extensive that it makes any room look small.’ He was so much out of temper and out of heart that he could not help making an attempt to ‘take’ this serene great lady ‘down.’

She smiled in her dignified way, which made the young critic feel very small.

‘We seldom hear any fault found with its size,’ she said.

And then, to the astonishment of Walter, the little person, whom he had allowed of his grace to pass in before him, came into the room and took her place and addressed the great lady in the most familiar terms.

‘Aunt Gerald,’ she said, ‘we are all a kind of cousins, don’t you think? We must be a kind of cousins, though we never saw each other before, for you are aunt to them and you are aunt to me, so of course we are friends by nature;’ and with that she put out her hand not only to Ally, whose face brightened all over at this cordial greeting, but to Wat, who stood hanging over them like a cloud, not knowing what to say.

‘You are mistaken, Mab,’ said Mrs. Russell Penton; ‘I am not aunt but cousin to—to—’ she did not know what to call them—‘to my young relations,’ she said at last.

‘That comes exactly to the same thing—an

old cousin is always aunt,' said Mab, settling herself on her seat like a little pigeon. She was very plump, pink and white, with very keen little blue eyes, not at all unlike a doll. There was nothing imposing in her appearance. 'I am Mab,' she said, 'and are you Alicia, like Aunt Gerald? Do all your brothers and sisters call you so? It is such a long name. I have neither brothers nor sisters.'

'Oh, what a pity,' said gentle Ally, who had brightened as soon as this new companion came in with all the freemasonry of youth.

'Do you think so? but then they say it is very good in another way. I have nobody to be fond of me though, nobody to bully me. Big brothers bully you dreadfully, don't they?' She cast a look at Walter, inviting him to approach. She was not shy, and he was standing about, not knowing what to do with himself. Walter would have been awkward in any circumstances, having no acquaintance with strange ladies or habit of attending them at tea. He drew a step nearer indeed, but her advances did not put him at his ease; for had he not

taken her for a lady's-maid? though this she did not know.

Mrs. Russell Penton left them thus to make acquaintance, as Mab said, but not willingly. She had to obey a summons from Sir Walter. Sir Walter had been a great deal more restless than usual for the last day or two. There was nothing the matter with him, he said himself, and the doctor said he was quite well, there was not the slightest reason for any uneasiness; but yet he was restless—constantly sending for Alicia when she was not with him, changing his position, finding fault with his newspapers, and that all the little paraphernalia he loved was not sufficiently at hand. Mrs. Russell Penton was always ready when her father wanted her. She would have let nothing, not the most exalted visitor, stand between her and her father, and though she was by no means desirous of leaving these young people together, yet she got up and left them without a word. It was, however, a little too much for her when Sir Walter exclaimed, almost before she got into the room,

‘Where are those children? I suppose they have come, Alicia. Why are you hiding them away from me?’

‘The children!—what children? Father, I don’t know what you mean.’

‘What children are there to interest me *now*, except the one set?’ said Sir Walter, peevishly. ‘Edward’s children of course I mean.’

‘Edward’s children!’

‘Am I growing stupid, or what is the matter with you, Alicia? I don’t generally have to repeat the same thing a dozen times over. Naturally it is Edward’s son I want. A man can scarcely help feeling a certain interest in the boy who is his heir.’

‘I am afraid I am very stupid, father. I thought we had settled——’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ said the old man; ‘it is all settled just as you liked, I know: but all the same the boy is my heir.’

Mrs. Russell Penton made no reply. Sir Walter was old enough to be allowed to say what he would without contradiction; but the statement altogether was extremely galling to

her. 'Settled just as you liked.' It was not as she liked, but as he liked. It was he who had moved in it, though it was for her benefit. Though she could not deny that the desire of her life was to possess Penton, to remain in her home, yet she was proudly conscious that she would have taken no step in the matter, done nothing, of her own accord. It was he who had settled it: and now he turned upon her, and asked for the boy who was his heir! Everybody was hard upon Alicia at this moment of fate. They all seemed to have united against her—her husband, the little girl even whom she had wished to defend from fortune-hunters—and now her father himself! If she had been twenty instead of fifty she could not have felt this universal abandonment more. But the practice of so many years was strong upon her. She would not oppose or make any objections to what he wished, though it was of the last repugnance to herself.

'I should have liked,' said the old man, 'to see Edward too; when one has advanced so far as I have on the path of life, Alicia, likes and

dislikes die away—and prejudices. I may have been too subject to prejudice. Edward never was very much to calculate upon. He had no character; he never could hold his own; but there was very little harm in him, as little harm as good you will perhaps say. Bring me the boy. He will be the same as I, Sir Walter Penton, when his turn comes, and it will not be long before his turn comes. Edward will never last to be an old man like me. He hasn't got it in him; he hasn't stuff enough. The young one will be Sir Walter—Sir Walter Penton, the old name. The tenth, isn't it—Walter the tenth—if we were to count as some of the foreign houses do?

'Oh, father, don't!' cried Alicia. To think he could talk, almost jest, about another Walter!

He looked up at her quickly, as if out of a little gathering confusion, seeing for the moment what she meant.

'Eh! well, we must not always dwell on one subject—must not dwell upon it. Let me see the boy.'

Mrs. Russell Penton rang the bell and gave a

message, out of which it was almost impossible to keep an angry ring of impatience.

‘Tell the young gentleman who is in the drawing-room, he who arrived half-an-hour ago—you understand?—that Sir Walter would like to see him. Show him the way.’

‘Why don’t you speak of him by his name, Alicia? Young Mr. Penton, Mr. Walter Penton, my successor, you know, Bowker, that is to be. Say I seldom leave my room, and that I should be pleased to see him here. My dear,’ he went on, ‘the servants always act upon the cue you give them, and they ought to be very respectful to the rising sun, you know. It is bad policy to set them out of favour with the rising sun.’

Alicia’s heart was too full for speech. She kept behind her father’s chair, arranging one or two little things which required no arrangement, keeping command over herself by a strong effort. A little more, she felt, and she would no longer be able to do this. That even the servants should have such a suggestion made to them, that Edward’s boy was the heir! Had her father departed from the resolution which

was, she declared to herself passionately, his own resolution, not suggested by her? Had he forgotten? Was this some wavering of the mind which might invalidate all future acts of his? She felt on the edge of an outbreak of feeling such as had rarely occurred in her reserved and dignified life, and at the same time she felt herself turned to stone. The old man went on talking, more than usual, more cheerfully than usual, as if something exhilarating and pleasant was about to happen, but she paid little attention to what he said. She stood behind, full of a new and anxious interest, when the door opened and Wat, timid, but on his guard, not knowing what might be wanted with him, half defiant, and yet more impressed and awed than he liked to show, came into the room. Mrs. Russell Penton gave him no aid. She said, 'This is Edward's son, father.' It annoyed her to name him by his name, though there was no doubt that he had a right to it, as good a right as anyone. She could not form her lips to say Walter Penton. But what she failed in Sir Walter made up. He half rose from his chair,

which was a thing he rarely did, and held out both his hands.

‘Ah, Walter! I’m glad to see you, very glad to see you,’ he said. He took the youth’s hands in those large, soft, aged ones of his, and drew him close and looked at him, as he might have looked at a grandson; and there was enough resemblance between them to justify the suggestion. ‘So this is Walter,’ he went on, ‘I’m very glad to see you, my boy. You’re the last of the old stock—no, not the last either, for I hear there’s plenty of you, boys and girls. Alicia’—the old man’s voice trembled a little, tears came into his eyes, as they do so easily at his age—‘Alicia, don’t you think he has a look of—of—another Walter? About the eyes—and his mouth? He is a true Penton. My dear, I’m very sorry if I’ve vexed you. I—I like to see it. I could think he had lived and done well and left us a son to come after him, my poor boy!’

And old Sir Walter for a moment broke down, and lifted up his voice and wept, running the little wail of irrepressible emotion into a cough

to veil it, and swinging Wat's hand back and forward in his own. Alicia stood as long as she could behind him, holding herself down. But when her father's voice broke, and he called her attention to that resemblance, she could bear it no longer. She walked away out of the room without a word. Had she not seen it—that resemblance? and it was an offence to her, a bitter injury. He had neither lived nor done well, that other Walter, the brother of her love and of her pride. He had crushed her heart under his feet, beaten down her pride, torn her being asunder; and now to have it pointed out to her that this insignificant boy, who was not even to be the heir, whose birthright was being sold over his head, that he was a true Penton and like her brother! She could bear it no longer. Not even the recollection that this emotion might injure her father, that he wanted her care to soothe him, sufficed to make her capable of restraining the passion which had seized possession of her. She went away quickly, silent, saying nothing. It was more than she could bear.

In the corridor she met her husband, between whom and her there was, she was conscious, a certain mist, also on account of this boy. Had all been as usual in other ways she would have passed him by with a sense in her heart of a certain separation and injury; but a woman must have some one to claim support from, and after all he was her husband, bound to stand by her, whatever questions might arise between them. She went up to him with an instinctive feeling of having a right to his sympathy in any case, even if he should disapprove, and put her hand within his arm with a hasty appealing movement, quite unusual with her. No man was more easily affected than Russell Penton by such an appeal. He put his hand upon hers, and looked at her tenderly.

‘What is it, my dear?’ he said.

‘Nothing, Gerald; except that I want to lean upon you for a moment, because I have more than I can bear; though you disapprove of me,’ she said.

He held her close to him, full of pity and tenderness.

‘Lean, Alicia, whether I approve or disapprove;’ and he added, ‘I know that all this is hard upon you.’

He sympathised with her at least, if not with the tenor of her thoughts.

She made no further explanation, nor did he ask for it. After a moment she said,

‘Gerald, do you know whether a sudden change of mind, abandoning one way of thinking for another, is supposed to be a bad sign—of health, I mean?’

He paused a moment and looked at her, with an evident question as to whether it was she who had changed her mind. But that look was enough to show that, though she was suffering, she was firm as ever, and a glance she gave towards the closed door of the library enlightened him.

‘I should not think it was a very good sign—of health,’ he said.

‘It shows a weakening—it shows a relaxation of the fibre—a—that is what I think. And so complete a change! Gerald, my father shall do nothing he does not wish to do for me.’

‘I never supposed you would wish that, my dear. What is it? Don’t form too hasty a judgment. Has he said that he does not want to do anything that has been spoken of between you?’

‘No, he has spoken of nothing. He has got Edward Penton’s boy with him, and he is quite affectionate, talking of a resemblance——’

‘Alicia, is it Penton you are thinking so much of?’

‘No, no,’ she cried, leaning upon his shoulder, bursting at last into sudden, long repressed tears. ‘No, no! It is my brother, my brother! *my* Walter! He who should have been, who ought to have been— Gerald, it may be wrong, but I can’t bear it, I can’t bear it. He talks of a resemblance——’

‘Alicia, I see it too. I thought it would soften your heart.’

‘Oh!’ she cried, ‘how little you know;’ and flinging herself from him, with a cry of mortification and disappointment, she flew into her own room and closed the door.

Russell Penton stood looking after her with a

troubled countenance, and then he began to walk slowly up and down the corridor. He did not approve, and perhaps, as she said in her passion, did not understand this strange revulsion of all gentle sentiments. But it went to his heart to leave her to herself in a moment of pain, even though the pain was of her own inflicting. He did not follow or attempt to console her. She was not a girl to be soothed and persuaded out of this outburst of passionate feeling. He respected her individuality, her age, her power to bear her own burdens; but because his heart was very tender, though he did not disturb Alicia, he walked up and down waiting till she should return to him, outside that closed door.

CHAPTER IV.

SIR WALTER AND HIS HEIR.

THERE was a ball at Penton that evening.

Nothing was more unusual than a ball at Penton. The family festivities were usually of the gravest kind. Solemn dinner-parties, duties of society, collections of people who had to be asked, county potentates, with whom Alicia and her husband had dined, and who had to be repaid. Nothing under fifty, unless it might be by chance now and then a newly-married couple, added in the natural progress of events to the circle of the best people, ever appeared at that luxurious but somewhat heavy table. Mr. Russell Penton chafed, but endured, and talked politics with the squires, and did his best to

relieve the ponderous propriety of their wives. He was good at making the best of things; and when he could do nothing more he put on a brave face and supported it. But now, for once in a way, youth was paramount. The young people from Penton Hook, who had little acquaintance with the other young people of all the county families who were invited, had not so much as heard of what was in store for them; and Ally reflected, when she did hear, that it was something like an inspiration which had induced her mother to provide her with that second evening dress, which was quite suitable for a first ball. It was very simple, very white, fit for her age, her slim figure, and youthful aspect. But it was not for Ally that the ball was given.

‘I believe it is my ball,’ Mab had told her. ‘It is my first visit to Penton since I was a child, and now that I am out Aunt Alicia thinks that something has to be done for me. Are you “out”? but you must be, of course, or you would not have been asked for to-day.’

‘I don’t know whether I am out or not,’ said Ally, with a blush; ‘but I don’t think mother, if she knew, would have any objection. I am eighteen. I have never been at a ball before. Perhaps I may not dance in the right way.’

‘Oh, nonsense,’ said Mab, ‘whatever way you dance you have only to stick to it and say that is the right way.’

The two girls were alone, for Walter had just been mysteriously called out of the room. And though Ally’s thoughts followed her brother with anxiety, wondering what could be wanted with him, yet the novelty of the scene and the companionship of a girl of her own age so warmed her heart that she forgot the precautions and cares which had been impressed upon her, and began to talk and to act by natural impulse without thought.

‘I should never have the courage to do that,’ she said; ‘I have never even seen people dancing. We had a few lessons when we were children, and sometimes we try with Wat, just to see, if

we ever had a chance, how we could get on. Anne plays and I have a turn, or else Anne has a turn and I play.'

'Is Anne your only sister?'

'Oh, no,' cried Ally, with a laugh at the impossibility of such a suggestion; 'there are two in the nursery. We are two boys and two girls, grown up; and the little ones are just the same, two and two.'

'How unfair things are in this world,' said Mab; 'to think there should be so many of you and only one of me!'

'It is strange,' said Ally; 'but not perhaps unfair; for when there is only one your father and mother must seem so much nearer to you—you must feel that they belong altogether to *you*.'

'Perhaps. Mamma died when I was born, so I never knew her at all. Papa is dead too. Don't let us talk of that. I never think of things that are disagreeable,' said Mab, 'what is the use? It can't do you any good, it only makes you worse thinking. Tell me about to-night. Who will be here? are they nice? are

they good dancers? Tell me which is the best dancer about, that I may ask Uncle Gerald to introduce him to me.'

'I know nobody,' said Ally.

'Nobody! though you have lived here all your life! Oh, you little envious thing! You want to keep them all to yourself; you won't tell me! Very well. I have no doubt your brother dances well: he has the figure for it. I shall dance with him all the night.'

'Oh no; that would be too much. But I hope you *will* dance with him, to give him a little confidence. Indeed, what I say is quite true. We don't know anybody; we have been brought up so—quietly. We never were here before.'

'Oh!' Mab said. She was an inquiring young woman, and she had not believed what she had heard. She had made very light of Mrs. Russell Penton's descriptions of her relations as 'not in our sphere.' As Ally spoke, however, Mab's eyes opened wider; she began to realise the real position. The misfortunes of the young Pentons had gone further than she believed; they were

poor relations in the conventional sense of the word, people to be thrust into a corner, to be allowed to shift for themselves. But not if they have some one to look after them, Mab said to herself. She took up their cause with heat and fury. 'You shall soon know everybody,' she cried; 'Uncle Gerald will see to that, and so shall I.' It then occurred to her that Ally might resent this as an offer of patronage, and she added, hastily, 'Promise to introduce all your good partners to me, and I will introduce all mine to you. Is that settled? Oh, then between us we shall soon find out which are the best.'

How kind she was! To be sure, Cousin Alicia was not very kind; there was nothing effusive about her. No doubt she must mean to be agreeable, or why should she have asked them? though her manner was not very cordial. But as for Mab—who insisted that she was to be called Mab, and not Miss Russell—she was more 'nice' than anything that Ally could have imagined possible. She was like a new sister, 'she was like one of ourselves.' So Ally

declared with warmth to Wat, who knocked at the door of her room just as she was beginning to dress for dinner, with a face full of importance and gravity. He was quite indifferent as to Mab, but he told her of Sir Walter with a sort of enthusiasm.

‘He said I must not forget that I was his heir, and that he would like to make a man of me. What do you think he could mean, Ally, by saying that I was his heir, after all?’

Ally could not tell; how was it possible that she should tell, as she had not heard or seen the interview? And, besides, she was not the clever one to be able to divine what people meant. She threw, however, a little light on the subject by suggesting that perhaps he meant the title.

‘For you must be heir to the title, Wat,’ she said; ‘nobody can take that from you.’

Wat’s countenance fell at this, for he did not like to think that it was merely the baronetcy Sir Walter meant when he called him his heir. However, there was not very much time to talk. Walter had to hurry to his room to get ready,

and Ally to finish dressing her hair and to put on her dress, with a curious feeling of strangeness which took away her pleasure in it. Of course, you really could see yourself better in the long, large glass than in the little ones at the Hook, but an admiring audience of mother and sisters are more exhilarating to dress to than the noblest mirror. And Ally felt sad and excited—not excited as a girl generally does before her first ball, but filled with all manner of indefinite alarms. There was nothing to be alarmed about. Cousin Alicia, however cold she might seem, would not suffer, after all, her own relation to be neglected. And then there was Mab. The girl felt the confused prospect before her of pleasure—which she was not sure would be pleasure, or anything but a disguised pain—to grow brighter and more natural when she thought of Mab. And that compact about the partners. Ally wondered whether she would get any partners, or if they would all overlook her in her corner, a little girl whom nobody knew.

And then came dinner, an agitating but

brilliant ceremonial, with a confusing brightness of lights and flowers and ferns, and everything so strange, and the whole disturbed by an underlying dread of doing something wrong. Sir Walter at the head of the table, a strange image of age and tremulous state, looked to Ally like an old sage in a picture, or an old magician, one in whose very look there were strange powers. She scarcely raised her eyes when she was presented to him, but curtsied to the ground as if he had been a king, and did not feel at all sure that the look he gave her might not work some miraculous change in her. But Sir Walter did not take much notice of Ally, his attention was all given to Wat, whom he desired to have near him, and at whom he looked with that pleasure near to tears which betrays the weakness of old age.

When dinner was over, the old man would not have Russell Penton's arm, nor would he let his servant help him. He signed to Wat, to the astonishment of all, and shuffled into the ball-room, where half of the county were assembled, leaning on the arm of the youth, who was no less aston-

ished than everybody else. Sir Walter was very tall, taller than Wat, and he was heavy, and leaned his full weight upon the slight boy of twenty, who required all his strength to keep steady and give the necessary support. Mrs. Russell Penton, who was already in the ball-room receiving her guests, grew pale like clay when she saw this group approach.

‘Father, let me take you to your seat,’ she said, hurriedly, neglecting a family newly arrived too, who were waiting for her greeting.

‘Nothing of the kind, Alicia. I’m well off to-night. I’ve got Wat, you see,’ the old gentleman said, and walked up the whole length of the room, smiling and bowing, and pausing to speak to the most honoured guests. ‘This is young Walter,’ he said, introducing the boy, ‘don’t you know? My successor you know,’ with that old tremulous laugh which was half a cough, and brought the tears to his eyes. The people who knew the circumstances—and who did not know the circumstances?—stared and asked each other what could have happened to bring about such a revolution.

When Sir Walter had been seated at the upper end of his room he dismissed his young attendant with a caressing tap upon his arm.

‘Now go, boy, and find your partner. You must open the ball, you know ; nothing can be done till you’ve opened the ball. Go, go, and don’t keep everybody waiting.’

Poor Wat could not tell what to do when raised to this giddy height without any preparation, not knowing anybody, very doubtful about his own powers as a dancer, or what was the etiquette of such performances. Russell Penton almost thrust Mab upon him in his pause of bewilderment. And from where she stood at the door, stately and rigid, Alicia looked with a blank gaze upon this boy, this poor relation, whom her eyes had avoided, whom she had included almost perforce in her reluctant invitation to his sister, but who was thus made the principal figure in her entertainment. She had been reluctant to ask Ally, but the brother had been put in quite against her will. His name, his look, the resemblance which she refused to see, but yet could not ignore, were all intoler-

able to her; but her father's sudden fancy for the boy, his change of sentiment so inconceivable, so unexplainable, struck chill to her heart.

When she was released from her duties of receiving, she found out the doctor among the crowd of more important guests, and begged him to give her his opinion.

‘How do you think my father looks?’

‘Extremely well—better than he has looked for years—as if he had taken a new lease,’ the doctor said.

Mrs. Russell Penton shook her head. She herself was very pale; her eyes shone with a strange, unusual lustre. She said to herself that it was superstition. Why should not an old man take a passing fancy? It would pass with the occasion, it might mean nothing. There was no reason to suppose that this wonderful contradiction, this apparent revolution in his mind, was anything but a sudden impression, an effect—though so different from that in herself—of the stirring up of old associations. She sat down beside her father, and did her

best to subdue the state of unusual exhilaration in which he was.

‘You must not stay longer than you feel disposed,’ she said, with her hand upon his arm.

‘Oh, don’t fear for me, Alicia. I am wonderfully well; I never felt better. Look at young Wat, with that little partner of his! Isn’t she the little heiress? I shouldn’t wonder if he carried off the prize, the rascal! eh, Gerald? and very convenient too in the low state of the exchequer,’ the old gentleman said; and he chuckled and laughed with the water in his eyes, while his daughter by his side felt herself turning to stone.

It was not, she said to herself passionately, for fear of his changing his mind. It was that a change so extraordinary looked to her anxious eyes like one of those mental excitements which are said to go before the end.

It was Ally’s own fault that she got behind backs, and escaped the attentions which Mr. Russell Penton, absorbed, too, in this curious little drama, had intended to pay her. Ally, in

the shade of larger interests, fell out of that importance which ought to belong to a *débutante*. It was a great consolation to her when young Rochford suddenly appeared, excited and delighted, anxious to know if she had still a dance to give him. Poor Ally had as many dances as he pleased to give, and knew nobody in all this bewildering brilliant assembly so well as himself.

She was unspeakably relieved and comforted when he introduced her to his sisters and his mother, who, half out of natural kindness, and half because of the distinction of having a Miss Penton—who was a real Penton, though a poor one, in the great house which bore her name—under her wing, encouraged Ally to take refuge by her side, and talked to her and soothed her out of the frightened state of loneliness and abandonment which is perhaps more miserable to a young creature expecting pleasure in a ball-room than anywhere else. They got her partners among their own set, the guests who were, so to speak, below the salt, the secondary strata in the great assembly—who indeed were quite good enough

for Ally—quite as good as anyone, though without handles to their names or any prestige in society. Mab, when she met her new friend, stopped indeed to whisper aside, ‘Where have you picked up that man?’ But Mab, too, was fully occupied with her own affairs.

And Walter was altogether swept away from his sister. He made more acquaintances in the next hour or two than he had done for all the previous years of his life. If his head was a little turned, if he felt that some wonderful unthought of merit must suddenly have come out in him, who could wonder? He met Ally now and then, or saw her dancing and happy now; and with a half guilty gladness, feeling that there was no necessity for him to take her upon his shoulders, abandoned himself to the intoxication of his own success. It was his first; it was totally unexpected, and it was very sweet.

The time came, however, as the time always comes, when all this fascination and delight came to an end. Sir Walter had retired hours before; and now the last lingering guest had departed; the last carriage had rolled away, the

lights were extinguished, the great house had fallen into silence and slumber after the fatigue of excitement and enjoyment. Walter did not know how late, or rather how early it was, deep in the heart of the wintry darkness, towards morning, when he was roused from his first sleep by sudden sounds in the corridor, and voices outside his door. A sound of other doors opening and shutting, of confused cries and footsteps, made it evident to him that something unusual had occurred, as he sprang up startled and uneasy.

The first thought that rises to the mind of every inexperienced adventurer in this world, that the something which has happened must specially affect himself, made him think of some catastrophe at home, and made him clutch at his clothes and dress himself hurriedly, with a certainty that he was about to be summoned. There flashed through Walter's mind with an extraordinary rapidity, as if flung across his conscience from without, the possibility that it might be his father—the thought that in that case it would actually be he, as old Sir Walter

had said, who would be——The thought was guilty, barbarous, unnatural. It did not originate in the young man's own confused, half-awakened mind. What is there outside of us that flings such horrible realization across our consciousness without any will of ours? He had not time to feel how horrible it was when he recognised Mrs. Russell Penton's voice outside in hurried tones, sharp with some urgent necessity.

‘Some one must go to Edward Penton, and Rochford—Rochford and the papers. Who can we send who will understand? Oh, Gerald, not you, not you. Don't let me be alone at this moment—let all go rather than that.’

‘If it must be done, I am the only man to do it, Alicia—if his last hours are to be disturbed for this.’

‘His last hours! they are disturbed already; he cannot rest; he calls for Rochford, Rochford! It is no doing of mine—that you should think so of me at this moment! How am I to quiet my father? But, Gerald, don't leave me—don't you leave me?’ she cried.

Walter threw his door open in the excitement of his sudden waking. The light flooded in his eyes, dazzling him.

‘I’ll go,’ he said, unable to see anything except a white figure and a dark one standing together in the flicker of the light which was blown about by the air from some open window. Presently Alicia Penton’s face became visible to him, pale, with a lace handkerchief tied over her head, which changed her aspect strangely, and her eyes full of agitation and nervous unrest. She fell back when she saw him, crying, with a sharp tone of pain,

‘You!’

‘I’m wide awake,’ said the young man. ‘I thought something must have happened at home. If there’s a horse or a dog-cart, I’ll go.’

‘Sir Walter is very ill,’ said Russell Penton. ‘I hope not dying, but very ill. And you know what they want, to settle the matter with your father and get that deed executed at once.’

‘I’ll go,’ said Wat, half sullen in the repetition, in the sudden perception that burst upon him once again from outside with all its train of

ready-made thoughts—that if he lingered, if he delayed, it might be too late, and Penton would still be his—that there was no duty laid upon him to go at all, contrary to his interests, contrary to all his desires—that— He gave a little stamp with his foot and repeated, doggedly, ‘I said I’d go. I’m ready. To bring Rochford and the papers, to bring my father; that’s what I’ve got to do.’

‘That is what Mrs. Penton does not venture to ask of you.’

‘Oh, boy,’ cried Alicia, lifting up her hands, ‘go, go! It is not for me, it is for my father. I don’t know what he means to do, but he cannot rest till it is done. He can’t die, do you know what I mean? It is on his mind, and he can’t get free—for the love of heaven go!’

‘This moment,’ Walter said.

CHAPTER V.

A NIGHT'S DRIVE.

WALTER PENTON found himself facing the penetrating wind of the December morning which was in its stillness and blackness the dead of night, before he had fully realised what was happening. A number of keen perceptions indeed had flashed across his mind, yet it felt like nothing so much as the continuation of a dream when, enveloped in an atmosphere of sound, the horse's hoofs clanging upon the frosty road, the wheels grinding, the harness jingling, all doubled in clamour by the surrounding stillness, he was carried along between black, half-visible hedgerows, under dark bare trees, swaying in

the wind, through shut-up silent villages, and the deathlike slumber of the wide country, bound hard in frost and sleep. A groom less awake than himself, shivering and excited, but speechless, and affording him no sense of human companionship, by his side, driving mechanically, but at the highest speed, along a road which to unaccustomed eyes was invisible.

The scene was a very strange one after the intoxicating dream of the evening, with all its phantasmagoria of light and praise, and confused delight and pride. The blackness before him was as heavy as the preliminary vision had been dazzling; the air blew keen, cutting the very breath which rose in white wreaths like smoke from his lips. Where was he rushing? carried along by a movement which was not his own, an unwilling agent, acting in spite of himself. Sir Walter's old head, crowned with white locks, looking upon him with so much genial approbation, Mrs. Russell Penton's drawn and rigid countenance, the disturbed face of her husband, the plump simplicity of little Mab, a sort of floating rosy cherub among all these

older countenances, seemed to flit before him in the mists ; the music echoed, the lights glowed ; and then came the darkness, the ring of the hoofs and wheels, the stinging freshness of the cold air, and all dark, motionless, silent around. He was in a vision still. The German poem in which the lady is carried off behind the black horseman, tramp, tramp across the land, splash, splash across the sea, seemed to ring in his ears through his dream. He was preternaturally awake and aware of everything, yet his eyes were in a mist of semi-consciousness, and all the half-visible veiled sights about him seemed like the vague and flying landscape of uneasy fever-journeys.

The cold, which half stupefied him, by some strange process only intensified these sensations ; his companion and he never exchanged a word. He was not acquainted even with the lie of the roads, the ascents and descents, or of what houses those were which looked through the darkness from time to time surrounded by spectral trees. After a while an overwhelming desire for sleep seized him. He

had visions of the bed, all white and in order, which he had left behind; of the chair by the fire which he had been roused out of; of his own room at home, all silent, cold, waiting for him. If only he could make a spring out of this moving jingling thing, out of the stinging of the air, and get into the quiet and warmth and sleep!

When the groom spoke, Walter woke up again, broad awake from what must have been a doze.

‘Shall we go to the Hook or to Mr. Rochford’s first, sir?’ the man asked.

Walter started bolt upright, and came to himself. They were dashing through his own village, and a moment later he would have passed without seeing the white blinds at the windows of Crockford’s cottage which shone through the gloom. He waved his hand in the direction of his home, thinking that to give his father the benefit of a warning was worth the trouble before he went on. He took the reins into his own hands, knowing the steep descent towards the house, which was ticklish even in

daylight, and this touch of practical necessity brought him to his full senses, and for the first time dispersed the mists. He perceived now fully what he was doing. As the horse's steps sank half stumbling down the invisible abyss of the way, Walter felt, with a tingling of his ears and a sinking of his heart, that he also was dropping from the brilliant mount of possibility which he had been ascending with delighted feet. It had seemed as if all the decisions of fate might be reversed, as if he were to be the arbiter of his own fortune, as if— And now it was his hand that was to seal his own fate. Such thoughts and questionings, such rebellions against a duty which is not to be escaped, may go on while one is executing that very duty without any practical effect.

Walter pushed on all the time as well as the difficulties of the path would allow. He dashed into the little domain at the Hook with an energy that made the still air tingle, feeling as if he were himself inside, and starting to the shock of the sudden awakening in the midst of the darkness. The groom, who had opened the

gate, ran on and gave peal after peal to the bell, and presently the house, which had stood so dead and dark in the midst of the spectral trees, awoke with a start. One or two windows were opened simultaneously.

‘Who is there?’ cried Mr. Penton, in a bass tone, while a sudden wavering treble with terror in it shrieked out, ‘Oh, it’s Wat, it’s Wat!’ and ‘Something has happened to Ally!’ with a cry that penetrated the night.

‘Father,’ said Wat, ‘nothing is the matter with either of us. Sir Walter’s very ill. I’m going to fetch Rochford and the papers. You have to come too, to sign. Be ready when I come back.’

‘Rochford and the papers! To sign! What do you mean? In the middle of the night!’

And here there came a white figure to the window, crying,

‘Ally—are you sure, are you sure, Wat, all’s right with Ally?’ through the midst of the question and reply.

‘I tell you, father, Sir Walter’s dying. Be ready, be at the cross-roads if you can in half-

an hour. It's three miles farther, but this horse goes like the wind. Don't stop for anything. In half-an-hour. It's true; it's not a dream,' he shouted, turning round to go away.

'Wat! dying, did you say? And a ball in the house! Wat! had they got the doctor? what was it? Wat!'

'I can't stay. He may be dead before we get there. In half-an-hour at the cross-roads,' cried the youth, turning the horse with dangerous abruptness; and in a minute or two all was still again.

The darkness and silence closed round, and the astonished family, terrified, startled out of the profound quiet of their repose, blinked, dazzled at the newly-lit candles, and said to each other wildly,

'Dying! perhaps before they can get there. But Ally—Ally and Wat are all right, thank God!' And soon there was a twinkle of lights from window to window.

The servants got up last, being less easily awakened; but Mrs. Penton had already some tea ready for her husband, and Anne, in a little

dressing-gown, was collecting the warmest coats and wrappers which the family possessed, before Mr. Penton himself, very grave, almost tremulous, in the sudden emergency, could get ready. His fingers trembled over his buttons. Sir Walter, whom he had not seen for years; the old man who had been as one who would never die; the kind uncle of old; the causeless antagonist of later years. It was strange beyond measure to Edward Penton to be thus sent for with such startling and tragic suddenness in the middle of the night.

‘What shall I do?’ he said, wringing his hands, ‘if he should die before—’

‘Oh, Edward, make haste; lose no time; a minute may do it,’ cried his wife in her anxiety.

They almost pushed him out, Anne running before to see that the gate was open, with a lantern to show him the way. There was no one else to carry the lantern, and she went with him up the steep ascent with the flicker of the light flaring unsteadily about the dark road. She was very thinly clad with an ulster over her dressing-gown, and her poor little feet thrust

into her boots, and shivered as she ran, and stumbled with the lantern, which was too big for her, her father being too much absorbed in his thoughts to perceive what a burden it was.

Anne shivered, but not altogether from cold. Her heart was beating high, the quick pulsations vibrating to her lively brain, and alarm, awe, the indefinite melancholy and horror of death mingling with that keen exhilaration of quickened living which any tremendous event brings with it to the young. It was a wonderful thing to be happening, to be mixed up in, to realise so much more vividly than even her father did. Her very lantern and course along this steep and dark road in the middle of the night gave a thrilling consciousness to Anne of having a great deal to do with it, of being really an actor in the drama. She would not leave him till the lights of the dog-cart showed far off, coming on swiftly, silently, through the dark, before any sound could be heard.

It was all wonderful; the portentous darkness, without a star; the cold, the silence, the

consciousness of what was going on ; the sense, which took her breath away, that perhaps after all the lawyer, with his papers, and her father, who had to sign them, might be too late ; that even now, when she turned to make her way, trembling a little with cold and fright and nervous excitement, Sir Walter might be dead, and Penton be 'ours' ! Mother would be 'my lady' in any case ; the servants would have to be taught to call her so. And all this might be determined in an hour or two, perhaps before daylight !

Anne shivered more and more, and was afraid of the darkness under the hedgerows as she went home alone with the heavy lantern. She had a great mind to leave it under the hedge and run all the way home, without minding the dark ; but such darkness as that was not a thing which a girl could make up her resolution not to mind.

Walter had gone on from the Hook with this issue plainer and plainer in his mind—if he but delayed a little, did not press the horse, took it more easily, he might without reproach, without

harm, be late, and so after all preserve his birth-right. He said to himself that if the papers were but there Mrs. Russell Penton would have them signed whatever might happen, if her father was in the act of dying she would have them signed. There was nothing she would not do to secure her end. Had she not secured himself, even himself, who was so much against her, whose life was more in question than any one's, to do her will and serve her purpose? And when *he* could not resist her who could? She would get her way. She would make the old man's melting, his sudden partiality, come to nothing; and again Walter, whose head had been turned a little, who had begun to feel more than ever what it would be to be the heir of Penton, would be replaced in the original obscurity of his poor relationship. And all this might be changed if he but delayed a little, went softly, spared the horse!

All the time, while these thoughts were going through his mind, he was pressing on with vehemence, making the animal fly through the darkness. He did not hesitate a moment practi-

cally, though he said all this to himself. What he did and what he thought seemed to run on in two parallel lines without deflection, without any effect upon each other. It was all in his hands to do as he pleased: no one could blame him or say anything to him if he ceased to press on, if he let the reins drop loosely. But it never occurred to him to do so.

Then there was the possibility that Rochford might not be ready at once, that he might not be able to find the papers over which he had so dawdled, that he might not be ready to jump up as Walter had done. What need was there to press him, to make the same startling summons at his door that had been made at the Hook, to insist on an answer? There seemed no need to take any active steps in order to upset the family arrangement, to turn everything the other way. All that it was necessary to do was only to let the reins fall on the horse's neck, to urge him forward no more.

They arrived thus flying at the gates of the Rochfords' house, a big red-brick mansion just outside the town. There was a light in the

coachman's cottage which answered the purpose of a lodge, and the coachman himself came out, half scared, half awake, to open to the pair of lamps that gleamed through the darkness, and the fiery horse from whose nostrils went up what seemed puffs of smoke into the frosty air.

‘At ’ome? He’ve just go ’ome, and scarce a-bed yet,’ said the man. ‘Whatever can you want of master so early in the morning?’

Walter had considered it to be night up to this moment; he recognised it as morning with a sigh of excitement.

‘Mr. Rochford must be called immediately,’ he said, his thoughts tugging at him all the time saying, ‘Why? Why can’t you let him alone? Is it your business to force him to get up, to produce his papers, to drive half-a-dozen miles in the chill of the morning?’ But Walter, though he heard all this, took no notice. ‘Let him know that I am waiting. Sir Walter Penton is very ill. He must come at once,’ he said.

He jumped down from the cart, and began to pace rapidly up and down to restore the circu-

lation of his half-frozen limbs, while the groom covered the horse with a cloth and eased the harness. There was no time to put the animal up, to go indoors and wait.

As Walter took his sharp walk up and down, the opposing force in his mind had a time to itself of inaction and silence, and heaped argument upon argument before him. What! hurry like this, drag everyone that was wanted from their rest, disturb the whole sleeping world with the clamour of his appeal in order to undo himself! Was this his duty, anyhow that it could be considered? Was it his duty to undo himself? More than ever, now he had seen it, Penton had become the hope of his life, the object of all his wishes; and was it in order to divest himself of the last possibility of being heir to Penton, though this was what Sir Walter had called him, that he was here?

The chill became keener than ever; a sharp air, blighting everything it touched, blew in his face and chilled him to the bone. It was the first breath of the dreary dawning, the dismal rising of a dull day. A faint stir became per-

ceptible in the house, very faint, a light flashed at a window, there was a far-off sound of a voice ! the movement of some one coming downstairs. Then a voice called out,

‘What is it, Penton? Is it possible I’m wanted? I can’t believe the man. What do you want with me?’ And Rochford shivering, half dressed, with a candle in his hand, appeared at a side door, close to which Walter was performing his march. ‘You can’t have come all this way for nothing,’ he cried, ‘but it’s not an hour since I came home. It doesn’t seem possible. Am I wanted certainly?’

Now was the time. The reasonings within tore Walter as if they had got hold of his heart-strings. Why should he be so obstinate, forcing on what would be his own ruin? It would be all his doing, the hurry-scurry through the night, the insistence, calling up this man, who yawned and gazed at him with a speechless entreaty to be let off, and his father who probably now was waiting for him by the cross-roads in the dark, chilled to the heart. It would be all his own officiousness, offering him-

self to go, forcing the others. These harpies were tearing at him all the time he was saying aloud, his own voice sounding strange and far off in his ears,

‘Sir Walter has been taken very ill ; he wants you at once. Mrs. Russell Penton sent me. You are to bring all the papers, and we are to pick up my father on the way.’

He said all this as steadily as if there was not another sentiment in his mind.

‘What,’ said Rochford, ‘the papers, and your father! Come in, at least ; it will take me some time to find them. Come in, though I fear there’s no fire anywhere.’

‘I want no fire, only make haste,’ said Walter, ‘we may be too late.’

Too late! yes, it was possible even now to be too late, but no longer likely. Now be still, oh, reasoning soul, keep silence, for there is no remedy—the thing is done : and yet it was still possible that it might not be done in time.

Rochford was a long time getting himself and his papers together ; so long that the blackness became faintly grey, and objects grew slowly

visible rising noiselessly out of the night. The young man went up and down, up and down, mechanically. He had jumped down to recover himself of the numbness of his long drive, but numbness seemed to have taken possession of him body and soul. His mind had fallen into a sort of sullen calm. He asked himself whether he should take the trouble to accompany them back at all. Rochford and his father were all that were necessary. He was not wanted. He thought he would walk home, getting a little warmth into him, following the clamour of the cart, but so far behind that all the echoes would die out, and leave him in the silence, making his way home. Not to Penton, where for a moment he had dreamed a glorious dream, and heard himself called old Sir Walter's heir, but home to the Hook, where he had been born, where to all appearance he would die, where he could steal to his own bed in the morning grey, and sleep and sleep, and forget it all. But now and again another revolution took place in him: he no longer wanted to sleep, all his faculties were wide awake, and life ablaze in him as if he never could sleep again.

When Rochford at last came out with his bag, Walter acted as if there had never been a question in his mind, as he had acted all along; he sprang up to his place without a word, gathered the reins out of the groom's hand, and took the road again, reckless, at the hottest pace. The horse was still fresh, rested yet fretted by the delay, and easily urged to speed. Walter did not know how to drive, he had no experience of anything more spirited than the pony of all work at home, and it was solely by the light of nature, and a determination to get forward, that he was guided. The groom had not ventured to say anything, but Rochford was afraid, and remonstrated seriously.

‘You can't go down hill at this pace, you will bring the horse down, or perhaps break our necks,’ he said.

‘I'll not be too late,’ said Walter, ‘that is the only thing; we must be there in time.’

At the cross-roads Mr. Penton, shivering, was pulled up on the cart almost without stopping, and they dashed on once more. The landscape revealed itself little by little, rising on all sides

in grey mists, in vague ghostly clearness—the skeleton trees, the solid mass of the houses, the long clear ribbon of the river lighting the plain. And then Penton—Penton rising dark and square with its irregular outline against the clouds. There were lights in many of the windows, though every moment the light grew clearer. Dawn had come, the darkness was fleeing away ; had life gone with it ? as it is said happens so often.

Walter, dashing in at the open gates, urging the horse up the avenue, did not ask himself this question. He felt a conviction, which was bitter at his heart, that he had completed his mission successfully, and that they had come in time.

CHAPTER VI.

A DEATH-BED.

SIR WALTER lay in his luxurious bed, where everything was arranged with the perfection of comfort, warmth, softness, lightness, all that wealth could procure to smooth the downward path. He was not in pain. Even the restlessness which is worse than pain, which so often makes the last hours of life miserable, an agony to the watchers, perhaps less so to the sufferer, had not come to this old man. He lay quite still, with eyes shining unnaturally bright from amid the curves and puckers of his heavy old eyelids, with a half smile on his face, and the air of deliverance from all care which some

dying people have. He was dying not of illness, but because suddenly the supplies of life had failed, the golden cord had broken, its strands were dropping asunder. The wheels were soon to stand still, but for the moment that condition of suspense did not seem to be painful. There was fever in his eyes which threw a certain glamour over everything about. He had asked that the candles might be lighted, that the room should be made bright, and had called his daughter to his side. Perhaps it was only her own anxiety which had made her suppose that he had asked for Rochford and the papers. At all events, if he had done so, he did so no more. He held her hand, or rather she held his as she stood by him, and he lightly patted it with the other of his large, soft, feeble hands.

‘You are looking beautiful to-night—as I used to see you—not as you have been of late. Alicia, you are looking like a queen to-night.’

‘Oh, father, dear father, my beauty is all in your eyes.’

‘Perhaps, more or less,’ he said; ‘I have

fever in my eyes, and that gives a glory. The lights are all like stars, and my child's eyes more than all. You were a beautiful girl, Alicia. I was very proud of you. Nobody but your father ever knew how sweet you were. You were a little proud outside, perhaps a little proud. And then we had so much trouble—together, you and I—'

She said nothing. She had not attained even now to the contemplative calm which could look back upon that trouble mildly. It brought hard heart-beats, convulsive throbs of pain to her bosom still. She had silenced him often by some cry of unsoftened anguish when he had begun so to speak. But as he lay waiting there, as it were in the vestibule of death, saying his last words, she could silence him no more.

'Something has occurred to-night,' he said, 'that has brought it all back. What was it, Alicia? Perhaps your ball: the dancing—we've not danced here for long enough—or the music. Music is a thing that is full of associations; it brings things back. Was there anything

more? Yes, I think there must have been something more.'

She stood looking at him with dumb inexpressive eyes. She could not, would not say what it was besides, not even now at the last moment, at the supreme moment. All the opposition of her nature was in this. Love and pride and sorrow and the bitter sense of disappointment and loss, all joined together. She met his searching glance, though it was pathetic in its inquiry, with blank unresponsive eyes. And after a while in his feebleness he gave up the inquiry.

'We have gone through a great deal together, you and I—ah, that is so—only sometimes I think there was a great deal of pride in it, my dear. My two poor boys—poor boys! I might be hard on them sometimes. There was the disappointment and the humiliation. God would be kinder to them. He's the real father, you know. I feel it by myself. Many and many a time in these long years my heart has yearned over them. Oh, poor boys, poor silly boys! had they but known, at least in this their day—

Alicia! how could you and I standing outside know what was passing between God and them when they lay—as I am lying now?’

‘Oh, father, father!’ she cried, with anguish in her voice.

‘It is you that are standing outside now, Alicia, alone, poor girl: and you don’t know what’s passing between God and me. A great deal that I never could have thought of—like friends, like friends! I feel easy about the boys, not anxious any longer. After all, you know, they belong to God too, although they are foolish and weak. Very likely they are doing better—well, now—’

‘Oh, father!’ she cried, with a keen pang of pain at what she thought the wandering of his mind. ‘You forget, you forget that they are dead.’

‘Dead!’ he repeated, slowly. ‘I don’t forget; but do you know what that means? We never understand anything till we come to it in this life. I’m coming very close, but I don’t see—yet—except that it’s very different—very different—not at all what we thought.’

‘Father,’ she cried, in the tumult of her thoughts; ‘oh, tell me something about yourself! Are you happy—do you feel—do you remember—?’

Alicia Penton had said the prayers and received the faith of Christians all her life, and she wanted, if she could, to recall to the dying man those formulas which seemed fit for his state, to hear him say that he was supported in that dread passage by the consolations of the Gospel. But her lips, unapt to speak upon such subjects, seemed closed, and she could not find a word to say.

‘Happy!’ he said, with that mild reflectiveness which seemed to have come with the approaching end. ‘It is a long, long time since I’ve been asked that question. If you mean, am I afraid? No, no; I’m not afraid. I’m—among friends. I feel—quite pleased about it all. It will be all right, whatever happens. I don’t seem to have anything to do with it. In my life I have always felt that I had everything to do with it, Alicia; and so have you, my dear; it’s your fault too. We were always setting God right.

But it's far better this way. I'm an old fellow—an old, old fellow—and I wonder if this is what is called second childhood, Alicia; for I could feel,' he said, with the touching laugh of weakness, 'as if I were being carried away—in some one's arms.'

His heavy eyes that were still bright with fever closed with a sort of smiling peacefulness, then opened again with a little start.

'But it seemed to me just now as if there was something to do—what was there to do?—before I give myself over. I don't want to be disturbed, but if there is something to do—Ah, Gerald, my good fellow, you here too.'

Russell Penton had come in to say that the men who had been sent for so hurriedly, they whose coming was so important, a matter of almost life and death, had arrived. He had entered the room while Sir Walter was speaking, but the hush of peace about the bed had stopped on his lips the words he had been about to say. He came forward and took the other hand, which his father-in-law, scarcely able to raise it, stretched out towards him faintly with a smile.

‘I hope you are better, sir,’ he said, mechanically, bending over the soft helpless hand: and under his breath to his wife, ‘They are come,’ he said.

She gave him a look of helplessness and dismay, with an appeal in it. What could be done? Could anything be said of mortal business now? Could they come in with their papers, with their conflict of human interests and passion, to this sanctuary of fading life? And yet again, could Alicia Penton make up her mind to be balked, disappointed, triumphed over in the end?

‘Better—is not the word.’ Sir Walter spoke very slowly, pausing constantly between his broken phrases, his voice very low, but still clear. ‘I am well—floating away, you know—carried very softly—in some one’s arms. You will laugh—at an old fellow. But I don’t feel quite clear if I am an old fellow, or perhaps—a child.’ Then came that fluttering laugh of weakness, full of pathetic pleasure and weeping and well-being. ‘But,’ he added, with a deeper drawn, more difficult breath, ‘you come in quickly. Tell me—before it’s late. There is

something on my mind—like a shadow—something to do.’

Alicia held his hand fast; she did not move, nor look up; her eyes blank, introspective, without any light in them, making no reply to him, fixed on her father’s face; but her whole being quivering with a conflict beyond describing, good and evil, the noble and the small, contending over her, in a struggle which felt like death.

A similar struggle, but slighter and fainter, was in her husband’s mind; but in him it was not a mortal conflict, only a question which was best. Was it right to permit the old man to float away, as he said, without executing a project which seemed so near to his heart? Because it was not one which pleased Russell Penton, because he would rather that it should fail, he felt himself the more bound to his wife that it should not fail through him.

‘It seems almost wicked to disturb you, sir,’ he said, ‘but I heard that you wanted Rochford; if so, he is here.’

Alicia caught her husband by the arm, press-

ing it almost fiercely with her hand, leaning her trembling weight upon him.

‘But not to disturb you, father,’ she cried, with a gasp.

‘Ah!’ said Sir Walter, ‘I remember. What was it? I don’t seem to see anything—except those lights like stars shining; and Alicia, Alicia! How beautiful she is looking—like a girl—to-night.’

Her husband gave her a strange glance. She was gripping his arm as if for salvation, clutching it, her breath coming quick; her cheeks with two red spots of anxiety and excitement; her eyes dull, with no expression in the intensity of their passion, fixed on her father’s face. The white dressing-gown which she had thrown on when she was called to him was open a little at her throat, and showed the gleam of the diamonds which she had not had time to take off. It was not wonderful that in the old man’s eyes, with love and fever together in them, Alicia, in her unusual white, should seem for a moment to have gone back to the dazzle and splendour of youth.

Sir Walter resumed after a moment, as though this little outbreak of tender admiration were an indulgence which he had permitted himself.

‘My mind’s getting very hazy, Gerald—all quite pleasant, the right thing, no trouble in it, but hazy. I remember, and yet I don’t remember. If I had but the clue—Rochford?—the young one, not the father. He’s gone, like all the rest, and now the young one reigns in his stead. Bring him, and perhaps I’ll remember. You could tell me, you two, but you’re afraid to disturb me. What does it matter about disturbing me? a moment—and then— Send for him; perhaps I’ll remember.’

Alicia would scarcely let her husband go. She looked at him with terror in her eyes. What was she afraid of? When he withdrew his arm from her she dropped down suddenly on her knees by her father’s bedside with a low shuddering cry, and hid her face, pressing her cheek upon the old man’s hand. The excitement had risen too high. She could bear it no longer. Complicated with all the aching and

trouble of the moment, the bursting this last tie of nature, the dearest and longest companionship of her life, to have that other anxiety, the miserable question of the inheritance, the triumph or sacrifice of her pride, which yet, even amid the solemnity of death, moved her more than any other question on earth—was something intolerable. It was more than she could bear. She sank down, partly out of incapacity to support herself, partly that she could not, dared not, meet her father's eyes with their vague and wistful question.

‘You could tell me, you two.’

He had seen it, then, in her face, though she had made efforts so determined to banish all sign of comprehension, all answer out of her eyes. And now, if he insisted, how could she refuse to answer him? and if Gerald perceived that the old man had found the necessary clue through her, what would he think of her? That she had preferred her own aggrandisement to her father's peace, that she had prompted him on the very edge of the grave to enrich herself. She could not sustain Sir Walter's look,

nor face the emergency without at least that passive protection of her husband's presence, which for the moment was withdrawn.

And Alicia trembled for the moment when the strangers would come into this sacred room ; the lawyer, and Edward Penton behind him, hesitating, not without feeling (she knew), looking sadly at the deathbed where lay one whom in his early days he had looked up to with familiar kindness. Nobody in the world, not even Gerald, could be so near to him in that moment as Edward Penton. She felt this even while she trembled at the anticipation of his coming. He was nearer than anyone living. He would bring in with him the shadows of those two hapless ones disappeared so long out of life. She bethought her in that moment how it had been usual to say ' the three boys.' Was her mind wandering too? All these thoughts surged up into her brain in a wild confusion—the old tenderness, the irritation, the bitter jealous grudge at him who had outlived the others, the natural longing towards one who could understand.

Sir Walter was unaffected by any of these thoughts; he felt it all natural—that the grief of his child should overwhelm her, that the sense of parting and loss should be profounder on her side than his. After various efforts he raised his hand, which was so heavy, which would not obey his will, and laid it tenderly upon her bowed head.

‘Alicia, my dear child, don’t let it overwhelm you. Who can tell even how small the separation is—as long as it lasts, and it cannot last very long. You must not, you must not, my dear, be sorry for me. I tell you—it is all pleasant—sweet. I am not—not at all—sorry for myself. God bless you, my dear. He is so close that when I say “God bless you” it is as if, my love, He Himself was putting out His hand.’

‘Oh, father! oh, father!’ she repeated, and could say no more.

And he lay with his face turned to her, and his hand feebly smoothing, stroking her bowed head, as if she had been a child. She was a child to him, his young Alicia, looking so beau-

tiful after her ball, in which he had seen her—had he not seen her?—admired of everybody, the fairest, the most stately, with the Penton diamonds glittering at her white throat as they were now. He had her in his mind's eye so distinct, as he had seen her—was it an hour, was it a lifetime ago?

His breathing began to be disturbed, becoming more difficult, and his thoughts to grow more confused. He talked on, in broken gasps of utterance, more difficult, always more difficult. The fog in his throat—he began to feel it now; but always in flashes saw the lights gleaming, and Alicia in full beauty, with her eyes like the stars, and those other stars, less precious, yet full of lustre, at her throat. He took no note of outward things, being more and more absorbed—yet with a dulness which softened everything, even the difficulty of the breath—in his own sensations, and in the sweep of the hurrying movement that seemed to be carrying him away, away, into halcyon seas beyond, into repose and smiling peace.

But the woman kneeling under his hand was

as much alive to every sound and incident as he was dull to them. Nothing muffled her keen sense, or stilled the flood of thoughts that were pouring through her mind. She heard, her heart leaping to the sound, steps approaching softly, on tiptoe, every noise restrained. She heard a low murmur of voices, then the opening of the door; but she was afraid to lift her head, to startle her father. She dared not look up to see who was there, or how he took the entrance of the new comers.

As for Sir Walter, he was almost beyond disturbance. His hand moved heavily from time to time over her head; sometimes there was a faint tremble when a breath came harder, nothing more. Would he die so? she asked herself, making no sign; was it all sealed up for ever, the source of life that had made the light or the darkness of so many other lives. Her own wildly beating heart seemed to stand still, to stop in the tremendous suspense.

‘Can you hear me?’ said her husband’s voice, low and full of emotion. ‘Rochford is here, sir; do you want him?’

He shook his head as he spoke to the awe-stricken men behind.

‘Eh!’ Sir Walter gave a start as if half-awakened. ‘Who did you say?—I think—I must have been asleep. Some one who wants me? They’ll excuse a—a sick old man. Some one—who?—Gerald—whom did you say?’

‘Rochford, sir, whom you wanted to see.’

‘Rochford! What should I want with Rochford? He’s the—lawyer—the lawyer. We have had plenty to do with lawyers in our day. Yes—I think there was something if I could remember. Alicia, where is Alicia?’

She rose up quickly, all those wild sensations in her stilled by this supreme call.

‘I am here, father,’ she said. Her countenance was perfectly colourless, except for two spots of red, of excitement and misery, on her cheeks. Her lips were parched, it was with difficulty she spoke.

‘Yes, my love; stand by me till the last. What was it? I feel stronger. I can attend—to business. Tell me, my child, what it was.’

She stood for a moment speechless, turning

her face towards them all with a look which was awful in its internal struggle. How was she to say it? How not to say it? Her fate, and the fate of others, seemed to lie in her hands. It was not too late! His strength fluctuated from moment to moment, yet he could do what was needed still.

‘Father,’ she began, moistening her dry lips, trying to get the words out of her parched throat.

Sir Walter had opened his heavy eyes. He looked round with a bewildered, half-smiling look. Suddenly he caught sight of Edward Penton, who stood lingering, hesitating, half in sympathy, half in resistance, behind. The dying man gave a little cry of pleasure.

‘Ah! I remember,’ he said.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOY.

THEY all came round gathering about his bed, Rochford stooping, drawing the papers out of his bag, Edward Penton approaching closer, looking with a revival in his bosom of the forgotten feelings of his youth upon the severed friend, the old protector, the fatherly patron of those days that were no more. To be sundered for years, and then to come again and see the object of the filial, friendly affection of the past, the man round whom your dearest recollections centre, lying, whatever chasm may in the meantime have opened between, upon his death-bed—what heart can resist that? Scarcely the most

obdurate, the most prejudiced; and Edward Penton was neither one nor the other.

He came slowly forward and stood by the bedside, forgetting all about the motive which brought him thither, impatient, so far as he noticed them all, of the presence of the strangers. He came close, placing himself before Russell Penton, who had no such claim to be there as he. He did not attempt to say anything, but claimed the place, he who was the last one left of the three boys; he whom they had hated rather than loved because he was the survivor, yet who forgot that entirely now, and everything involved in it. He stood by the side of Alicia as he had stood so often. He forgot that there was any question between them. He had been brought, indeed, to sign and settle, but all that floated from him now.

Russell Penton stood aside to let him pass, and the lawyer placed himself at the writing-table which had been brought nearer, within reach of the bed, and where all the papers had been laid out.

‘Do you think he will be able to understand

if I read them?' Rochford said, aside, to Russell Penton; 'or shall we try for his signature at once?'

Russell Penton made no reply, except by a slight wave of his hand towards the bed. It seemed a profanity that anyone should speak or occupy the attention of the group save he who was the centre of it. Sir Walter's eyes were open, his interests fully awakened. He watched while the writing-table was drawn forward and put in order. He gave one glance of recognition to Edward Penton at his bedside, but had not time, it seemed, for greetings, his whole mind being fixed on this thing which he had to do.

'I had almost lost sight of it,' he said. 'Now, thank God, I remember—while I have the time. It will be—what you call a codicil. Alicia, you always were generous; you won't grudge it, Alicia?'

'Father!' she cried, bewildered with this preamble; then, in the rapid process of thought, trying to believe that it was some further compensation to Edward which was in her father's mind.

‘You know,’ she said, fervently, ‘that I will grudge nothing that is your pleasure—nothing ; you know that !’

‘Yes, my love—I know : it is not money she would ever grudge. Alicia—no, no ; but perhaps honour—or love. Rochford, what I want is about the boy.’

‘The boy !’

Mrs. Russell Penton turned quickly a searching glance on her father, to which his dim eyes made no response : then looked round with one rapid demand for explanation. She seemed to ask heaven and earth what he meant. Could it be this ? Could this be all ?

‘The boy !’ Rochford echoed, with amazement ; ‘what boy, sir ?’ faltering. ‘There was nothing about any boy ;’ and he too gave Russell Penton a significant look, meaning that Sir Walter’s mind was wandering, and that no settlements could be possible now.

‘Gerald, you understand, tell them.’

Sir Walter turned his eyes instinctively to the one impartial.

‘The boy—Edward’s boy. Alicia would not

see how like he was; but it was very plain to me—and a nice boy. He has the name as well, and he will have Penton. Eh, Penton? What was there about Penton?’ The old man paused a moment, trying to raise his heavy brow, his drooping eyelids—and there was a great silence in the room; they all looked at each other, conscious, with something like a sense of guilt, and no one ventured to be the first to speak. It was Alicia, perhaps, who should have done it, but she felt as if her labouring bosom was bound by icy chains, and could not; or the lawyer, who gazed at her mutely, demanding whether he should say anything—what he should say. It was but a moment, breathless, precipitate. Then, as if there had been nothing in it but the break of his difficult breathing, Sir Walter resumed, ‘He will have Penton, in the course of nature. But we’re long-lived, it may be a long time first. Alicia,’ he groped for her with the feeble hand which he could scarcely raise, moving the heavy fingers like a blind man. ‘Alicia, I want, as long as I can, to do something for the boy.’

She had turned half away, her hands had fallen by her side, a blank of something like despair had come over her. Not for Penton! oh, not for Penton; but because he had glided away from her into the valley of darkness, and his mind had gone beyond the sphere of hers. To feel that as he did so the mind of her father, so long united to hers, as she had believed, in every thought, took another turning, and disclosed other wishes, other sentiments, overwhelmed Alicia with a wild surprise. Death was nothing to that. It made heaven and earth reel to her with the greatness of the astonishment. But that too was but for a moment. She turned round, it seemed to the spectators instantly, though to herself after a pause which was tragical in its passion, and answered the feeble groping of the blind hand by clasping it in both of hers. Then she had to summon her voice from the depths, to break the chains of ice.

‘Whatever,’ she said, ‘father, whatever you wish.’

There was something like reviving life;

there was reconciliation, reunion, in the way his dull fingers closed upon hers. Had a shadow of doubt come over the dying mind? He breathed a long sobbing sigh, which was half satisfaction and half the prolonged effort of dying.

‘To do something,’ he murmured, ‘for the boy.’

Here Rochford broke in, becoming accustomed to the solemnity of the scene, and recovering the instinct of business and a sense of the necessity of completing what he had in hand.

‘But,’ he said, ‘this is not the business for which I was summoned. Everything is ready; there are only the deeds to sign; there is only the signature——’

Alicia gave him a warning look to stop him, and Russell Penton put forth his hand with an impressive ‘hush!’ Perhaps it was the new voice that caught the attention of Sir Walter. He opened his eyes again, but half, showing only a sightless whiteness under the heavy lids.

‘Eh?’ he said, ‘was some one speaking? I can’t hear any more. Alicia—what? what?—was it—about the boy——’

‘It was—our own business, father; but not to trouble you. It shall trouble you,’ she said firmly, but with an indescribable tone that said much, ‘no more, no more.’

A faint grateful smile came upon his face, the faintest, almost imperceptible, pressure of her hands. And then in a moment sleep came over the aged pilgrim so near the end of his career. They all stood in the silence of awe about the bed, watching, unable to believe that it was only sleep and not death. The one was almost more awful than the other would have been. That the common repose which refreshes all living things should come in the middle of dying seemed almost an unnatural break. Even love itself in such circumstances cannot endure delays, and would fain push the bark of the soul out into the eternal sea.

Mrs. Russell Penton sat by the bed, holding her father’s hand still in hers. And for some time her cousin stood beside her, silent, absorbed,

standing mechanically with his eyes fixed upon the still face on the pillow.

Edward Penton was scarcely sensible of what was passing round him. It seemed all to be going on in a dream, in which he saw and heard plainly enough, yet attached little meaning to anything that occurred. He had come to conclude his bargain, touched, deeply touched by the condition of his old relation, his former protector and friend, but yet more occupied by the importance of the event to himself and to his wife and children, who were nearer to him still. But when he had entered the sick-room he had stepped into a dream—everything had changed. His business had sunk away, as it were, into the chaos of abortive projects. Nothing was required of him except to stand and look on reverently while the shadows of death gathered.

His heart was deeply touched; it had seemed to him natural, only natural and fitting, that he should stand by Alicia at this solemn moment. He was the nearest of her kin; he was the oldest of her friends; he had loved her in his time;

even now there were no two people in the world who had the same hold upon his imagination and his memories as these two, the father and daughter. It was his right to be here more than Russell Penton's; nearer than anyone else living he had a right to stand by her, to give her the support of an affection as old and almost as natural as her own. Though he had not seen Sir Walter for years, there was no one so nearly Sir Walter's son as he. What was said about the boy perplexed him, almost made him impatient. The boy—what boy? He did not understand. He himself was the last of the three boys, the survivor, whose surviving had seemed a wound and injury, but which yet gave him rights which no one in the world, no one else could ever have as he.

The entrance of the doctor, who came in softly, and looked, with the gravity which dying commands from all, upon the sleeper, disturbed the group. The gentlemen withdrew to leave him free for his examination, and for the whispered directions which were necessary, carrying away the writing-table with all its useless arrange-

ments. When he left the bedside they surrounded him with questions. Was it possible that there might be a period of revived strength? was it likely that he could attend to business still? Important business remained to be settled.

The doctor shook his head. He gave them certain low-toned explanations which for the moment seemed to make everything clear, but in reality left them as little informed as ever; and, on the other hand, gave them a little lecture upon the folly of postponing business to such a moment.

‘A man of Sir Walter’s age, and in his state of health, could never be calculated upon,’ he said. ‘I hope the business is not vital. To leave wills or settlements to the last is the greatest folly.’

A statement of this kind, superfluous and absolute, is at all times so much easier to give than a little enlightenment upon the immediate case. But how could the doctor tell any more than any spectator whether the old man would wake from that sleep to an interval of clearness and consciousness, or whether he would dream away

the few remaining moments that lay between him and the end of his career ?

And then stillness fell upon them all, a period of utter quiet, of that waiting for death which is intolerable to the living. Alicia sat by her father's bedside alone, still holding his hand, watching his sleep, feeling nothing but the arrest of all things, the suspension of thought itself. The three men had withdrawn to the ante-room, where they waited for any movement or call. Rochford, who had no reason for any profounder feeling than that of respectful sympathy, drew near the fire in the shivering chill of the grey winter morning, and after a while dozed and dreamt of the ball, with its music and lights. Russell Penton seated himself close to the door, where he could see his wife at her father's bedside. Her head was turned from him, but yet it was giving her the support of his presence to be there. Edward Penton was the only one who could not rest. He went to the window and gazed out blankly upon the cold misty morning light, now as full day as it was likely to be. All was whiteness upon the wide stretch

of landscape, the river milky and turbid under the featureless whitish vapour that covered the sky, mist hanging about the ghostly trees, cold, damp, and penetrating, stealing to the heart ; within the fire burned dimly, the lights had been put out, though from the door of Sir Walter's room still came a stream of candlelight shining unnaturally in the grey pale suffusion of the day.

Mr. Penton wandered from the window to the fire, then stood behind Russell Penton's chair, and gazed into the hushed room where one lay dying and the other watching. He thought nothing about his business which was so strange ; he had not yet awakened to the sense of those wandering injunctions about the boy. He was troubled, sad, confused in his soul, only conscious of the close neighbourhood of death, and that all somehow had fallen back into a kind of chaos out of which there seemed no apparent way.

None of them knew how long the time was. It was endless, intolerable, an awful pause in their own living, in which everything was arrested, even thought. For what could the thoughts do whirling vainly about a subject on which

there could be no enlightenment, beating as it were against a blank wall all round and round? In reality it was not quite an hour when Alicia rose from the bedside and made a sign to her husband. Sir Walter's voice broke again into the silence, eager, quick, startling.

‘Eh! eh! What—what is it? What’s to do? What’s to do?’

They hurried in one after another, young Rochford waking up with the air of the last waltz still in his ear, hastening to the table, where all the papers were still laid out. Sir Walter had struggled up upon his bed and sat gazing out upon them, holding his daughter fast, who had steadily drawn one of his arms over her shoulder by way of support. He looked like an old prophet, with his heavy eyelids raised, his white locks streaming.

‘What is—to do? What am I to do—before I die? before I——’

Rochford came forward with his deed, with the pen in his hand.

‘It is a signature,’ he said. ‘Sir Walter, your signature—here—it is all simple; your name, that is all.’

No one moved to help him. He stood holding out the pen, eager as if his own interests were involved, while the rest stood motionless, saying not a word, gazing at this venerable dying figure in that last blaze in the socket. Probably the old eyes, all veiled in whiteness like the mists of the morning, no longer saw anything, though they seemed to look out with solemn intelligence—for Sir Walter made no response; his question had required no answer; his eyes flickered with a movement of the lids, as though taking one other look round, then a smile came over his face.

‘Alicia—will do it. Alicia—will think of—everything,’ he murmured, and, relapsing as it were upon himself, sank back, to resume the thread of conscious life no more.

The night was over. The grey day, dim and calm, benumbed with cold, and veiled with mists, yet full in its own occupations and labours, was in possession of earth and sky. Thus one ends while the others go on. There was no new beginning to those who were chiefly concerned. They stopped for a moment, then went on again, life sweeping back with all its require-

ments to the very edge of the chamber of death.

When it was evident that no interval of consciousness was now to be looked for, the watchers went downstairs and found breakfast, of which indeed they had great need, and talked in subdued tones at first, and on the one sole subject which seemed possible. But presently even this bond was broken, and Russell Penton and Rochford discussed, a little gravely, the weather, the chances of frost, the state of the country.

Edward Penton did not join in this talk, but he ate his breakfast solemnly, as if it had been a serious duty, saying nothing even to Wat, who had ventured to join the grave party. Wat was more worn out than any of them. He had not been able to rest, and he had the additional fatigue of the drive, not to speak of the wearing effect of the mental struggle to which he was so entirely unaccustomed. He wanted more than anything else to go home. Ally, upstairs in her room, crying out of excitement and sympathy, and longing for her mother, had packed up all the pretty things which had served so little purpose, and was waiting very eagerly for

the call to return to the Hook, which it would have been, oh! so much better had they never left. But there had been breakfast for everybody all the same, notwithstanding that the troop of servants were all very anxious, wondering what was to come of it, or rather what was to come of them, a more important question.

The only evidence of this great over-turn of everybody's habits in the house was that the room in which the dancing had been remained untouched, which was a wonderful departure from the order and regularity of the household. But everything is to be excused, the housekeeper herself said, in the confusion of a death in the family, though that was a thing for which, considering Sir Walter's great age, they should all have been prepared.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MASTER OF PENTON.

MR. PENTON waited through all the dreary day. He sent the young ones away peremptorily at the earliest opportunity, without throwing any light to them on the state of affairs.

‘It would be bad taste, the worst of taste, to have you here at such a time,’ he said, but without explaining why. ‘Tell your mother I will come back when I can—but not before—’ He spoke in ellipses, with phrases too full of meaning to be put into mere words.

‘Mab is coming with us, father,’ said Ally. ‘We couldn’t leave her here by herself.’

‘Mab? who is Mab?’ said Mr. Penton, but he looked for no reply.

His mind was too much absorbed to consider what they said to him. There seemed so little in their prattle that could not wait for another time. And his mind was full of a hundred questions. By this time, as was natural, the pathetic impression which had been made on him when he stood by his uncle's bedside through those solemn moments, and felt that next to Alicia it was he, of all the world, who had the best right to be there, had died away. Common life had come back to him—his own position, the prospects of his family, what he was to do. He wandered about the house, up and down, with very much the air of a man inspecting it before taking possession, which was what he actually was.

But no such consciousness was in his mind. He was overflowing with thought as to what he was to do in the new crisis at which he had arrived. It was a crisis which ought to have been long foreseen, and indeed had been fully entered into in detail many a day. But lately it had been put away from his thoughts, and other possibilities had come

in. He had thrust Penton away from him, and allowed himself to feel the power of his wife's arguments, and even to act upon the possible increase of fortune which should be immediate, and bring no responsibility with it. Gradually, and with a struggle, his mind had been brought to that point. But now all this new condition of affairs was gone, and everything restored to the old basis.

The change had come in a moment, so far as he was concerned. He had not anticipated it, had not thought of it, until Sir Walter had suddenly lifted up his dying voice and began to talk of the boy. The boy! he did not realise even now, or scarcely ask himself, who was the boy. The crisis was too great for secondary matters. The real thing to think of was that the new deeds had never been signed nor completed, that no change had been made, that Penton was his, as he had always looked forward to it, not a new fortune unencumbered and free, but Penton with all its burdens, with all its honours, with the old family importance, the position of which he had so

often heard, and so often said, that it was one of the best in England.

Perhaps at any time he would have been startled and alarmed by the first consciousness of entering into this great inheritance. It was not an advancement that could be thought of lightly as mere getting on in the world. It was like ascending a throne. It was entering on a post rather than on a mere possession. The master of Penton had claims made upon him which were different, he thought, from those of a mere country gentleman. At any time there would have been solemnity in the prospect. But now that he had put it all away from him, and made up his mind to the other, to mere money without any position at all, and had calculated even on withdrawing from the smaller claims of Penton Hook, and setting up in perfect freedom, without any responsibilities, any land or burden of the soil, the awe with which he felt his natural importance come back to him, and all his plans brought to nothing, was great. It was as if Providence had refused to accept that sacrifice which he

had not indeed been willing to make, which he had done not for his own pleasure but in deference to what seemed best for the children, more practicable for himself. Providence had made light of all those deliberations, of the mother's arguments, and his own laborious and cloudy attempts to decipher what was best. Whether it was the best or the worst, in a moment God had changed all that, and here he was again at the point from which he had set out—master of Penton, or, if not so already, at least in an hour or two to be.

And he looked, to the servants at least, exactly as if he were taking possession, inspecting his future property. He went from one room to another with eyes that seemed to be investigating everything, though in reality they saw nothing. He walked about the library with his hands in his pockets, looking at all the books, then from the windows over the park, which stretched away down to the river, and in which there was a great deal of wood that might come down. He lingered long over the view; was he marking in his mind the clumps which were

thickest, where the trees most wanted cutting—the easiest way to make a little money? Then he went to the dining-room and looked in the same keen way at the plate upon the sideboard, calculating perhaps which were heirlooms and which were not.

The butler had his eye upon the probable new master, and drew his own conclusions. And then he went to the drawing-room, where he remained a long time, looking at everything. The butler had a great contempt for the poor relation who was about to come into this great property.

‘I don’t know what he could find to do away with there,’ that functionary said, and suggested that perhaps the painted roof was the thing that had occupied the speculations of the hungry heir.

As it happened, poor Edward Penton’s reflections were of the most depressed kind. He asked himself what would *she* do there—how could she settle herself and her work-basket and the children among those gilded pillars? How were they ever to furnish it? as she had said.

His wife after all was a woman of great sense. She knew how difficult it was to adapt one way of living to another, to transpose a household from what was little less than a palace. But now all her arguments were to come to nothing, and the revolution in his own mind to be set aside. He stood and shivered; for the heating had been neglected on this dismal and exciting day. The heating and everything else had been neglected, and the great room with one feeble fire burning was cold as any deserted place could be. What would she do there with Horry and the rest of the little ones, and her basket with the stockings to darn? Ally had asked herself the same question, but with a sort of awed satisfaction, feeling that this problem would never have to be resolved. But now it had come.

He strayed at last from the drawing-room through the corridor to the great room sometimes called the music-room, for there was an organ in it, sometimes called the King's room, since a Sacred Majesty had once, as at Lady Margaret Bellendean's castle of Tillietudlem, broken his

fast there—where the dancing had been. And here it was that the disorganisation of the household became apparent. Shutters were still closed and curtains drawn in this room. The pale light struggled in by every crevice, by the folds of the shutters, from the large open chimney, which was filled with flowers. The walls were hung with greenery, garlands of ivy and holly, and feathery bunches of the seedpods of the clematis. They had been beautiful last night; they were ghastly now, looking as if they had hung there for fifty years.

There was something in the neglect, in the deserted place, in the contrast of all that faded decoration with the stillness and desolation of the day, that suited Edward Penton's mood. The rest of the house suggested life and its ordinary occupations, neither sad nor glad, but serious and still. This was the banquet-hall deserted, which is of all human things the most dismal and suggestive. He walked up and down looking at the banks of flowers, half seen in this curious subdued and broken light. Here it was that the children were dancing, timid strangers,

half afraid of it, and of all that was going on, last night : and now to-day——

Solemn steps came in at the other end, slowly advancing over the waxed and slippery floor ; a solemn figure in black, more grave than ever mourner was, holding its hands folded.

‘Sir,’ the butler said, ‘my mistress has sent me to tell you all is over, about a quarter of an hour ago.’

‘All over ! You mean, my uncle is dead ?’

‘Sir Walter Penton died, sir, about ten minutes or a quarter of an hour ago, at twenty-five minutes past three.’ The butler took out his watch and looked at it with solemnity. ‘Just twelve minutes since, sir, by the clock, sir.’

It cost the man a great effort not to say Sir Edward. Sir Edward it had been for twelve minutes by his watch ; but decorum and a sense that he was himself on the other side restrained him. He paused a minute, waiting for anything that might be said to him, then went back again, his footsteps sounding solemnly all the way upon the uncarpeted floor.

Edward Penton sat down on one of the red

chairs against the wall which the dancers had used. A more forlorn picture could not have been made. The day breaking through the shutters, the dropping decorations, the waxed floor reflecting faintly those lines of pale light, and the man against the wall with his face hidden in his hands. He might have been a ruined spendthrift hearing of the final catastrophe of his fortune, hearing it with metaphorical propriety, amid the relics of feasting and merry-making. But no one would have recognized that picture to represent a man who had just come into his inheritance.

He met Rochford going away as he returned to the inhabited parts of the house.

‘I suppose I need not hesitate to congratulate you,’ the lawyer said, ‘Sir Edward; it is not as if the poor old gentleman had been a nearer relation.’

‘I don’t know what you call near. My uncle was the nearest relation I had of my name; nor why you should call him poor because he has just died.’

‘I beg your pardon. I meant nothing; it is

the ordinary way of talking,' said the lawyer, somewhat abashed.

'And a very inappropriate one, I think,' Edward Penton said. He had relapsed into his usual manner, in which there was always a little suppressed irritation. 'I suppose there never was any possibility of producing——'

He looked at the bag which Rochford carried.

'It is all so much waste paper,' said the young man. 'I felt it was so as soon as I saw him; even if we could have got him to sign, it would have been of no legal value; he was too far gone. It is curious,' he added, 'to be so nearly done, and yet not done. I wonder if you are sorry or pleased?'

Edward Penton made no reply. Rochford's ease and familiarity had seemed natural enough a few days ago, the conceit perhaps of a youngster, nothing more. Now it offended him, he could not tell why.

'Do you know,' he said, 'if my cousin is still there?'

He made a movement of his hand towards the room in which Sir Walter lay.

‘She has gone to her own room; they have persuaded her to lie down. Mr. Russell Penton is about, I know, if you want to see him.’

Edward Penton went on with another wave of his hand. It was not so much his new position (though as a matter-of-fact he felt that), but the change in all things, and the confused absorbing sentiment of all that had happened which made his companion disagreeable to him, like a presuming stranger. He himself was as a man in a dream. As he came through those rooms again they too were changed. They were now his. All that foolish idea of having nothing more to do with them was past for ever. They were now his. He walked through them with the step of the master, thinking involuntarily how this and that must be changed. The house had become to him a place no longer to be judged on its merits as suitable or unsuitable for the habitation of his family, but one to be adapted, arranged, borne with as being his own. Everything had changed—himself and his surroundings, his future, his place in the world,

and the mind with which he approached that place.

In the library, to which he returned as the room in which he was most likely to meet some one to whom he could talk, he found Russell Penton, and the two men instinctively shook hands with each other as if they had not met before.

‘I hope there was no more suffering,’ Edward Penton said.

‘None. He never recovered consciousness, but just slept away. No man could have wished a calmer end. He has had a long life, and his dying has been very peaceful. What more could a man desire?’

Edward Penton bowed his head, and they stood together for a moment saying nothing, paying their tribute not only to the life but to the state of affairs that was over. They both felt it, the one as much as the other. To Russell Penton it was, if not actual, at least possible freedom, especially now that the Penton arrangement was over. He grieved for his father-in-law, if not painfully, yet sincerely. He

was a venerable figure, a sustaining personality gone out of his life. He had so much less to do and to think of, which was in its way a sorrowful thought. But with that came the secret exhilaration of the consciousness that now perhaps the guidance of his own life would be his own. He would not oppose Alicia nor endeavour to coerce her; that would be the greatest mistake, he felt; but it was likely enough that in her softened state she would of her own accord subdue herself to this. At least, he hoped so, and it spread before him the prospect of a new existence. After they had stood together silent for a minute, Russell Penton spoke.

‘I think I ought to say this,’ he said. ‘Whatever Alicia may feel,—and I fear she will be disappointed,—I am myself much more pleased, Penton, that things should be as they are.’

‘I thought that was your feeling all along.’

‘Yes, they both knew it was; but I have always abstained from saying anything. My first desire was that she should as much as pos-

sible have what she liked best. She has well deserved it at my hands.'

Edward Penton said nothing on this subject. It was not one in which he could deliver his opinion.

'It is a great house,' he said, 'and a great responsibility for a man with a large family like me.'

'You will find it perhaps easier than you think; everything is in very perfect order. Alicia would like me to tell you, Penton, that though it was too late to be added as a codicil, her father's wish is sacred to her, and that it shall be as he desired about your boy.'

'My boy! do you mean Wat? What has he to do with it?' Edward Penton cried, half affronted.

He who had so nearly parted with the birthright himself, he was a little jealous of any interference now: and especially of this, that the feelings of his son should be brought into account in the matter.

'You heard what Sir Walter said. Your son took his fancy very much. He found a resem-

blance, which I also can see : but Alicia dislikes to hear of it, and so will you, perhaps.'

'A resemblance!' said Edward ; and then he thought of Walter Penton, his cousin. If Wat had not been like that unfortunate scapegrace, why should he have thought of him now? He said, with energy, 'There is no resemblance. They have dwelt so long on the memory of the boys that everything they see seems to have got identified with them. It was not so in their life. My boy Wat is no more like—why, you know, Russell ; you remember what a broken-down, miserable——'

'Hush!' said Russell Penton, lifting his hand. 'Let their memory be respected here. Alicia thinks with you : she sees no resemblance ; but she will give effect to her father's wishes. Everything he desired is sacred in her sight.'

'I hope she will think no more of it,' said Edward Penton, growing red. 'Beg of her from me to think no more of it. I could not have—I should not wish—in short, I should prefer nothing more to be said on the subject. He was an old man. His memory had got confused.

As I cannot be of any use here, can I have something to drive home? My wife will be anxious, she will want to know.'

And then there was a few minutes' brief conversation about the funeral and all the lugubrious business of such a moment. It was with a sense of relief that Edward Penton quitted for the first time the house that was now his own. He looked back upon it with curiously mingled feelings. He was glad to get away. It was an escape to turn out of the avenue into the clear undisturbed air in which there was nothing to remind him of the close, still atmosphere, the silence, the associations of this fatal place. But yet when he looked back his heart swelled with a sensation of pride. It was his. He had given up thinking of it, avoided looking at it, weaned his heart in every way from that house of his fathers. Never man had tried more honestly than he to give it up, entirely and from the bottom of his heart—this thing which was not to be for him. And now, without anything that could be called his doing, lo! it had come back into his hands. It was the doing of Providence,

he thought: his heart swelled with a sort of solemn pride.

As he went silently along, the landscape took another aspect in his sight. It was the country in which he was to spend all the rest of his life. It was his country, in which he was one of the chief people, a man important to many, known wherever he passed. By degrees a strange elation got into his mind.

‘Drive quickly, I am in haste to get home,’ he said to the groom who drove him.

‘Yes, Sir Edward,’ said the man, respectfully.

He had changed his very name—everything was changed. Then as the red roof of Penton Hook appeared below at the foot of the hill he thought of the anxious faces looking out for him, the young ones with awe in them, thinking of the first death that had crossed their way; his wife wistful, ready to read in his face what had happened. But none of them knowing what had really happened—that Penton was his after all.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ENCOUNTER UNFORESEEN.

THE young people drove from Penton to the Hook very silent and overawed, the two girls close together, and Walter opposite to them, looking very heavy and dull, his eyes red with want of sleep and the air of one who has been up all night in every line of him. It is curious what an air of neglect this gives even to the clothes. He felt shabby, out of order, in every way uncomfortable in body and dazed in mind, not feeling that he knew anything about what had happened, nor that he cared to think of that. He almost went to sleep with the closeness and the motion of the carriage, and took no more

notice of the presence of the stranger opposite to him than if she had been another sister. It had annoyed him for the first moment to have her there, but by this time he was quite indifferent to the fact, indifferent to everything, dazed with sleep and agitation and the weakening influence of a struggle past.

But there came a moment as they neared home when his senses returned to him with a bound. He was looking vaguely out of the carriage window seeing nothing, when suddenly, vaguely, there appeared at a distance, going up a road which led away from the main road deep into the quiet of the fields, a solitary figure. It was little more than a speck upon the road, a little shadow almost like that of a child: but it woke Walter fully up in a moment and made his heart beat. He called to the coachman to stop, to the great astonishment of Ally, who thought that something more must have happened in a day so full of fate, and cried out,

‘What is it, Wat, what is the matter?’ with anxiety in her tone.

‘Nothing,’ he said, opening the door as the

horses drew up ; ‘but I should prefer to walk if you don’t mind ; I think I shall go to sleep altogether if I stay here.’

‘Shall I come too?’ said Ally : but a glance at her companion showed her that this was impracticable.

‘Oh, Wat, don’t be long ! Mother will want to ask you—she will want to know——’

‘You can tell her as much as I can,’ he said, taking off his hat in honour of Mab, who looked out with much surprise at this sudden interruption of the drive, which was so dreary and yet so full of novelty and interest. And then the carriage went on.

Ally looking out of the window saw with great perplexity and distress that he turned back along the road. Was he going back to Penton ? where was he going ? Mab by her side immediately interposed with a reason.

‘Men don’t like close carriages,’ she said ; ‘they always prefer walking coming home from places. I don’t wonder ; I should walk if I might.’

‘We might if we were to go together,’ said

Ally ; 'we always walk with Walter, Anne and I. He likes it too. Let us—' But then she remembered that Wat had given no sort of invitation. And when she looked out again he had vanished from the road. Where had he gone? This was very startling, not to be explained by anything that occurred to Ally. She added, quickly, 'But it is very cold, and mother will be anxious.' And the carriage rolled on without any further interruption through the village and down the steep and stony way.

Walter could not have restrained himself even had the occasion of his leaving them been now apparent. He felt as if all his life were involved in getting speech of *her*, in receiving her sympathy and hearing her voice. He had never had such an opportunity before, never met her, scarcely in daylight seen her face, and to see her pursuing the loneliest road, where nobody ever appeared, which led nowhere in particular, where he could have her all to himself without the possibility of being sent away! He hurried along after her, striking across a field and dropping over a low wall, which brought him im-

mediately in front of her as she strolled along. She gave a little cry at sight of him, or rather at the suddenness of the apparition, not distinguishing at first who it was. She was dressed in very dark stuff with some rough fur about her throat and a thick gauze veil shrouding the upper part of her face. The little outline was so slim and pretty that any imperfection in costume or appearance was lost in the daintiness of the trim form. Indeed, how should Walter have seen any imperfection? She was not like anybody he had ever known. What was different could not but be an added grace.

‘You didn’t expect to see me,’ he said, coming up to her with his hat in his hand.

‘How should I? I thought no one knew this path but I. It is so quiet. And I saw no one on the road, nothing but a carriage. Ah, I know! You jumped out of the carriage. It was hot and stifling, and there were ladies in it who made you do propriety. I know.’

‘There was my sister,’ said Walter, ‘but I saw you. That was my reason, and the best one a man could have.’

‘You are only a boy,’ she said, shaking her head with a smile. Only her chin and lips were clear of that envious thick veil. The rest of her face was as if behind a mask, but how sweet the mouth was, and the smile that curved it! ‘And how could you tell it was I? Everybody wears the same sort of thing, tweed frock, and jacket, and——’

‘There is nobody like you; it is cruel to ask me how I knew. If you would only understand——’

‘I have heard that sort of thing before, Mr. Penton.’

‘Yes, I don’t doubt every fellow would say it, of course; but nobody could mean it so much as I.’

‘That’s what you all say; but I don’t believe it a bit: only I suppose it amuses you to say it, and it does, a little, amuse me. There are so few things,’ she said, with a sigh, ‘to amuse one here.’

‘That is what I feel,’ cried the lad; ‘nothing—we have nothing to keep you here. It is all so humdrum and paltry—a little country place.’

There is nothing in it good enough for you.'

She laughed with an air of keen amusement, which in his present condition slightly jarred upon Walter.

'It is a great deal too good for me,' she said, 'old Crockford's niece. If anybody speaks to me, I curtsy and say, "Yes, ma'am, it's doing me good, it is indeed, this fine fresh air."'

'I wish,' said the boy, 'you would drop this, and tell me once for all who you really are. I'm not happy to-day. We are all in great trouble. I wish you would not laugh, but just be serious once.'

'Oh, no, sir, I'll not laugh if you don't like it—nor nothing else as you don't like. I knows my place and how to behave to my betters. I'm Emmy, old Crockford's niece.' And she paused in the middle of the road to make him a curtsy. 'I've never said nothing else, now 'ave I, sir?'

He looked at her with irritation beyond expression. Could not she see that he was in no humour for jest to-day? And yet he could not but feel that the tone of her imitation was per-

fect, and that as she said these latter words it was certainly in the voice and with the manner which old Crockford's niece would have employed.

‘You don't know,’ he said, ‘how you fret me with all that. I thought when I saw you that I'd fly to you and get comforted a little. I don't want to have jokes put upon me just now. All this is very amusing—it's so well done—and it's so droll to think that it's you; but I have been through a great fight this morning,’ said Walter, with that self-pity which is so warm at his age. He felt his eyes moisten, something was in his throat—he was so sorry for himself; and he almost thought it would be best, after all, to hurry home to his mother, who always understood a man, instead of lingering out here in the cold, even with the most delightful, the most enthralling of women, who would do nothing but laugh. He was in this mood, with his eyes cast down, his head bent, standing still, yet with a sort of movement in his figure as if he would have gone away again, when suddenly a shock, a thrill of sweeter consciousness went through

him—and his whole being seemed rapt in delicious softness, comprehension, consolation. She had put her hand suddenly on his arm with a quick, impulsive movement.

‘Poor boy!’ she said. ‘You have been in a great fight? Tell me all about it.’

Her voice had changed to the tenderest, coaxing tone.

‘Ah!’ he exclaimed, in sudden ecstasy, holding close to his side the hand that had stolen within his arm—and for some time could say no more.

‘Well?’

‘Yes, yes!’ cried Walter, ‘I’ll tell you presently. I don’t know that I want to tell you at all. I want you to take an interest in me.’

‘Oh, if that is all!’ she said; then, after a moment, drew her arm away. ‘If we should meet anyone, Mr. Walter Penton, it would not look at all pretty to see you walking arm-in-arm with a—girl who lives in the village; a girl whom nobody knows, and, of course, whom everybody thinks ill of; but I can hear you

quite well without that. Come, tell me what it is. Did you say a fright or a fight ?'

'Both,' said Walter.

He made various attempts to recover the hand again, but they were all fruitless. The mere touch, however, had somehow—how, he could not tell—made things more natural, harmonised all the contrarieties in life, brought back a better state of affairs. The fumes of sleep and fatigue seemed to die away from his brain : the atmosphere grew lighter. It did not occur to him that to disclose the most private affairs of his family to this little stranger was anything extraordinary. He told her all about the bargain between his father and his cousin, and how he himself had been left out, and his consent never asked, though he was the heir ; and what had happened this morning—how he had been sent to fetch the parties to this bargain, and the papers, and how he had been tempted to delay or not to go.

'If I had not answered from my room when I heard them, if I had pretended not to hear, if I had only held back, which would have been no

sin! Should I have done it? Shouldn't I have done it?' cried Walter, quite unaware of the absurdity of his appeal.

The girl listened to all this with her head raised to him in an attitude of attention, but in reality with the most divided interest and a mind full of perplexed impatience. What did she care about his doubts—doubts and difficulties which she could not understand—which did not concern her? Her attention even flagged, though her looks did not. She wanted none of this grave talk; it was only the lighter kind of intercourse which she fully understood.

'Then it was you,' she said, seizing the only tangible point in all this outburst, 'that I heard thundering past the cottage just before daylight? I couldn't think what it could be.'

'Did you hear me? I looked up at the windows, but they were all closed and shut up. I wish,' cried the young man, 'I had known you were awake, I should not have felt so desolate.'

'Oh,' she cried, with a little toss of her head, 'what good could that have done you?' Then, seeing the cloud come over his face again which

had lifted for a moment, 'And how has it all ended?' she asked.

'Ended?'

He looked at her with surprise. He had not even asked himself that question, or realised that there was a question at all. How could it end but in one way?

'It is so good of you to tell me,' she resumed, 'when I am only a stranger and know nothing; but I hope they won't succeed in cheating you out of your money.'

'My money? oh, there is nothing about money. Money is not the question.'

'I know,' she said, with a pretty air of confusion—'your property, I mean; but they couldn't really take it from you, could they? Tell me what you will do when you come into your own. I should like to know.'

Walter's heart stood still for the moment. He felt as if he had suddenly come up against a blank world. Was this all she understood or would take notice of, of the struggle he had gone through? Had she no feeling for his moral difficulties or sympathy; or was it per-

haps that she thought that struggle too private to be discussed, and thus rebuked him by turning the conversation aside from that too delicate channel? In the shock of feeling himself misunderstood, he paused bewildered, and seized upon the idea that she understood him too clearly, and checked him with a more exquisite perception of her own.

‘You think I should not speak of it?’ he said. ‘You think I should not blame—you think—Oh, I understand. A delicate mind would not say a word. But I would not, except to you. It is only to you.’

‘Now I wonder,’ said the girl, ‘why it should be to me? for I don’t understand anything about it. And all that you’ve been telling me about wanting one thing and doing another, I can’t tell what you mean—except that I hope it will end very well, and that you will get what you want and be able to live very happy at the end. That’s how all the stories end, don’t you know. And tell me, when you come into all that fine property, what will you do?’

She wanted nothing but to bring him back to

the badinage which she understood and could play her part in. All this grave talk and discussion of what he ought or ought not to have done embarrassed her. She did not understand it, and yet she knew by instinct that to show how little she understood would be to lose something of her attraction; for though she was scarcely capable of comprehending the ideal woman whom the youth supposed he had found in her, yet she divined that it was not herself but an imaginary being who was so sweet in Walter's eyes. Perhaps it was even with a dull pang and sense of her inferiority that she discovered this; but she could not make herself other than she was. At any risk she had to regain that lighter tone which was alone possible to her.

She put up her veil a little and looked at him with a sort of laughing provocation in her eyes. It was a vulgar version of the 'Come, woo me,' of the most delightful of heroines. She could understand him or any man on that ground. She knew how to reply, to elude, or to lead on; but in other regions she was not

so well prepared; she preferred to lead the conversation back to herself and him.

‘I do not suppose,’ he said, in a subdued tone, ‘that there will be any property to come in to.’

‘Oh, that is nonsense,’ she said, putting this denial lightly away; ‘of course there will be property some time or other. And when you come into your fortune, tell me, what shall you do?’

Walter gave up with a sigh his hope of receiving support and consolation; but even now he was not able to follow her lead.

‘I suppose,’ he said, very uncheerfully, ‘I shall have to go to Oxford. That’s the only thing I shall be allowed to do.’

‘Oh, to Oxford!’ she cried, with disdain.

‘I don’t know that I wish it, only it’s the right thing to do, I suppose,’ said Walter, with another sigh. ‘Don’t you think so?’

‘I think so? No, indeed! If I were you—oh, if I were you! That’s what I should like to be, a young gentleman with plenty of money and able to do whatever I pleased.’

‘Oh,’ he said, with a shudder, ‘don’t say so; you who are so much finer a thing—so much—don’t you know—it is a sort of sacrilege to talk so.’

At this she laughed with frank contempt.

‘That’s nonsense,’ she said; ‘but I should not go to Oxford. I’d go into the Guards. It is they that have the best of it; almost always in London, and going everywhere. I should not marry, not for years and years.’

‘Marry!’ cried Walter, and blushed, which it did not occur to his companion to do.

‘No, I should not marry,’ said the girl; ‘I should have my fun, that is, if I were a gentleman. I should make the money go; I should go in for horses and all sorts of things. I should just go to the other extremity and do everything the reverse of what I have to do now. That’s because I can do so little now. Come, tell me, Mr. Penton, what should you do?’

Walter was much discomposed by this inquiry. He was disturbed altogether by the turn the conversation had taken. It was not at all what he had intended. He felt baffled and put

aside out of the way; but yet there was an attraction in it, and in the arch look which was in her eyes. He felt the challenge, and it moved him, notwithstanding that in his heart he was deeply disappointed that she had thrown back his confidences and not allowed herself to be drawn into his thoughts. He half understood, too, whither she wanted to lead him—into those encounters of wit in which she had so easily the mastery, in which he was so serious, pleading for her grace, and she so capricious, so full of mystery, holding him at bay. But he could not all at once, after all the experiences of the morning, begin to laugh again.

‘I am stupid to-day,’ he said. ‘I can’t think of fortune or anything else. I daresay I should do just the reverse of what you say.’

‘What! marry?’ she said. ‘Oh, silly! You should not think of that for years.’

‘I should do more than think of it,’ cried Walter, ‘if I—if you—if there was any chance—’ The boy blushed again, half with the shy emotion of his years, the sudden leaping of his blood towards future wonders unknown. And then

he stopped short, breathing hard. 'You tempt me to say things only to mock me,' he said. 'You think it is all fun; but I am in earnest, deep in earnest, and I mean what I——'

He stopped suddenly, the words cut short on his lips. They had turned a corner of the road, and close to them, so close that Walter stumbled over the stones on which he was seated, slowly chipping away with his hammer, was old Crockford, with ruddy old face and white hair, and his red comforter twisted about his neck.

'Is that you, baggage?' said the old man, who saw the girl first as they came round the corner. 'What mischief are ye after now? I never see one like you for mischief. Why can't ye let the lads alone? Why, Master Walter!' he cried, in consternation, letting the hammer fall out of his hand.

'Yes, Crockford. What's the matter? Do you think I am a ghost?' said Walter, in some confusion.

It was cowardly, it was miserable, it was the smallest thing in the world. Was he ashamed to be seen with her, she who was (he

said to himself) the most perfect creature, the sweetest and fairest? No, it could not be that; it was only what every young man feels when a vulgar eye spies upon his most sacred feelings. But he grew very red, looking the old stone-breaker, the road-mender, humblest of all functionaries, in the face as he spoke.

‘Ghost!’ said old Crockford, ‘a deal worse than that. A ghost could do me no harm. I don’t believe in ’em. But the likes of *hur*, that’s another pair o’ shoes. I know’d as she’d get me into trouble the moment I set eyes on her. Be off with you home, and let the young gentleman alone. You’ve made him think you’re a lady, I shouldn’t wonder. And if Mr. Penton found out he’d put me out of my cottage. Don’t give me none of your sauce, but run home.’

‘I have done no harm,’ said the girl. ‘Mr. Penton couldn’t put you out of your cottage because I took a walk. And you can send me away when you please. You know I’m not afraid of that.’

‘I know you’re always up to mischief,’ said the old man, ‘and that if it isn’t one it’s another.’

I've had enough of you. There's good and there's bad of women just like other creatures, but for making mischief there's nought like them, neither beasts nor man. Be off with you home.'

'Crockford, you forget yourself. That's not a way to speak to a—to a young lady,' cried Walter, wavering between boyish shame and boyish passion. 'And as for my father——'

'A young lady; that's all you know! Do you know who she is, Mr. Walter?' cried the old man.

'I am old Crockford's niece,' said the girl, 'and I know my place. I've never given myself out for any more than I am; now have I, sir? Thank you for walking up the hill with me, and talking so kind. But it's time I was going home. He's quite right, is the old man; and my duty to you, sir, and good day; and I hope you will come into your fortune all the same.'

How it was that she turned, standing before him there in the road in all her prettiness and cleverness, into Crockford's niece, with the diction and the air proper to her 'place,' was what

Walter could not tell. She cast him a glance as she turned round which transfixed him in the midst of his wonder and trouble, then turned and took the short cut across the field, running, getting over the stile like a bird. Which was she, one or the other? Walter stood and gazed stupidly after her, not knowing what to think or say.

CHAPTER X.

THE NEW STATE OF AFFAIRS.

WHEN Mr. Penton in the dog-cart was heard coming down the steep path to the open gates there was a universal rush to door and window to receive him. The delay in his coming had held the household in a high state of tension, which the arrival of the carriage with Ally and the young visitor increased. The girls could give no information except that Sir Walter was very ill, and that Mr. Russell Penton himself had put them into the carriage and sanctioned their coming away. Ally took her mother anxiously aside to explain.

‘I didn’t know what to do. She is Mr. Russell Penton’s niece; she has no father or

mother. She wanted to come, and he seemed to want her to come. Oh, I hope I haven't done wrong! I couldn't tell what to do.'

'Of course, there is the spare room,' said Mrs. Penton, but she was not delighted by the appearance of the stranger. 'Tell Martha to light a fire in the spare room. But you must amuse her yourselves, you and Anne; your father must not be troubled with a visitor in the house.'

'Oh, she will not be like a visitor, she will be like one of ourselves,' said Ally.

The father, however, observed the little fair curled head at the drawing-room window as he drove up, and it annoyed him. A stranger among them was like a spy at such a moment. The girls were at the window, and Walter, newly returned, had been standing at the gate, and Mrs. Penton was at the door. He jumped down, scarcely noticing the anxious look of inquiry with which she met him, and stopped on the step to take a sovereign from his waistcoat pocket, which he handed to the groom who had driven him.

‘Thank you, Sir Edward,’ said the man, touching his hat with great obsequiousness.

‘Sir Edward’ and a sovereign! The two things together set Mrs. Penton’s heart beating as it scarcely ever had beat before. She did not understand it for the moment. ‘Sir Edward’ and a sovereign! This perhaps was the most impressive incident of all.

Then he took her by the arm without a word of explanation.

‘Come with me into the book-room, Anne.’

He had not a word even for little Molly, who came fluttering like a little bird across the hall and embraced his leg, and cried, ‘Fader, fader!’ in that little sweet twitter of a voice which was generally music to his ears.

‘Take her away,’ was all he said, with a hasty pat of her little shining head. His face was as grave as if the profoundest trouble had come upon him, and wore that vague air of resentment which was natural to him. Fate or Fortune or Providence, however you like to call it, had been doing something to Edward Penton again. As a matter of course, it was always

doing something to him—crossing his plans, setting them all wrong, paying no attention to his feelings. There was no conscious profanity in this thought, nor did the good man even suppose that he was arraiguing the Supreme Disposer of all events. He felt this sincerely, with a sense of injury which was half comic, half tragic. Mrs. Penton was used to it, and used to being upbraided for it, as if she had somehow a secret influence, and if she pleased might have arrested the decisions of fate.

‘Well, Edward?’ she said, breathless, as he closed the book-room door.

‘Well,’ he replied. The fire was low, and he took up the poker violently in the first place and poked and raked till he made an end of it altogether. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘after being out all the morning, I might at least find a decent fire.’

‘I’ll make it up in a moment, Edward. A little wood will make it all right.’

‘A little wood! and you’ll have to ring the bell for it, and have half-a-dozen people running and the whole house disturbed, just when I

have so much to say to you! No, better freeze than that!' He turned his back to the fire, which, after all, was not quite without warmth, and added, after a moment, not looking at her, contracting his brows, and with a sort of belligerent shiver to let her see that he was cold, and that it was her fault. 'My uncle is dead.'

'Is it all over, Edward? I fancied that it must be soon;' and then she added, with a little timidity, 'Were you in time?'

'In time! I was there for hours.' He knew very well what she meant, but it was a sort of pleasure to him to prolong the suspense. 'Of course,' he said, slowly, 'he could not be expected to recover at his age. Alicia should have known better than to have had—dances and things at his age.'

'Dances! I have had no time to speak to Ally. I didn't know: oh, how dreadful, Edward, and the old man dying!'

'The old man wasn't dying then,' he said, pettishly. 'How were they to suppose he was going to die? He has often been a great deal

worse. He was an old man who looked as if he might have lived for ever.'

After this his wife made no remark, but furtively—her housewifely instincts not permitting her to see it go out before her eyes—stooped to the coal-box standing by to put something on the fire.

'Let it alone!' he said, angrily. 'At such a moment to be poking among the coals! Do you know what has happened? Can't you realise it a little? Here we have Penton on our hands—Penton! *That* place to be furnished, fitted out, and lived in! How are we to do it? I am in such a perplexity, I think, as never man was. And, instead of helping me, all your thoughts are taken up with mending the fire!'

Mrs. Penton sat down suddenly in the first chair. She put her hand upon her heart, which had begun to jump.

'Then you were not in time? Oh, I thought so from the first. To go on wasting day after day, and he such an old man!'

And in the extreme excitement of the mo-

ment she began to cry a little, holding her hand upon her fluttering heart.

‘It was what I always feared; when there is a thing that is troublesome and difficult, that is always the thing that happens,’ she cried.

Her husband did not make any immediate reply. He wheeled round in his turn and took up the poker, but presently threw it down again.

‘It is no use making a fuss over that now. It’s that fellow Rochford’s fault. By the way,’ he said, turning round again sharply, ‘mind, Annie, I won’t have that young fellow coming here so much. It might not have mattered before, but now it’s out of character—entirely out of character. Mind what I say.’

Mrs. Penton took no notice of this. She went on, with a little murmur of her own :

‘No, it is of no use making a fuss. We can’t undo it now. To think it might have been settled yesterday, or any day! and now it never can be settled whatever we may do.’

‘I don’t know what you mean by settled,’ he

said, hastily; 'nothing can be more settled; it is as clear as daylight: not that there could be any doubt at any time. The thing we've got to think of is what we are to do.'

'With all the children,' said Mrs. Penton, 'and that great empty house, and no ready money or anything. Oh, Edward, how can I tell what we are to do? It has been before me for years. And then I thought when your cousin spoke that all was going to be right.'

'There's no use speaking of that now.'

'No, I don't suppose there's any use. Still when one thinks—which of course I can't help doing; when your cousin came I thought it was all right. Though you never would listen to me, I knew that you would listen to her. And now here it is again just as if that had never been!'

It was, perhaps, not generous of Mrs. Penton to indulge in these regrets, but it was expecting from her something more than humanity is capable of, to suppose that she would instantly turn into a consoler, and forget that she had ever prophesied woe. That is very well for an

ideal heroine, a sweet young wife who is of the order of the embodied angel. But Mrs. Penton was the mother of a large family, and she had other things to think of than merely keeping her husband in a tranquillity which perhaps he did not desire. When there are so many interests involved, it is not easy for a woman to behave in this angelic way. Perhaps her husband did not expect it from her. He stood leaning his back upon the mantelpiece with a countenance which had relapsed into its usual half-resentful quiet. He was not angry nor surprised, nor did he look as if he were paying much attention. It gave him a little time to collect his own thoughts while she got her little plaint and irrestrainable reflections over. Sympathy is in this as much as in other more demonstrative ways. If she had got over it in a moment without any expression of feeling, he would probably have been shocked, and felt that nothing mattered to her; but he got calm, while she, too, had her little grumble and complaint against fate.

‘The thing,’ he said, ‘now, is to think what

we must do. I sha'n't hurry the Russell Pentons; they can take their time: and in the meantime we must look about us. The thing is there will be no rents coming in till Lady-day, and it's only Christmas. I never thought I should have seen it in this light. To succeed to Penton seemed always the thing to look forward to. It is you that have put it in this light.'

'What other light could I put it in, Edward? Penton is very different from this, and we have never been much at our ease here. I was always frightened for what would happen when you began to realise—But, dear me,' she added, 'what is the use of talking? We must just make the best of it. Nothing is quite so bad as it seems likely to be. With prudence and taking care, perhaps, after all, we may do——'

'Do!' he said, 'to go to Penton, the great house of the family, and to be the head of the family, and to have nothing better before one than a hope that we shall be able to *do*——'

And then there was a pause between this careful and troubled pair; and of all things in the world, any stranger who had seen them would

have imagined last of all that they had succeeded to a great inheritance, and that the man at least had attained to what had been his hope and dream for years.

‘Well,’ she said at last, ‘I can’t do you any good, Edward, and the bell for dinner will be ringing directly. You must have had an agitating morning, and I daresay ate no breakfast, and you will be the better for your dinner. I suppose we ought to draw down all the blinds.’

‘Why should you draw down the blinds? There is not too much light.’

‘I should not like,’ said Mrs. Penton, ‘to be wanting in any mark of respect. And, after all, Sir Walter was your nearest relation, and you are his successor, so that it is really a death in the family.’

She walked to the window as she spoke, and began to draw down the blind. He followed her hastily, and stopped her with an impatient hand.

‘My windows look into the garden. Who is coming into the garden to see whether we pay respect or not? I won’t have it anywhere. On

the funeral day, if you please, but no more. I won't have it!' It did him a little good to have an object for his irritation. She turned round upon him with some surprise, feeling the imperative grasp of his hand upon her arm. Perhaps that close encounter and her startled look affected him; perhaps only the disturbed state in which he was, with all emotions close to the surface. He put his other hand upon her further shoulder, and held her for a moment, looking at her. 'My dear,' he said, 'do you know you're Lady Penton now?'

She gave him another look, full of surprise and almost consternation.

'I never thought of that,' she said.

'No, I never supposed you did—but so it is. There has not been a Lady Penton for thirty years. There couldn't be a better one,' he said, with a little emotion, kissing her on the forehead.

The look, the caress, the little solemnity of the announcement overcame her. Lady Penton! How could she ever accustom herself to that name, or think it was she who was meant by it? It drove other matters for the moment out of

her head. And then the bell rang for dinner—the solid family meal in the middle of the day, which had suited all the habits of the family at Penton Hook. Already it seemed to be out of place. She dried her eyes with a tremulous, half-apologetic hand, and said,

‘You know, Edward, the children—must always have their dinner at this hour.’

‘To be sure,’ he replied. ‘I never supposed there could be any change in that respect.’

‘And you must want some food,’ she said, ‘and a little comfort’—then, as she went before him to the door, she paused with a little hesitation, ‘you know they brought a little girl with them, a niece of Russell Penton’s? It is a pity to have a stranger to-day, but they could not help it.’

‘No, I don’t suppose they could help it,’ said Sir Edward.

Neither he nor she knew anything more of their visitor than that she was a girl, Russell Penton’s niece.

They all met round the table in the usual way, but yet in a way which was not at all

usual. The father and mother came in arm-in-arm, after the children had gathered in the dining-room—that is to say, he had taken her arm, placing his hand within it, and pushing her in a little before him into the room. The little children had clambered into their high chairs, and little Molly sat at the lower end, which was her usual place, close to her father's chair, flourishing a spoon in the air, and singing her little song of 'Fader, fader!' Molly was always the one that called him to dinner when he was busy, and thus the cry of 'fader!' had become associated with dinner in her small mind.

The elder ones stood about waiting for their parents; Mab between Ally and Anne, looking curiously on at all the manners and customs of this new country in which she found herself—the unknown habits of a large family, who were not rich—all of which particulars were wonderful in her eyes.

Walter, as his mother at once saw, bore a strange aspect—abstracted and far-away—as if his mind were full of anything in the world except the scene around him. Perhaps it was

fatigue, for the poor boy had been up all night ; perhaps the crisis, which was so extraordinary, and which contradicted everything they had been planning and thinking of. The elder children were all grave, disturbed, a little overawed by all that was coming to pass. And for some time there was scarcely anything said. The little bustling of carving, of serving the children, of keeping them all in order, soon absorbed the mother as if it had been an ordinary day ; but, at the other end of the table, neither Ally, looking at him with anxious eyes on the one side, nor Molly on the other, got much attention from their father, who was occupied by such different thoughts. Mab was the only one who was free of all *arrière pensée*. She had scarcely known Sir Walter ; how could she be overwhelmed by his death ? and it made no difference to her ; whereas this plunge into novelty and the undiscovered was more wonderful to her than anything she had ever known. She watched the children and all their ways—the little clamour of one, the steady perseverance of another, the watchful way in which

Horry devoured and kept the lead, observing lest any of the brotherhood should get before him as he worked through his meal—with delighted interest.

‘Are they always like that?’ she whispered to Anne. ‘Do you remember all their names? Do they always eat as much? Oh, the little pigs, what darlings they are!’ cried Mab, under her breath.

Anne did not like to hear the children called ‘little pigs,’ even though the other word was added.

‘They don’t eat any more than other children,’ she said.

And Anne, too, if she was not anxious was at least very curious and eager to hear all that had happened, which only father knew. And father’s brow was full of care. They all turned it over in their minds in their different fashions, and asked each other what could possibly have happened worse than had been expected; for already experience had made even these young creatures feel that something worse happening was the most likely,

a great deal more probable, than that there was something better. The mother was the most fortunate, who divided and arranged everything, and had to make allowances for Horry's third help when she first put a spoon into the pudding, a matter of severe and abstruse calculation which left little space in the thoughts for lesser things.

When dinner was over, the children all rushed out with that superfluity of spirits which is naturally produced by a full meal—but also a little quarrelsome as well, making a great noise in the hall, and requiring a great deal of management before they could be diverted into the natural channels in which human energy between the ages of twelve and two has to dissipate itself in the difficult moment of the afternoon. When the weather was good they all scampered out into the garden, where indeed Horry and his brothers rushed now with the shouts of the well-fed and self-satisfied. To recover these rebels on one hand, and to get the little tumult of smaller children dancing about in all the passages dispersed and quiet

was a piece of work which employed all the energies of the ladies.

Mab Russell looked on admiring in the midst of that little rabble. She would have liked, above all things, to head an insurrection, and besiege the mother and sisters in their own stronghold. She went so far as to hold out her skirts over Horry, who took refuge behind her, seeing the face of an ally where he expected it least. They were all anxious to get the riot over, but Mab, who knew no better, interrupted the course of justice. Oh, how awkward it is to have a stranger in the house when the family affairs are trembling in the balance, and no one knows what is going to happen! This was what Ally and Anne said to each other, almost weeping over that contrariety of fortune, when they were compelled, instead of hearing all about it, to go round the grounds with Mab and show how high the water had come up last year.

CHAPTER XI.

NEW PLANS.

NOTWITHSTANDING all the hindrances that envious fate could send, the news so important to the family got itself circulated among them at last, with the result that the strangest excitement, elation, and despondency, a complication of feelings utterly unknown in their healthful history, took possession of the Penton family. They had made up their minds to one thing—they now found themselves and all their projects and plans swallowed up in another. They had adapted themselves, the young ones with the flexibility of youth, to the supposed change in their fortunes. They had now to go back

again, to forget all those innumerable consultations, arrangements, conclusions of all kinds, and take up their old plans where they had been abandoned. It had been dreadful to give up Penton. It was scarcely more agreeable to take it back again. And yet an elation, an elevation was in all their minds. Penton was theirs, that palace of the gods. They were no longer nobodies, they were people of importance.

The girls found it beyond measure uncomfortable, distracting, insupportable, that on this day of all others, when they had a thousand things to say to each other—questions to ask, suggestions to make, the most amazing revolution to talk over, there should be a stranger always between them, one whom, with that civility which was born with them, and in which they had been trained, they felt themselves constrained to explain everything to, whom they would not leave out of their conversation or permit to feel that she was an intruder. She was an intruder all the same. She was in the way, horribly in the way, at this eventful

moment. The family was dissolved by her presence. The father and mother retired together to the book-room to talk there, a thing they never would have done but for the stranger. And Walter strolled off on his side, scarcely saying a word to his sisters, whom he could not approach or communicate his sentiments to in consequence of Mab. It was a heavy task to the two girls to have to entertain her, to go round and round the garden with her, to point out the views of Penton, to explain to her what it was about, when one or another would burst out into some irrestrainable exclamation or remark; but the fate of womankind in general was upon these devoted young women. They had to entertain the visitor, to occupy themselves with the keeping up of appearances, and to put everything that interested them most aside in their hearts.

‘ We put this seat here because it is the best view of Penton. No, it isn’t very shady in summer, it is a little exposed to the wind; but then Penton——’

‘ We used to be so much interested in every

view. Is this the best, or the one from the top of the hill?’

‘Oh, the one on the top of the hill. Oh, I wish Penton was at the bottom of the sea!’

‘I don’t,’ cried Anne. ‘After all, it is only the confusion with having changed our minds. It is so much better not to change one’s mind, that lets so many new thoughts come in.’

‘And most likely the old thoughts were the best,’ said Ally, softly, with a little sigh. Then she added, ‘You must think us so strange; but it is only just to-day, for we are all excited and put out.’

‘One would think you did not like coming into your fortune,’ said Mab. ‘Is it because of old Sir Walter? But Aunt Gerald said you scarcely knew him.’

‘We never saw him; but it is terrible to think of being better off because some one has died—’

‘And it is more than that. It is because we thought we were to give it all up, and now it seems it is all ours——’

‘And we were always brought up to think so very much of it,’ Ally said. And then she

added, 'Shouldn't you like to come round and see where the children have their gardens; it is quite high and dry, it is beyond the highest mark. No flood has ever come up here.'

This was the supreme distinction of the terrace and that part of the garden that lay beyond it. They were quite proud to point out its immunity from the floods: as they passed they had a glimpse through the windows of the book-room of Mr. and Mrs.—nay, of Sir Edward and Lady Penton, sitting together, he with a pencil in his hand jotting down something upon a piece of paper, she apparently reckoning up upon the outstretched fingers of her hand. Ally and Anne looked at each other; they would all have been deep in these calculations together if Mab had not been there.

Walter went upon his own way. Perhaps had the visitor been a man he might have had the same confinement, the same embarrassment: but probably he would have undertaken nothing of the sort. Probably he would have thrown over his guest upon the girls. What were girls good for but to undertake this sort of thing,

and set more important persons free? For himself he did not feel able for anything but to realise the new position; to turn everything over in his mind, to hurry away to the neighbourhood, at least, of the one creature in the world who (he thought) might look at it from his point of view and care what he felt. Could he still think, after the reception she had given him that morning, after the blank which he had found in her, the incapacity to understand him—could he believe still that his tumultuous feelings now and all the ferment in his mind would awaken in her that ideal sympathy and understanding of which he had dreamed?

Alas! poor Walter! he knew so little in reality of *her*: what he knew was his own imagination of her—a perfect thing, incapable of failure, sure to sympathise and console. What he had learned from the failure of the morning was only this: that it must have been his fault, who had not known how to explain—how to make his story clear. It was not she who was to blame. He rushed up the hill with his heart aflame, thinking of everything. He was now no dis-

inherited knight, no neglected youth whose fate his elders decided without consulting him. Oh, no; very different. He was the heir of Penton! He had attained what he had looked for all his life. He stood trembling upon the verge of a new existence, full of the tumultuous projects, the unformed resolves that surge upwards and boil in the mind of a youth emancipated, whose life has come to such promotion, whose career lies all before him. And to what creature in the world after himself could this be of the same importance as to her who might—oh, wonderful thought!—share it with him? He had been far from having this thought in the morning. Then he was but a boy, without any definite plan, with only education before him and vague beginnings, and no certainty of anything. Now he was Walter Penton of Penton, with a position which no man could take from him—not his father even! Nobody could touch him in his rights. Not an acre could be alienated without his consent; nothing could be taken away.

And then there was that story about

‘providing for the boy’ which his father had touched on very lightly, but which came back in the strongest sense to the mind of the boy who was to be provided for. He felt the wildest impatience to tell her all this. She would understand him now. She did not know what he meant in the morning, which was, no doubt, his fault. How could she be expected to understand the fantastic discontent that was in his mind? But she would understand now. He had a certainty of this, which was beyond all possibility of mistake, and though he knew that it was very unlikely he should see her at this hour, yet the impulse of his heart was such that nothing else was possible to him but to hurry to the spot where she was—to be near her, to put himself in the way if perchance she should pass by. The painful impression with which in the morning he had seen her in a moment change herself and her aspect, and step down from the position on which she met him to that of Crockford’s niece, passed altogether from his mind—or rather it remained as a keen stimulant forcing him to a solution of the mystery which inter-

twined the harmony with a discord as is the wont of musicians. There could not be any such jarring note. He must account for the jarring note; it was a tone of enchantment the more, a charm disguised.

These were the things he said to himself—or rather he said nothing to himself, but such were the gleams that flew across his mind like glimmers of light out of the sky. He went quickly up the steep hill, breasting it as if his fortune lay at the top, and a moment's delay might risk it all—until he came within sight of Crockford's cottage, its upper windows twinkling over the rugged bit of hedge that fenced off the little grass-plot in front. Then his pace slackened—the goal was in sight; there was no need for haste—in short, even had she been visible, Walter would have dallied, with that fantastic instinct of the lover which prolongs by deferring the moment of enjoyment. And then at a little distance he could examine the windows, he could watch for some sign or token of her, as he could not do near at hand.

He lingered, he stood still on a pretence of

looking at the hedgerows, of examining a piece of lichen on a tree, his eyes all the time furtively turning towards that rude little temple of his soul. What a place to be called by such a name! And yet the place was not so much to be found fault with. The hedge was irregular and broken, raised a little above the path, with a rough little bit of wall, all ferns and mosses, supporting the bank of earth from which it grew; above it, glistening in the low red rays of the afternoon sun, were the lattice windows of the upper storey, with the eaves of an uneven roof—old tiles covered with every kind of growth—overshadowing them; a cottage as unlike as possible to those dreadful dwellings of the poor which are the result of sanitary science and economy combined; a little human habitation harmonised by age and use with all its surroundings, and which no one need be ashamed to call home.

So Walter said to himself as he stood and looked at it in the light of romance and the afternoon sun. It was as venerable as Penton itself, and had many features in common with

the great house. It was more respectable and more lovely than the damp gentility of Penton Hook, which was old-new, with plaster peeling off, and a shabby modernism in its vulgar walls. Crockford's cottage pretended to nothing, it was all it meant to be. It was in its way a beautiful place, being so harmonised by nature, so well adapted to its uses. Walter's estimate of it increased as the moments went on. He felt at last that to bring his bride from such an abode was next door to bringing her from an ideal palace of romance; perhaps better even than that, seeing that there would be all the pleasure of setting her in the sphere which she would adorn; for would not she adorn—it was an old-fashioned phrase, yet one that suited the occasion—any sphere?

He was interrupted in these thoughts by the sound of steps approaching. All was silent, alas! in the cottage. The door was shut, for it was very cold weather, and no one appeared at a window; there was not a movement of life about. Walter knew that the room in which they lived (*i.e.*, the kitchen) looked to the back.

The approaching passenger, therefore, did not convey any hopes to his mind, but only annoyed him, making him leave off that silent contemplation of the shrine of his love, which he had elaborately concealed by a pretended examination of the lichens on the tree. If anyone was coming, that pretence, he felt, was not enough, and he accordingly continued his walk very slowly up the hill in order to meet the new-comer, whoever he might be.

When he came in sight, he was not, as Walter had expected, a recognisable figure, but unmistakably a stranger—a man whose dress and appearance were as unlike as possible to anything which belonged to the village. He was a young man, rather undersized, in a coat with a fur collar, a tall hat, a muffler of a bright colour, a large cigar, and a stick of the newest fashion. He was indeed all of the newest fashion, fit for Bond Street, and much more like that locality than a village street. Walter was not very learned in Bond Street, but he laughed to himself as he made this conclusion, feeling that

Bond Street would not acknowledge such a glass of fashion.

The stranger was looking at Crockford's cottage with a glass stuck in his eye, and a sort of contemptuous examination, which proved that he made a very different estimate of it from that which Walter had just done. When he in his turn heard Walter's step upon the road, he seemed to wake up to the consciousness of being looked at, in a way which aroused the contempt of the young native. He gave himself various little pulls together, took his cigar from his mouth with an energetic puff, put up his disengaged hand to his cravat with an involuntary movement to arrange something, and settled his shoulders into his coat—gestures corresponding to the little shake and shuffle with which some women prepare themselves to be seen, however elaborate their toilette may have been before. Then he quickened his steps a little to meet Walter, who came towards him very slowly, with a quite uncalled-for sentiment of contempt. Why should a youth in knicker-

bockers, in the rough roads of his native parish, feel himself superior to a gentleman visitor in the apparel of the higher orders, coming (presumably) out of Bond Street? Who can explain this mystery? No doubt it was balanced by a still stronger feeling of the same kind on the other side. The stranger came forward evidently with the intention of asking information. He was a sandy-haired and rather florid young man, with a badly-grown moustache and little tufts of colourless beard. His hat was a little on one side, and the hair upon which it was poised glistened and shone. The level sun came in his eyes and made him blink; it threw a light which was not flattering over all his imperfections of colour and form.

‘Beg your pardon,’ he said, with a slight stammer as they approached each other, ‘you couldn’t tell me, could you, where one—Crockton or Croaker, or some such name, lives about here?’

‘Croaker?’ said Walter. With Crockford’s cottage before his eyes, what could be more simple? The suggestion was too evident to be

mistaken, as was also the other suggestion, which came like a flash of lightning, and made his eyes shine with angry fire. 'I know nobody of the name,' he said, quietly, making a rapid step forward; and then it occurred to him that the information thus sought might be supplied easily by an uninterested passer-by, and he paused, feeling that it was necessary to plant himself there on the defence. 'What sort of a man do you want? What is he?' he asked.

'Ah, no sort of man at all—it's—it's a cottage, I believe. He may be a cobbler or a plough-boy, or a—anything you please. Am I the sort of person to know such people's trades? It's a—it's a—— Look here, I'll make it worth your while if you'll help me. It's a lady I want.'

'Oh, a lady!' said Walter.

He felt the blood flush to his face; but this the inquirer, occupied with his own business, did not remark. He came close, turning off the smoke of his cigar with his hand.

'Look here,' he said, in a loud whisper, 'I'll make it worth your while. I'll be as good as a suv——, well, I may say if you'll really find out

what I want, as good as a fiver in your pocket. Oh, I say, what's the matter? I don't mean no harm.'

'I wonder who you take me for?' cried Walter, whose sudden move forward had thrown the other back in mingled astonishment and alarm.

The stranger eyed him from head to foot with a puzzled look, which finally awoke a little amusement in Walter's angry soul.

'Don't know you from Adam,' he said, 'and I ain't used to fellows in knickerbockers. Swells wear them, and gamekeepers wear them. If you're a swell I beg your pardon, that's all I can say.'

This prayer it pleased Walter graciously to grant. He began to enter into the humour of the situation. And then, to save her from some vulgar persecutor, was not that worth a little trouble?

'Never mind,' he said, 'who I am. I know all the ladies that live here. Which of them is it that you want?'

'Well, she don't live here,' said the other.

‘Yes, to be sure, she’s here for the moment, with one Croaker, or something like that. But she’s not one of the ladies of the place; she’s not, perhaps, exactly what you call a—— Yes, she is though—she’s awfully well educated. She talks—oh, a great deal better than most of the swellest people you meet about. I’ve met a good few in my day,’ he said, with an air, caressing his moustache. ‘I don’t know nobody that comes up to her, for my part.’

He was a little beast—he was a cad—he was a vulgar little beggar: he was not a gentleman, nor anything like it. But still he seemed to have a certain comprehension. Walter’s heart softened to him in spite of all provocations.

‘I don’t think,’ he said, but more gently than he could have thought possible, ‘that you will meet anyone of that sort here.’

‘No? you don’t think so. But they’d keep her very close, don’t you see. Fact is, she was sent off to keep her out of a young fellar’s way. A young swell, you know, a—a friend of mine, with a good bit of money coming to him, and his people didn’t think her good enough. Oh, I

don't think so—not a bit. I'm all on the true love side. But where there's money, don't you know, there's always difficulties made.'

'I suppose so,' said Walter, with momentary gravity. And there came before him for a moment a horrible realisation—something he had never thought of before. 'But I don't think,' he added, 'that you will find any such lady here.'

He was so young and simple that it was a certain ease to his conscience to put it in this way. He said to himself that he was telling no lie. He was not saying that there was no such lady here, only that he did not think the other would find her—which he should not, at least so long as Walter could help it. This little equivocation gave great comfort and ease to his mind.

'Don't you, though?' said the stranger, discouraged. 'But I'm almost sure this was the village, near the river, and not far from—it answers to all the directions—if only I could find Croaker—or Crockton, or a name like that. I'm a dreadful fellow for muddling names.'

‘I’ll tell you what,’ said Walter, ‘it may be Endsleigh, about two miles further on; that’s near the river, and not far from Reading, which I suppose is what you mean—a pretty little village where people go in summer. And, to be sure, there’s some people named Croaker there; I remember the name—over a shop—with lodgings to let—that’s the place,’ he cried, with a little excitement. For all this was quite true, and yet elaborately false in intention, a combination to delight any such young deceiver. ‘Come along,’ he cried, ‘I’ll show you the way. It lies straight before you, and Croaker’s is just as you go into the village. You can’t miss it. I’ve earned that fiver,’ he said, with a laugh, ‘but you’re welcome to the information—for love.’

‘For love!’ cried the other; and he gave the young fellow a very doubtful look, then threw a suspicious glance around as if he might possibly find some reasons lying about on the road why this young stranger should attempt to deceive him. But, after all, why should a young swell in knickerbockers desire to deceive the man of

Bond Street? There could be no reason. He took out his cigar-case, and offered a large and solid article of that description for Walter's acceptance, who took it with great gravity. 'I can't thank you any way else—they're prime ones, I can tell you,' he said, and with a flourish of his stick, by way of farewell, took the way pointed out to him.

Walter stood and watched him with a curious mingling of satisfaction and mischief. He threw the cigar into the ditch. It was a bad one, he had no doubt, which, perhaps, made it less a sacrifice to throw away this reward of guile.

CHAPTER XII.

A DECISIVE MOMENT.

BUT, when this little adventure was over, it made no difference to the longing and eagerness in the boy's heart. Indeed, he wanted to see her more than ever, to find out from her who this fellow was, what he had to do with her, why he was seeking her. Could it be possible that she felt any interest in such a creature? that she—might have married him, perhaps. Could this be? He had spoken as if it was he who had been the prize. She had been sent away in order not to be a danger for him. Walter snapped the branch of a tree he had seized hold of as if it had been a twig, as

the thought passed through his mind. And then he was seized with a half-hysterical fit of laughter. Him, that fellow! that little beast! that cad! that—— There were no words that could express his contempt and scorn and merriment, but it was not merriment of a comfortable kind.

When his laugh was over, he went round and round the house without seeing anyone—all was closed, the doors shut, nobody at the windows, nothing at all stirring. One or two people passed, and looked wondering to see him wander about, up and down like a ghost; but he neither saw her nor any trace of her. The red glitter went out of the windows, the sun sank lower and lower, and then went out, leaving nothing but the winter grey which so soon settled towards night. And by-and-by Walter found himself compelled by the force of circumstances to turn his back upon the cottage, and go down the steep road again towards home.

The force of circumstances at this particular moment meant the family tea—and the strange,

tragical, foolish complication of his own high romance and enthusiasm of love, for which he was ready to defy anything—and the youthfulness and childishness of his position, which made it criminal for him not to be in for tea—was one of those things which confuse with ridicule all that is most serious in the world. He saw it with an acute pang how absurd it was; but he could not emancipate himself. The thought of the family consternation, the question on all sides, Where is Wat? his father's irritation, and his mother's wonder, and the apologies of the girls, and the suggestions of accident, of some catastrophe, something terrible to account for his non-appearance, were all quite visible and apparent to him; and the grotesque incompatibility of these bonds, with the passionate indulgence of his own will and wish upon which his mind was fixed.

He saw all these circumstances also with a curious faculty, half of sympathy, half of repulsion, through the eyes of the little visitor, the little intruder, the girl who had suddenly become a member of the household, and who was

there observing everything. She would remark the unwillingness with which he appeared, and she would remark, he felt certain, his absence both before and after, and would ask herself where he went, a question which, so far as Walter was aware, not even his mother had begun to ask as yet. He had an instinctive conviction that Mab would ask it, that she would see through him, that she would divine what was in his heart. And when they all met about the homely table once more,—the children intent upon their bread-and-butter, the mother apportioning all the cups of tea, the milk-and-water to some, the portions of cake,—Walter seemed to himself to be taking part in some scene of a comedy curiously interposed between the acts of an exciting drama.

A cold world, out of doors, spreading all around, with the strangest encounters in it, with understandings and misunderstandings which made the blood run cold, and sent the heart up bounding into high passion and excitement, into feverish resolve and wild daring, and the madness of desperation—and in the very midst a

sudden pause, the opening of a door, and then the confused chatter of the children, the sound of the teacups, the lamp which smelt of paraffin, the bread-and-butter,—how laughable it was, how ridiculous, what a contrast, what a slavery, how petty in the midst of all the passions and agitations that lay around !

Presently Walter, in his boyish ingenuousness, began to feel a little proud that he, so simple as he sat there in the fumes of the household tea, was in reality a distracted yet well-nigh triumphant lover, meaning to put his fortune to the touch that very night, to pledge his new life and all it might bring. They thought him nothing more than a lad to be sent to school again, to be guided at their will, when he was a man and on the eve of an all-important decision, about to dispose of his existence.

He caught Mab's eyes as this thought swelled in his mind. They were not penetrating or keen eyes ; they were blue, very soft, smiling, child-like, lit up with amused observation, noticing everything. But Walter felt them go through

him as none of the other accustomed familiar eyes did. *She* saw there was something more than usual about him. She would divine when he disappeared that his going away meant something. The family took no heed of his absence—he had gone out to take a turn, they would say; perhaps his father would grumble that he ought to be at his books. But only that little stranger would divine that Walter's absence meant a great deal more—that it meant a romance, a poem, a drama, and that it consumed his entire life.

The dispersing of the children, the game of play permitted to Horry and the small brothers, the going to bed of the rest, made a moment of tumult and agitation. And in the midst of this Walter stole out unperceived into the clear air of the night. It was clear as a crystal, the sky shining, almost crackling with a sudden frost, the stars twinkling out of their profound blue, with such a sharp and icy brilliancy as occurs only now and then in the hardest winter. The air was so clear and exhilarating that Walter did not find it cold; indeed, he was too much

excited to be sensible of anything save the refreshment and keen restorative pinch of that nipping and eager atmosphere.

As he hurried up the hill the blood ran riot in his veins, his heart seemed to bound and leap forward as if it had an independent life. He found himself under the hedge of Crockford's cottage in a few minutes, with the feeling that he had flown or floated there, though his panting breath told of the rush he had actually made. The moon, which had but newly risen, was behind the cottage, and consequently all was black under the hedge, concealing him in the profoundest darkness.

He was glad to pause there in that covert and ante-chamber of nature to regain command of himself, to get his breath and collect his thoughts—to think how he was to make his presence known. She had somehow divined that he was there on other nights, but this was a more important occasion, and he felt that he would be justified in defying all the restrictions put upon him, and letting even the Crockfords, the old people of the house, know that he was

there. It was true that the idea of old Crockford daunted him a little. The old man had a way of saying things; he had a penetrating, cynical look. But it would be strange indeed, Walter reflected, if he who was not afraid of fate, who was about to defy the world in arms, should be afraid of an old stone-breaker on the roads.

The thought passed through his mind, and brought a smile to his face as he stood in the dark, recovering his breath. All was perfectly silent in the night around. The village had shut itself up against the cold. There was nobody near. The heat and passion in Walter's being seemed to stand like an image of self-concentrated humanity, independent of all the influences about, indifferent, even antagonistic, throbbing with a tremendous interest in the midst of those petty personal concerns of which the world thought nothing, but in himself a world higher than nature, altogether distinct from it. The little bit of shadow swallowed him up, yet neither shadow nor light made any difference to the mind which felt all moons and

stars and the whole system of the universe inferior to its own burning purpose, and intense tumultuous thoughts.

But while he stood there, indifferent to the whole earth about him, a little sound of the most trivial character suddenly caught his ear, and made every nerve tingle. It was a sound no more important than the click of the latch of the cottage door. Had she heard him, then, though he was not aware of having made any sound? Had she divined him with a mind so much more sensitive than that of ordinary mankind? He stood holding his breath, listening for her step, imagining it to himself, the little skim along the pavement, the touch when she paused, firm yet so light. He heard it in his thoughts, in anticipation; but in reality that was not what he heard. Something else sounded in his ears which made his veins swell and his heart bound, yet not with pleasure—a voice which seemed to affront the stillness and offend the night, a voice without any softness or grace either of tone or words—something alive and hostile to every feeling in his heart, and which

seemed to Walter's angry fancy to jar upon the very air. And then there followed a sound of steps; they were coming to the gate. She was with him, accompanying him, seeing him off. Was it possible? Walter made a step forward and clenched his fist; he then changed his mind and drew back.

'Anyhow, you'll think it over,' said the voice of the man whom he had met on the road. 'It's a good offer. It ain't every day you'll get as good. A good blow-out and a good breakfast, and all that, would suit me just as well as you. I ain't ashamed of what I'm doing; and you'd look stunning in a veil and all that. But what's the good of making a fuss? It's fun, too, doing a thing on the sly.'

And was it *her* voice that replied?

'Yes, it's fun. I don't mind that, not a bit. I should just like to see it put on the stage. You and me coming in, and your mother's look. Oh, her look! that's what fetches me!'

It could *not* be her, not her! and yet the voice was hers; and the subdued peal of laughter had in it a tone which he had felt to thrill

the air with delight on other occasions; but not now. The man laughed more harshly, more loudly; and then they appeared at the gate in the moonlight. He so near them, unable to stir without betraying himself, was invisible in the gloom. But the light caught a great white shawl in which she had muffled herself, and made a sort of reflection in the tall shiny hat.

They stood for a minute there, almost within reach of his hand.

‘Don’t you stand chattering,’ she said; ‘it’s time for your train; and I tell you it’s a mile off, and you’ll have to run.’

‘There’s plenty of time,’ said he. ‘I should just like to know who was that young spark that sent me off out of my way to-day. I believe it’s some one that’s sweet upon you too, and as you’re holding in hand——’

‘Nonsense,’ she said, ‘I see nobody here.’

‘Oh, tell that to—them that knows no better; see nobody: only every fellow about that’s worth looking at; as if I didn’t know your little ways!’

She laughed a little, not displeased ; and then said,

‘There’s nobody worth looking at ; but let me again say, go ; the old man will be out after me. He won’t believe you’ve got a message from mother ; he doesn’t now. He doesn’t believe a word I say.’

‘No more should I if I was in his place. Oh, I know your little ways. You’ll have to give them over when we’re married, Em. It’s a capital joke now, don’t you know, but when we’re married——’

‘We’re not married yet,’ she said, ‘and perhaps never will be, if you don’t mind.’

‘Oh, I say ! When we’ve just settled how it’s to be done, and all about it ! But look here, don’t you have anything to say to that young ’un in the knickerbockers. He’s cute, whoever he is. He might have put me off the scent altogether. I couldn’t have done it cleverer myself. Don’t let him guess what’s going on. He’s just the one, that fellow is, to let the old folks know, and spoil our fun.’

‘Look here,’ said the girl, ‘I warn you, Ned, you’ll lose your train.’

‘Not I. I’ll make a run for it. Good-bye, Em!’

Great heavens! did he dare to touch her, to approach his head with the shiny hat still poised upon it to hers. The grotesque horror overwhelmed Walter as he stood trembling with rage and misery. There was a little murmuring of hushed words and laughter, and then a sudden movement:

‘Be off with you,’ she said; and the man rushed away through the gleams of the moonlight, his steps echoing along the road.

She stood and looked after him, with her white shawl wrapped round her head and shoulders, moving from one foot to the other with a light, buoyant movement as if to keep herself warm. The motion, the poise of her figure, the lingering, all seemed to speak of pleasure.

Walter stood in the dark with his teeth set and his hand clenched, and misery fierce and

cruel in his soul. It seemed impossible to him to suffer more. He had touched the very bottom of the deepest sea of wretchedness; the bitterness of death he thought had gone over him, quenching his very soul and all his projects. His love, his hopes, his wishes seemed all to have melted into one flame of fury, fierce rage, and hate, which shook his very being. It seemed to Walter that he could almost have murdered her where she stood within three paces of him; and if the veil of darkness had been suddenly withdrawn the boldest might have shuddered at the sight of that impersonation of wrath, standing drawn back to keep himself quiet, his hand clenched by his side, his eyes blazing as they fixed upon her, within reach of the unconscious watcher, so light and pleased and easy, not knowing the danger that was so near. Her head was turned away from him watching her lover—her lover!—as he rattled along the road; and, when Walter made a sudden step forward out of the shade, she started with a suppressed alarmed cry and wail of terror.

‘Mr. Penton! you here!’

‘Yes. I’ve been here—too long.’

‘Oh, Mr. Penton,’ cried the girl, ‘you’ve heard what we’ve been saying! Do you call that like a gentleman to listen to what people are saying? You have no right to make any use of it. You did not put us on our guard. You have no right to make any use of what you heard when we didn’t know.’

Walter came up to her, close to her, and put his hand upon the fleecy whiteness of her shawl, into which it seemed to sink as into snow.

‘Will you tell me this?’ he said. ‘You are one person to old Crockford, another to *him*, another to me. Which is you?’

A man who has been injured acquires an importance, a gravity, which no other circumstances can give him; and the tone of his misery was in Walter’s voice. He imposed upon her and subdued her in spite of herself. She shrank a little away from him and began to cry.

‘It is not my fault! I never asked you to

notice me. I never pretended I was anyone—not your equal—not——’

‘Which is you?’ he said.

Through the soft shawl he reached her arm at last, and grasped it firmly, yet with a weakening, a softening. How could he help it when he felt her in his power? Through her shawl, and through the mist of rage and bitterness about him, the quick-witted creature felt how the poor boy’s heart was touched, and began to melt at the contact of her arm.

‘Which—is me? Oh,’ she cried, ‘you don’t know me—you don’t know my circumstances, or you would not ask. You don’t know what I come from, nor how I have been surrounded all my life. It is the best that is me! It is, whatever you may think.’

Her arm quivered in his grasp; her slight figure seemed to vibrate so near to him. It appeared to his confused brain that her whole being swayed and wavered with the appeal he made to her. She lifted her face to his, and that too was quivering in every line. She was entirely in his power, to be shaken, to be anni-

hiliated at his will, and he had the power over her of right as well as of strength.

‘The best—I don’t know which is the best. I came up to tell you—to ask you—to let you decide. And I find you with a man who—is going to marry you.’

‘He thinks so, perhaps; but a man can’t marry one without one’s own consent.’

‘Your consent! You seemed to agree to everything he said!’ cried the young man, in his rage. ‘A fellow like that! A cad—a— And I waiting here—waiting to see you—oh!’ He flung her arm from him, almost throwing her off her balance. But, when he saw her totter, compunction seized the unhappy boy. ‘You make me a brute!’ he cried; ‘I’ve hurt you!’ and felt as if, in the stillness of the night, and the despair of his heart, his voice sounded like a wild beast’s cry.

‘You have hurt me—only in my heart,’ she said. ‘Oh, but listen. I know it all looks bad enough: but you listened to him, and you must listen to me. You think he’s not good enough for me, Mr. Penton; but a little while ago he

was thought far too good, and I—perhaps I thought so too. Not—oh, not now. Wait a minute before you cry out. Who had I ever seen that was better? I had heard of other kind of people in books, but either I thought they didn't live now, or at least they were far, far out of my reach. I never knew a gentleman till—till——'

Her voice died away; it had been getting lower, softer, complaining, pleading—now it seemed to die away altogether, fluttering in her throat.

'Till?' Walter's voice too was choked by emotion and excitement. The strong current of his thoughts and wishes, so violently interrupted, found a new channel and flooded all the obstructions away. Till—! Could anything be more pathetic than this confusion and self-revelation? 'You did not tell him so,' he said, with a remnant of his wrath—a sort of rag of resentment, which he caught at as it flew away. 'You let him believe it was he; you made him understand——'

'Mr. Penton,' she cried, 'listen. What am I

to do? You've sought me out, you've been far too kind: but I can't let myself be a danger to you too. You know it never, never would be allowed if it were known you were coming here to me. And, now that I've known you, how can I bear living here and not seeing you? It was the only charm, the only pleasure—Oh, I'm shameless to tell you, but it's true.'

'Emmy,' said the lad, in his infatuation, laying once more his hand on her arm, but this time trembling himself with feeling and tenderness, 'if it's true, how could you—how could you let that man——'

'Mr. Penton, just hear me out. He can take me away from this, and give me a home, and take me out of the way of harming you. Oh, don't you see how I am torn asunder! If I throw him over, there's no hope for me. Oh, what am I to do? What am I to do?'

Walter was moved beyond himself with an impulse of enthusiasm, of devotion, which seemed to turn his feelings in a moment into something sacred—not the indulgence of his own will, but the most generous of inspirations. He

put his arm round her, and supported her in her trembling and weakness.

‘Emmy,’ he said, his young voice ineffably soft and full of tears—‘Emmy darling, we’ll find a better way.’

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FUNERAL DAY.

THE day of Sir Walter Penton's funeral was a great if gloomy holiday for the whole country about. A man so old, and so little known to the neighbourhood, could not be greatly mourned. He had kept up, no doubt, the large charities which it is the worthy privilege of a great family to maintain for the benefit of the country, but he had never appeared in them, and few people associated a personal kindness with the image of the stately old man who had been seen so seldom for years past. The people in the village and all the houses scattered along the road were full of excitement and curiosity.

The carriages which kept arriving all the morning gradually raised the interest of the spectators towards the great climax of the funeral procession, which it was expected would be half-a-mile long, and embraced everybody of any importance in the neighbourhood, besides the long line of the tenantry. And then the flowers—that new evidence of sombre vanity and extravagant fashion. To see these alone was enough to draw a crowd. In the heart of winter, just after Christmas, what masses of snowy blossoms, piled up, crushing and spoiling each other—flowers that cost as much as would have fed a parish! The villagers stood with open mouths of wonder. No one there in all their experiences of life—all the weddings, christenings, summer festivals of their recollection—had seen such a display. The procession, headed by no black mournful hearse, such as would have seemed natural to the lookers-on, but by a sort of triumphal car, covered with flowers, drew forth crowds all along the way.

The Pentons, who were now the lords of all—or rather of as little as was practicable, for all

that was untailed naturally went without question to Sir Walter's daughter—had not a carriage of their own in which to swell the procession. And, though they were now naturally in the chief place, they were perhaps the least known of all the rural potentates, great and small, who shook hands in silence, with looks of sympathy more or less solemn, with Mr. Russell Penton after the ceremony was over. Sir Edward, indeed, the new baronet, had known them all in his day ; but Walter looked on them with a half-defiant shyness, with scarcely an acquaintance in the multitude. And the sensation was very strange to both father and son when all the train had dispersed, and they came back to the great house which was henceforward theirs.

Mrs. Russell Penton had not, since the moment of her father's death, made any show of her grief. She had been entirely stricken down on that day. A frightful combination and mingling of emotions had prostrated her. Grief for her father : ah, yes ! He had been perhaps the one individual in the world upon whose full

comprehension she had leaned ; but in his dying even this had failed her, and she felt that he comprehended her and she him no longer, and that at the last moment his steps had strayed from hers. A more bitter and terrible discovery could not be ; and when with that came the sense that all her hopes had failed—that the plans so nearly brought to some practical possibility had all come to nothing—that everything was too late—that, instead of securing her home for an eternal possession, which was what her eager spirit desired, she had only presented herself to the world in the aspect of a grasping woman, endeavouring to take advantage of a poor man and seize his inheritance,—when all this became apparent to her, Alicia covered her face and withdrew from the light of day. The loss of one who had been the chief object in her life for so long, the father whom she had loved, was not much more than a pretence (and she felt this too to the bottom of her heart) for the misery that overwhelmed her : which was not grief only, but disappointment almost more bitter than grief ; disenchantment and failure

mingled with the sorrow and loss, and made them more keen and poignant than words can tell. And she was ashamed that it should be so—ashamed that, when all around her gave her credit for thus profoundly mourning her father, she was mourning in him her own disappointed hopes, her disgust, her failure, as well as the loss her heart had sustained. This consciousness was in itself one of the bitterest parts of her burden. Her husband came into the room with sympathetic looks, her maid stole about on tiptoe, everything was kept in darkness and quiet to soothe her grief. And yet her grief was but a small part of what her proud spirit was suffering. To feel that this was so was almost more than she could bear.

After the first day she would indeed bear it no longer. She would permit no more of that obsequious tenderness which is given to sorrow, but got up and came forth to take her usual place in the house and fulfil her ordinary duties, refusing as much as she could the praises lavished upon her for her self-control and unselfishness and regard for others. She 'bore

up' wonderfully, everybody said; but Alicia, to do her justice, would have none of the applause which was murmured about her.

'I did not expect my father would live for ever,' she said, with a tone of impatience to her husband; 'and to lie there and think everything over again, is that to be desired? I would rather feel I had some duty still and claims upon me.'

'Oh, many claims,' he said; 'but you must not overtask your strength.'

She had no fear of overtasking her strength, but rather a feeling that if she could get to work—as her maid did, as the housemaids did, to prepare for her departure and the entry of the other family—that would be the thing which would do her good. After the funeral she came out in her deep mourning, out of the library, in which she had been spending that solemn hour, to meet the chief mourners when they returned. It would have pleased her better to have been chief mourner herself: but it had been said on all hands that it would be 'too much for her.'

So she had spent the time, while the slow *cortège* was winding along the country road and all the gloomy formulas were being fulfilled, by herself in the old man's favourite room, where everything spoke of him, reading the funeral service over and over, thinking—now they will be there, and there; now arrived at the grave; now leaving him—beside the boys. It was that thought that brought the tears. Beside the boys! They had lain there for twenty years and more, but she could still shed tears for them; for all the rest her eyes were dry. And when the carriages came back she came out quite composed, though so pale, in all the solemnity of her mourning, covered with crape, to the drawing-room to receive them. She had bidden her husband to bring the new proprietor back with him, that everything might at once be said which remained to say. She gave her hand to Edward, who came forward to meet her, he too in deep mourning; but her eye went beyond him to 'the boy' who stood behind, and whose slight young figure seemed to hold itself more erect, and with an air of greater self-belief than when

she saw him last. What wonder! he was the heir.

‘I wanted to see you,’ she said. ‘Gerald will have told you—that everything might be put at once on the footing we wish it to be.’

‘I told you, Alicia, that your cousin would not hurry you. He is as anxious as I am that you should have no trouble. We have talked it all over——’

‘Why shouldn’t I have trouble?’ she said. ‘There is no reason in the world for sparing me my share of the roughness. I am better so. Edward, if you should wish to get possession soon, you and your wife, you may be sure I will put no obstacles in your way.’

‘I wish you would believe that we have no wish, no desire—We want you to act exactly as may suit you best—to consider yourself still in your own house.’

‘That is impossible,’ she said, quickly; ‘mine it is not, nor ever was; and now that he is gone who was its natural master—I know perfectly well how considerate you will be. What I am expressing is my own wish—not to be in your

way—not to put off your settling down. You have a large family—you will want to settle everything.’

At this Sir Edward began to clear his throat, and it took him some time to get out the next words.

‘Alicia,’ he said, ‘we have been thinking a great deal about it, my wife and I.’

‘Yes, you must naturally have thought about it. Mrs. Penton’—here the speaker paused, grew red, hesitated a little, and then went on—‘she must wish to have everything decided about the removal, and to know what furniture will be wanted, and a great deal besides. If you would like to bring her to see for herself, and judge what is necessary—I hope you understand me—my husband and I will give every facility.’

‘My dear, your cousin knows all that,’ said Russell Penton, not without impatience.

‘It was something else I wanted to say. My wife—is a woman of great sense, Alicia.’

Mrs. Russell Penton made a slight bow of assent. She had nothing to do with his wife.

She did not like to hear of her at all, the woman who was now Lady Penton, and yet was a woman of no account, an insignificant mother of a family. This description, which the person to whom it belongs is generally somewhat proud of, is often to women without that distinction a contemptuous way of dismissing an individual of whom nothing else can be said. Edward Penton's wife was no more than that. Sense! Oh, yes, she might have sense, so far as her brood and its wants were concerned.

‘She always thought—an opinion which, however, she did not express till very lately, and in which I did not agree—that this house, which you and my poor uncle kept up so splendidly——’

Alicia gave an impatient wave of her hand. She could not see why Sir Walter should be called poor because he was dead.

‘Yes,’ said Sir Edward, ‘it has been splendidly kept up; nothing could be more beautiful or in better taste. You always had admirable taste, Alicia: and my poor dear uncle——’

‘Don’t,’ she cried; ‘what is it you want to

say? I beg your pardon, Edward, if I am impatient. For heaven's sake come to the point.'

'I know,' he said, with a compassionate look, 'grief is irritable. My wife has always been of opinion that for us, with our large family, the possession of Penton would be no advantage. We could not keep it up as it has been kept up. The entailed estates by themselves are not—you must have a little patience with me, my dear Alicia, or I never can get out what I have to say.'

She seated herself with a sigh of endurance. All this was intolerable to her. She wanted nothing to be said, but simply that she should go away, who no longer could keep possession, and that they who had the right should come in—no struggle about it, not a word said, not a lament on her side, and if possible not a flourish of trumpets on theirs—at least, not anything that she should hear. It was like Edward to maunder on, though he must have known that she could not endure it. And his wife with her sense! But an appearance of dignity must be

kept up, and she must, she knew, hear out what he had to say.

‘Go on,’ said Russell Penton, ‘you can understand that she is not able for very much.’

And he came and stood by the back of his wife’s chair with his usual undemonstrative self-forgetfulness, full of sympathy for her, though he did not approve of her—all of which things she knew.

‘It comes to this,’ said Edward Penton, a little confused in his story: ‘I did not agree with her at all. When we entered into the negotiations—which have come to nothing—I did it without any heart. It was only on the morning I spent here, you know, the morning that—it was only then I perceived that my wife was right. We have talked it over since, Alicia, and I have a proposal to make you. If you like to remain——’

She got up from her chair suddenly, clenching her hands in impatience.

‘No, no, no, *no*,’ she cried, almost violently, ‘I want to hear nothing more about it. There is nothing, nothing more to say.’

‘If you would but hear me out, Alicia! this that I’m speaking of would really be a favour to us. We have not the means to keep it up. We have things to think of, of far more importance than the gardens and glass and all that. We have our children to think of. The house is a great deal to you—and—and it’s something to me that know it so well; but to them—to them it doesn’t matter,’ he said, with a sort of contempt for the Pentons who were only half Pentons though they were his children. ‘I would rather a great deal you kept it and lived in it, and remained as you have been.’

There was a curious little by-play going on in the meantime. Walter listened to his father with consternation, moving a step nearer, looking on eagerly as if desiring to interfere in his own person—while over the face of Russell Penton there came a shade of anxiety, suspense, and annoyance. He was sufficiently calm to put out his hand keeping Walter back; but he was no longer a mere spectator of the interview. Alarm was in his face; he had thought he had escaped, and here was the chain again ready to drag him

back. Sir Edward turned to him at the end of his little speech with a direct appeal.

‘Speak to her, Russell; I make the offer in a friendly spirit. There’s nothing behind,’ he said.

‘That I am sure of: but it is for Alicia to answer. She must decide, not me.’

‘I have decided,’ said Mrs. Penton, with something like suppressed passion. ‘No: if it had been mine, I should have been glad, why should I deny it? I was born here. I like it better than any other place in the world. But there are some things more important than even the house in which one was born. Go back to your wife, Edward, and tell her I daresay she understands many things, but me she doesn’t understand. To owe my house to your civility and hers, to hold it at your pleasure, no, no—a thousand times. Perhaps you mean well—I will say I am sure you mean well; but I could not do it. Gerald, there’s been enough of this, I should like to go away.’

Over Russell’s face there shot a gleam of satisfaction; but he did not let it appear in what he said.

‘Alicia, you must not be hasty. Your cousin can mean nothing but kindness. Let me tell him you will think of it. He does not want an immediate answer. You might be sorry after——’

‘Gerald! it is not a thing you have ever wished.’

‘No, I am like your cousin’s wife,’ he said, with a slight laugh. ‘But what has that to do with it? It is for you to judge: and you might repent——’

She cast a glance round the stately room, with all the beautiful furniture so carefully chosen to enhance and embellish it. Can one help the hideous thoughts that against one’s will come into one’s mind? Swift as lightning there flashed before her a picture of what it would be—the pictures gone, the rich carpets in which the foot sank, the hangings of satin and velvet—and the whole furnished as an upholsterer would do it, called in in a hurry, and, kept to the lowest possible estimate; and then the children of all ages, rampant, running over everything. She saw this in her imagina-

tion, and with it at the same instant felt a shrinking of horror from the desecration, and a horrible momentary exultation. Yes, exultation! over the difference, over the contrast. It was better so; the stateliness and splendour must sink with her reign. With the others, her supplanters, would come in squalor, pettiness, all the unlovely details of poverty. It gave her a sense almost of guilty pleasure that the contrast should be so marked beyond all possibility of mistake.

‘No,’ she said, with forced composure. ‘I shall not repent. This chapter of life is over. It has been long, far longer than is usually permitted to a woman. I shall not interfere with you, Edward; it is your place, and you must take it. Good-bye; it was only to tell you that no hindrance should be raised on my part—that as soon almost as you please—as soon as it is possible——’

‘There was something else, Alicia, you meant to say.’

‘What else?’ Her eyes followed her husband’s to where Walter stood; then a sudden

flush covered her pale face. 'Yes, that is true—it is concerning your son. Mr. Rochford will give you the papers, and my husband will explain. My father had an idea, I cannot think how it arose; but he had an idea, and it is my business to carry it out.'

'Then is this all?' cried Edward Penton; for his part, he was not even curious as to what had been done for Walter. He almost resented it as she did. 'Is this all? You will not allow us to offer—you will not listen. After all, if I am my poor uncle's successor I am still your cousin, Alicia. It is not my fault.'

'It is no one's fault,' she said.

'And we all feel for you. Even were it a sacrifice, we should be glad to make it. My wife——'

Mrs. Russell Penton rose hurriedly.

'You are very kind,' she said. 'Good-bye, Edward; I have had a great deal to try me, and I don't think I can bear any more.'

She hurried out of the room as the servant came in with a message. She could not bear to hear the new title, and yet how could she

avoid hearing it? Sir Edward—it was in her ears all the time. And when her husband had said in that cumbrous way, ‘your cousin’s wife,’ there had passed through her mind the ‘Lady Penton’ which he would not say, which she could not say, which seemed to choke her. Lady Penton, her mother’s name! And it was all perfectly just and right. This was what made it so intolerable. They had a right to the name. They had a right to the position. And nothing could be more wretched, envious, miserable than the exasperation in her soul.

CHAPTER XIV.

AFTERWARDS.

EVERYTHING was very quiet at the Hook on the funeral day; all the blinds were drawn down, even those which could be seen only from the garden and the river, and Mrs. Penton—nay, Lady Penton, though she did not easily fall into the title, and, indeed, until Sir Walter was buried scarcely felt it right to bear it—had quite a little festival of mourning all to herself with the girls, who had no inclination to gainsay her. They knew nothing of the vagaries of girls of the present epoch, and it never occurred to them to go against anything she proposed or to doubt its propriety, though if there was an absurd side to it they saw that too later on, and

made their little criticisms, no doubt, with little jokes to each other, not to be ventilated till long, long after.

There is perhaps a natural liking in the feminine heart for all those little exhibitions of importance which the great crises of life make natural. To stand in the privileged position of those who are immersed in sorrow, yet not to be immersed in sorrow; to have all the consequence which is derived from fresh mourning and nearness to 'a death;' yet to have the heart untouched, and no real trouble in it—this is something which pleases, which almost exhilarates in a sombre way. It is so good to think that the death is not one which touches us, that we are only lightly moved by it, sitting in a voluntary gloom to please ourselves and compliment the other, not in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Lady Penton in her way enjoyed all this, especially after her husband had gone. She put on her mourning, and made the girls dress themselves in the black frocks which had just come home, and then sitting down in the midst

of them she too read the funeral service. It was very soothing, she said—all the more that she had so little real need of being soothed. The girls were full of awe and acquiescence; the new thought that some one had died, though it was only an old man, touched them, and the idea of all his death would bring about increased the subduing, half-compunctious sentiment. It was not their fault that he had died, yet they seemed somehow involved in it—almost to blame.

Little Mab put on a black frock also, though she had no intention of going into mourning, and made one of the little audience to whom the mother read the burial service. She was the spectator amid the group who felt themselves more immediately concerned, and it was all very strange to her—almost droll, it must be allowed. She was not wise enough to see how far the sentiment was real and sprang out of the confused emotions of this critical period, and she was too sympathetic to pronounce that it was all false, which to a little woman of the world would have been the reasonable thing.

She did not, in fact, at all understand these innocent people, though they were so easily understood. Her education made her look for motives in what they did; and they had no motives, but acted on the simple instinct of nature. Her keen little blue eyes, which were so childlike and full of laughter, scintillated with interest and the endeavour to understand. It was all so strange to her, so novel—the large family, the homely living, the community of feeling, everybody moving together, which was puzzling beyond description. She had seen so much of the world in her wealthy orphanhood, even though she was so young, that a sphere so simple and action so single-minded were altogether beyond her understanding. She kept looking out for the secret, the rift within the lute, the point at which this unanimity would break up, but it did not appear.

She had been taught a great deal about fortune-hunting, and the necessity of taking care of herself, and she had heard those side-whispers of society which cannot escape the ears even of children—those insinuations of

evil underneath and selfishness always rampant. She would not have been surprised had she found that Ally and Anne had schemes of their own, or their mother some deep-laid plan which nobody suspected. And when she found out that there was nothing of the sort—so far, at least, as her keen inspection could find out—Mab was far more puzzled than if she had made any number of discoveries.

There was but one particular in which she felt that there might be an opening into the unknown, and that was Walter—not, however, in the way in which she had been prepared for delinquency. He paid no attention to herself, neither did any of the others make the faintest effort to put them in each other's way. There was certainly no fortune-hunting in the case. But Mab felt that Walter's absences were not for nothing. She was astonished in her premature wisdom that no one took any note of them or seemed to mind. Perhaps there was a little pique in her soul. She had been interested in Walter, but he had shown no interest in her. She could not but think he would be much

better employed making himself agreeable to the heiress whom fortune had thrown in his way than in involving himself in some clandestine love-making, which she felt sure was the case—some entanglement probably in the village, to which he seemed always to be going.

What could be more silly? Mab had a strong practical tendency, perhaps drawn from the father who had made his own way so effectively. She felt vexed with Walter for this throwing away of his chances. Looking at the subject with perfect impartiality, she could not but feel that a young man coming into an encumbered property—or, at least, what was just the same as an encumbered property—to neglect the fortune which, for anything he knew, lay ready to his hand, was a mingled weakness and absurdity of the most obvious description. She did not enter into the question whether she herself would be disposed to assent or not. That was her own business, and not his. But that he should be so blind as not to try! And in the meantime she observed them all with wonder, and looked at their grave faces when

they put themselves thus in sympathy with old Sir Walter's burial with a little cynical disposition to laugh, which it took her some trouble to restrain.

It was amusing—it might even be said ridiculous—when Lady Penton, the little ceremonial being over and an hour or so of quiet having elapsed, drew up all the blinds again solemnly with her own hands, going from window to window.

‘They will have got back to Penton by this time,’ she said, in a tone perceptibly more cheerful. ‘You can tell Mary to take the children out for their walk; by this time it will be all over. And the affairs of life must go on, whatever happens,’ she added, with a little sigh.

The sigh was for the trouble over, the cheerfulness for the life to come. They were both quite simple and true. She herself took a little walk afterwards, still with much gravity, round the garden, in which Mab, in her character as a philosophical observer, took pains to accompany her.

‘But you never knew Sir Walter Penton, did you?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I knew him, but not well. We went there a few times when we were newly married. After the death of the sons they rather turned against Edward. It was a pity, but I never blamed them.’

‘Why should they have turned against him? It was not his fault.’

‘My dear,’ said the gentle woman, quietly, ‘you are not old enough to understand.’

Mab looked at her with those keen little eyes, which twinkled and sparkled with curiosity, and which to the little girl’s own apprehension were able to look through and through all those simple people. But even Mab was daunted by this gentle and undoubting superiority of experience.

Lady Penton resumed quietly, speaking more to herself than to her companion:

‘I hope she will not feel it now—not too much to listen. I hope she may not prove more proud than ever.’

She shook her head as she went slowly along,

and Mab could not divine what she was thinking. They went together to the bench under the poplar-tree, where the weathercock which was over the Penton stables caught the red gold of the westering sun, and blazed so that it looked like a sun itself, stretching brazen rays over the dark and leafless woods.

‘Do you think she could be happy living anywhere else?’ Lady Penton said at last.

‘She—who? Do you mean Aunt Gerald? Oh, yes, to be sure, when she knows it isn’t hers. And my uncle hates it.’

‘Your uncle!’ Lady Penton repeated. And then she said, after a time, ‘I don’t think she could be happy in any other house.’

But what was meant by this, or whether the new mistress of Penton was glad that her predecessor should suffer, or if these words were said in sympathy, was what little Mab could not understand. She had to betake herself to an investigation of the sentiments of the others. It began a new chapter in her investigations when at last Sir Edward and his son appeared in their sables, both very grave and

preoccupied. The father went into the house with his wife; the son joined the youthful group about the door. But no one could be more unwilling to communicate than Walter proved himself. He stood like a hound held in and pulling at the leash—like a horse straining against the curb. ('If you were to give him his head, how he would go!' Mab said to herself.) But he did not break loose as she expected him to do. Impatient as he was, he stood still, with now and then a glance at the western sky. The sunset was a long time accomplishing itself. Was that what he was so impatient for?

'I suppose there was a wonderful crowd of people, Wat?'

'Yes, there were a great many people.'

'Everybody—that was anybody——'

'Everybody, whether they were anybody or not.'

'And were there a great many flowers? And did our wreath look nice? Was it as big as the others?'

'There were heaps of flowers; ours didn't

show one way or another. How could you expect it among such a lot?’

‘But you were the chief mourners, Wat!’

‘Yes, we were the chief mourners. I wish you wouldn’t ask me so many questions. Just because we were the chief mourners I saw next to nothing.’

‘Did Cousin Alicia go?’

‘How do you suppose she could go—to have all those people staring?’

‘But did you see her?—did you see anybody? Did father say——’

‘Oh, don’t bother me,’ Walter cried. ‘Don’t you see I have enough to think of without that!’

‘What has he to think of, I wonder?’ said Mab to herself, gazing at him with her keen eyes.

But the girls were silent, half-respectful of the mysterious unknown things which he might now have to think of, half subdued by the presence of the looker-on, before whom they could not let it be supposed that Wat was less than perfect. And presently, after moving about a

little, saying scarcely anything, he disappeared indoors. Was it to the book-room, to look over his Greek? or was it to steal out by the other door and hurry once more to the village? It was there Mab felt sure that he always went. To the village—meaning doubtless to some girl there, of whose existence nobody knew.

Sir Edward took his wife indoors, solemnly leading her by the hand, and when they got to the book-room he put a chair for her solemnly. Already his old breeding—too fine for the uses of every day at the Hook—began to come back to him.

‘I have not been successful,’ he said. ‘It will not do.’

‘It will not do? She won’t take it from you, Edward?’

‘There is no reason why she shouldn’t take it from me; but she will not hear of it. I have done all I could, my dear. There is nothing more possible. We can go in when we like; they will put no obstacles in our way.’

‘Go in when we like—and how are we to furnish Penton?’ she cried.

‘And keep it up,’ he said, with a groan ; ‘there are literally acres of glass—and to see the gardeners going away in the evening it is like a factory. But we cannot help it. I have done my best. By-the-by,’ he added, in something of his old aggrieved tone, ‘they have behaved what I suppose will be called very handsomely in another way. I told you my uncle’s fancy about Walter—they have given him ten thousand pounds.’

‘What?’ she said, almost with a scream.

‘Walter—he took my uncle’s fancy ; didn’t I tell you ? He is to have ten thousand pounds. It’s a good sum, but nothing to them ; they are very rich ; what with all the savings of the estate, and the money in the funds, and the lands elsewhere that are out of the entail, Alicia’s very rich. They can afford it ; but all the same it’s a nice sum.’

‘Ten thousand pounds,’ she repeated to herself. She had not remarked the rest. A sort of consternation of pleasure overwhelmed her. ‘It is very good of them, Edward—oh, very good. Why, Walter will be independent. Ten

thousand pounds! Oh, dear me, what a good that would have done us—how much we should have thought of it! Ten thousand pounds! And what does he say?’

‘Nothing, so far as I remarked. I was not thinking of him,’ said Sir Edward, with a little impatience. He had so much to think of in respect to the family at large and all the cares of the new life, that he was a little annoyed to have Walter thrust into the front at such a moment. ‘Of course it is a great thing for him,’ he said. ‘It would have been a great thing for us at this moment to have command of a sum of money. My uncle might have thought of that. He might have thought that to change our style of living as we shall be obliged to do, to set up an establishment on a totally different scale, to alter everything, a little ready money would have been a great help; whereas Walter has no use for it, no need of it, a boy of twenty. But there is no limit to the fantastic notions of old men with money to leave.’

‘You forget,’ said his wife, ‘that old Sir

Walter intended everything to be different—that he never meant us to set up an establishment or live in Penton at all.’

‘Ah, the question is, did he mean that—wasn’t it merely a plan of Alicia’s? Oh, no, I’ve heard nothing more. But I can’t help thinking my uncle would really have preferred having a family to continue the old name after him, instead of letting it all run into the Russell family, as I suppose it must have done. That reminds me, I have a message for that little Russell girl. Russell Penton will come for her or send for her to-morrow. He made all sorts of pretty speeches about our kindness in taking her in.’

‘Dear me, it was not worth talking about. It was Ally’s idea. One little thing more in our house—what does it matter? She is a nice little thing; she gives no trouble,’ said Lady Penton, to whom little Mab was of no importance at all.

Sir Edward dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. It was of still less importance to him than to his wife. He said,

‘They are going abroad, I believe, very soon.

Those people to whom money is no object always fly abroad to get quit of every annoyance. When shall you and I be able to run off, Annie, for a rest? Never, I fear.'

'Well, Edward,' she said, quietly, 'if we were able in one way we shouldn't be in another. We couldn't leave the children, you know. I shouldn't wonder if the Russell Pentons would willingly change with us—their money against our children. They have the worst of it, after all: so much to leave and nobody belonging to them to leave it to. So we must not grumble.'

This view of the case did not appear to give Sir Edward much comfort. He seated himself at his table and drew his writing things towards him. It was only to begin once more those inevitable calculations which had a charm yet did not make anything easier.

'If you have got anything to do,' he said, 'I'll not keep you any longer.' He added, as she went towards the door, 'Don't make any fuss about Walter. He ought to understand that this makes no difference;' and again, turn-

ing round, calling her, 'Annie, don't forget to tell the little Russell girl.'

She went out into the garden, where the girls were still wandering about in the restlessness of spent excitement. It did not occur to her to keep back her news because of 'the little Russell girl.' They all came round her, Mab keeping behind a little, yet following the others. The day was very mild, and Lady Penton had a shawl round her shoulders, but no covering on her head.

'Your father is rather disappointed,' she said. 'Your Cousin Alicia will not accept what we offered. I am sorry, but we must just make up our minds to it.'

'Make up our minds to Penton!' cried Anne.

'Oh, my dear, so far as that is concerned! but you know how difficult it will be. However, there is something else that will please you very much. You know old Sir Walter at the last took a great fancy to our Wat, and wanted to leave him something. Well, your Cousin Alicia felt she ought to carry out her father's

wishes, and she has settled on him a fortune—ten thousand pounds.’

‘Ten thousand pounds!’ said the girls, in one breath.

‘It makes him quite independent. It is a great thing for him at his age; I hope it will not lead him into temptation. And it is very good of your Cousin Alicia. She had no need to do it unless she pleased, for it was a fancy, a dying fancy, which Sir Walter, perhaps, had he got better, might not— We must always be grateful to her, whatever else may happen. Few people, though they might be very civil, would show kindness to that extent.’ Lady Penton paused thoughtfully. Cousin Alicia had not been on the whole very civil, and she felt as if the thanks she was according were not enthusiastic enough. ‘It is a wonderful thing,’ she added, warming herself up, ‘an absolute gift of ten thousand pounds. I don’t think I ever heard of anything like it. It is a splendid gift!’

‘And Wat never said a word! I wonder, mother, if he knows.’

‘Yes, he knows. I daresay he was overwhelmed by it. He would not know what to say. Where is he? I should like to wish him joy.’

‘I know where he is. He has gone to the village to tell *her*,’ said little Mab to herself; and she looked the other way in case Lady Penton might have read it in her eyes.

But Lady Penton, in her innocence, never would have divined what those eyes meant. And presently she carried the war, so to speak, into the enemy’s country by turning next to her visitor.

‘My dear,’ she said, ‘there is a message for you too. Mr. Russell Penton is to send for you, or perhaps come for you, to-morrow.’

‘To-morrow!’ cried Mab, taken by surprise. While she was thus keeping back her sheaf of imaginary arrows, here was one which caught herself, as it were, in the very middle of her shield. ‘Oh!’ she cried again, ‘and must I go?’

Now she had been no inconsiderable embarrassment to the family at this crisis of its

affairs, but the moment she uttered this little plaintive cry all their soft hearts turned to Mab with a bound of tenderness and gratitude, and great compunction for ever having found her in their way. They did not know that part of her reluctance to leave them was in consequence of the investigations which she had entered upon, and was by no means willing to break off.

‘My dear,’ said Lady Penton, ‘we have been so out of our ordinary while you have been with us, that I am sure it is very, very sweet of you to care to stay. And we should all like very much to keep you a little longer. I hope Mr. Russell Penton may come for you himself to-morrow, and then perhaps he will consent to let you stay.’

CHAPTER XV.

A VISIT.

THESE communications were interrupted by the sound of carriage-wheels so near that it was not possible to escape the certainty that visitors were approaching. Lady Penton paused for a moment, discussing with herself whether she should say 'Not at home;' the day of the funeral was very early to receive visitors; but then she reflected that they had all got their mourning—even Martha having her black gown—and that there was therefore no reason why she should not receive, though 'they,' whoever they were, would have shown better taste had they postponed their visit. However, in this afternoon of excitement and *désœuvrement*, it

was almost a relief to see somebody who was not concerned, and might consequently impart something new—a little change into the atmosphere. The carriage which came wheeling round past the drawing-room windows was new and glistening, and highly effective, much more so than is usually to be met with in the country: and out of it came two ladies, as carefully got-up as their vehicle, wrapped in furs and plush. That peeps were taken at them from the corner where a judicious observer could see without being seen it is almost unnecessary to say.

‘No, I don’t know them,’ said Anne, shaking her head. ‘It is none of the Bannister people, nor the Miltons, nor the Durhams, nor anybody I ever saw. They must be from the other side, or else they are Reading people, or——’

‘We know no Reading people,’ said Lady Penton, with a tone—well, perhaps it was not pride: but certainly it was a tone which would not have come naturally to Mrs. Penton of the Hook one short week before.

‘The footman is opening the door—he has

such a delightful fur-cape on! They're coming in. Ally, look, look! Did you ever see them before?'

Ally had held back, not liking to show her curiosity before little Mab, that critic and investigator whom she began instinctively to divine. But she made a little soft movement forward now. And when she saw the ladies stepping out of the carriage Ally gave vent to a stifled cry, 'Oh!' which showed she was not so ignorant as her sister. Lady Penton turned towards her for explanation, but it was already too late. The door was thrown open by Martha with more demonstration than when she was only parlour-maid to Mrs. Penton. The shadow of a title upon her head changed even Martha. She announced 'Mrs. Rochford, my lady!' in a voice such as no one in the Hook had ever heard before.

'Mrs. Rochford?' said Lady Penton, with a wondering question in her voice, looking at Ally, who seemed to know.

It was not in her nature to be otherwise than polite. She stepped forward and accepted the

visitor's outstretched hand, and gave her a seat, but without any of the tremulous shyness of former days. She had taken up the *rôle* of great lady with less difficulty than could have been anticipated. Mrs. Rochford was large and ample in her furs. She would have made three of Lady Penton : and the muff in which one of her hands was folded was worth more than all that the other lady had to wear. Nevertheless, Lady Penton, simple as she sat there, felt herself so entirely Mrs. Rochford's social superior that this outside splendour of appearance was altogether neutralised. Perhaps the visitor was a little confused by this, for she made another step beyond the mistress of the house and seized upon Ally with both her hands out and a great deal of enthusiasm.

‘Dear Miss Penton, how are you after all this agitation?’ she said, in the most sympathetic tone, and looked as if she would have kissed Ally, who blushed crimson, and evidently did not know how to respond ; and then it was the turn of Miss Rochford, who was effusive and sympathetic too.

‘The dear child,’ said Mrs. Rochford, seating herself, ‘looked a little lost at Penton at the ball. She had never been out before, I am sure, without you, Lady Penton—which makes such a difference to a sensitive girl. I quite took it upon me to be her chaperon. And then I think she enjoyed herself.’

‘Oh!’ said Lady Penton, with a blank look; and then she added, ‘So much has happened since that I have heard nothing about the ball.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said the other, in the most sympathetic tone. ‘Such wonderful changes in so short a time! and just when we were all thinking that poor dear Sir Walter might live to be a hundred.’ Then she remembered that this was not an event which the Pentons at the Hook would naturally have found desirable. ‘But I always say,’ added the lady, ‘that it is such a comfort when an old gentleman of that age goes out of life in tolerable comfort without suffering. Sometimes they have so much to go through. It seems so mysterious.’

Meanwhile, Miss Rochford, a pretty but much-

curled and frizzed girl of the period, seized upon Ally.

‘Oh, I’ve wanted so much to come and see you. Mamma said we oughtn’t to, that you were much greater people now. But you were so nice at the ball, and looked so pleased to be with us, I felt sure you wouldn’t mind. Wasn’t it a delightful ball? But you who were in the house must have felt all that dreadful business about old Sir Walter dying. It was very dreadful, of course: but what a good thing he waited till the ball was over. Had it happened only a little sooner, there would have been no ball. Is that your sister? are they both your sisters? Oh!’

This exclamation followed when Mab turned round and revealed to the visitor the features of the heiress who had been pointed out to everybody at the Penton ball.

‘This is my sister Anne, but she wasn’t at Penton. And this is Miss Russell,’ said Ally, who did not know much about the formulas of introduction, and who was considerably startled by the recollection that the Rochfords had been her pro-

tectors at Penton, which even she, simple as she was, felt to be inappropriate now. Mab made the new comer a very dignified little bow. She knew everything of this kind much better than the others did, and knew very well who the Rochfords were.

‘My son has told me so often about your charming family and how kind you were to him : and after meeting Miss Penton, as there seemed then a sort of double connection, I thought I might take it upon me to call.’

‘Oh, you are very kind,’ Lady Penton said.

‘My son does nothing but talk of Penton Hook. He is so charmed with everything here. And he is not easily pleased. He is a great favourite in the county, don’t you know? He is invited everywhere. I told him at his age it is enough to turn his head altogether. But he is very true ; he is not led away by finery. I find that he always prefers what is really best.’

‘Yes,’ said Lady Penton : ‘we saw Mr. Rochford several times. He used to come

about the business which unfortunately was not completed.'

'Do you say unfortunately? He supposed you would rather be pleased.'

'I am not at all pleased,' said Lady Penton, drawing back into the stronghold of her dignity. 'It is always a pity when family arrangements cannot be carried out.'

'I am sure,' said Mrs. Rochford, in her most ingratiating tones, 'the county will like far better to see you there than Mrs. Russell Penton. Not that there is anything disagreeable in Mrs. Russell Penton. She is everything that is nice: but it is always more or less a false position, don't you think? and, on the other hand, a young family is always cheerful and popular.'

'I don't know how that may be. We are really more a nursery party than anything else.'

'Oh, don't say so, Lady Penton! with those two charming girls.'

The mother's eye followed the wave of the visitor's hand, and she could not but feel that there was truth in this. She had not thought

of Ally and Anne from this point of view. They were not beauties, she was aware. Still, looking at them as they were now, a thrill of that satisfaction and complacency which is at once the most entirely unselfish and the most egotistical of sentiments warmed her bosom. She felt, contrasting them with the somewhat artificial neatness of the Rochford young lady, and the bluntness of little Mab on the other hand, that they might very well be called charming girls. She had rarely had creatures of the same species to compare them with.

‘They are very young,’ she said, ‘and we have had little opportunity to do anything for them; they are not at all acquainted with the world.’

‘And that is such a charm, I always think! When my son brought Miss Penton to us the other night she had that look of wanting her mother which is so sweet. Mrs. Penton of course had all her guests to look to, and the anxiety about her father. I was so happy to take your dear girl under my motherly wing. It is broad enough,’ said Mrs. Rochford, raising a

little the arm which was clothed in sealskin and beaver, or in something else more costly than these, if there is anything more costly, and which indeed had an air of softness and warmth which was pleasant. She was what is called a motherly woman, large and caressing, and really kind. She might perhaps have found the courage to keep a poor girl at 'a proper distance' had her son been in danger, but otherwise in all probability would have been kind to Ally even had she not been Miss Penton of Penton. And in that case would have taken no credit for it, such as in the present she felt it expedient to insist upon.

'You will be going nowhere in your mourning,' said Miss Rochford to Ally, 'it will be so dull for you just at this time of the year. I do so wish you would come to us a little. We don't give parties, not often; but there is always something going on. Mamma is very good, she never minds the trouble. And Charley is the very best of brothers, he is always trying to keep us amused. Now if you would come there's nothing he wouldn't do. We could give

you a mount if you hunt. My sister doesn't ride. I should be so happy to have another girl to go out with me. Oh, do come. And if the frost holds there will be skating. You will have to be quiet, of course, at home for the sake of your mourning, but with us you needn't mind. Oh, do! It would be so delightful to have you. Charley was very despondent about it. He thought you would be so much too grand for us, who are only Reading people, but I said I was sure you were not one to forget old friends.'

'Too grand!' cried Ally, turning red. 'Oh, no, no.'

It was not surely that she was too grand. Still there was something—a sentiment of repugnance, a drawing back—which, if it was that, was the meanest sentiment, she thought, in the world.

'No, I am sure not,' said Miss Ethel Rochford. 'I knew you were not one to throw over old friends.'

Were they old friends? She was very much puzzled by this question. It seemed so un-

gracious to make any exception to a claim made with such kindness and enthusiasm. But Ally did not know what answer to make when the ladies at length had rustled away back to their carriage, still very caressing and cordial, but somewhat disappointed, since Lady Penton, with a firmness not at all in keeping with her character, had declined the invitation to Ally.

‘Are you such great friends with these people?’ asked Anne, before the sealskin had quite swept out of the door; and, ‘Were you so much with them at the ball?’ said Lady Penton, sitting down, and turning her mild eyes upon her daughter with great seriousness. Poor Ally felt as if she were a culprit at the bar.

‘They were very kind,’ she said, with a look of great humility at her mother. ‘I never saw them except that one time; but they were very kind.’

‘You have never told me anything about the ball, there have been so many other things to think of. I ought to have remembered, my poor little Ally, you would be very forlorn without

me or some one: but then I thought your Cousin Alicia—— Didn't you have any dancing, then? Didn't you enjoy yourself at all?'

'She danced all the evening,' said Mab; 'I saw her. I never could get near her to say a word.'

'Then what does this lady mean?' the mother said.

Poor Ally was very nearly crying with distress and shame, though there was nothing to be ashamed about. Oh, yes! there was cause for shame, and she felt it. She had been thankful for Mrs. Rochford's notice. She had been thankful to meet *him*, to feel herself at once transformed from the neglected little poor relation, whom no one noticed, to the admired and petted little heroine of the other set, who were not the great people, and yet looked just as well as the great people, and danced as well, and were as well dressed, and so much more kind. And now she felt ashamed of it all—of them and *him*, and all the people who had made the evening so pleasant. She did not like to tell her story—how she had been neglected, and

how she had been admired, and the comfort the Rochford set had been to her, and now that she was ashamed of them all—for that was the conclusion which she could not disguise from herself.

Now that she was Sir Edward Penton's daughter, now that she herself was to be the first at Penton, she was ashamed to have known nobody but the Rochfords, and she was ashamed of being ashamed. The family solicitor, that was all—a sort of official person, whose duty it was to take a little notice of her, not to let her feel herself neglected, whom she had been so glad to cling to. And now! There was no word of contempt that Ally did not heap upon herself. She was not sure if girls were ever called 'snobs,' but this she was sure of, that if so, then a snob was what she was.

'Mother, they're both true,' she said. 'It was—oh, dreadful at first! I didn't know anyone. I knew some of them by sight, but that was all. And nobody spoke to me. I should have liked to go through the floor or run away, but I hadn't the courage. And then I saw *him*

—I mean Mr. Rochford, you know, who has been so often here. And he asked me to dance ; and, when he saw I had no one to go to, took me to his mother. And they were so kind : and I enjoyed myself very much after that. But—’ said Ally, and stopped short.

Oh, odious little traitor that she was ! But she could not say what was in her heart besides, which was—oh, horrible snobbishness, miserableness, unworthiness !—that she never wished to see these good Samaritans any more.

‘ When I return her call, I must thank her for being so kind to you,’ said Lady Penton, with a cloudy countenance.

And this was all she said. Nor was there any further conversation on the subject—none, at least, which Mab heard. She had her own theory on the subject, and formed her little history at once, which was founded on Ally’s faint little emphasis, ‘ I saw *him*.’

‘ Him ’ Mab decided to be a lover, whom, now that the Pentons had risen in the world, the family would no longer permit to be spoken of, but whom Ally favoured in secret, and to whom

she had given her heart. It was a mistake which was very natural—the most usual thing in the world. Mab decided that it was a great blunder for the mother and sisters to interfere. What could they do? except to put the other party on their guard.

Our comprehensions are limited by our experiences. To understand the state of mind in which Ally was—the repugnance she felt towards the people whom she had liked so much, and who had been so kind to her, and her disgust at herself for that other disgust which she could not conquer—was what no one at Penton Hook was the least able to do.

CHAPTER XVI.

WALTER, AND HIS FATE.

WALTER had darted off to the village as Mab divined ; but what was the good ? He might get himself talked of, wandering about Crockford's cottage ; but there was no one there who would compromise herself for him. He had to go home again for the evening meal as before, but this time with more impatience than before, with a stronger sense that the bondage was insupportable. Walter would have been furiously indignant had it been said to him that the fact of having or not having money of his own would change his deportment towards his family ; but yet it was the case, notwithstanding all he could

have said. He felt himself a different being from the docile boy who had to do what was decided for him, to go to Oxford or wherever his father pleased. This morning, no further back, that had been all he thought of. There was nothing else possible—to do what was told him—what was arranged and settled for him—what father and mother after one of their consultations had decided was the best.

Walter would no more have thought of resisting that decision at twenty than Horry would at nine. But a day brings so many changes with it. He was not now what he had been when he passed the cottage with his father on his way to Sir Walter's funeral. Now he was no longer dependent; he could stand by himself. It seemed absurd to him that he should have to be punctual to an hour, that he should be bound by all the customs of the house. Already he had felt the absurdity of going home—home from his romance, from his drama, from love and devotion on a heroic scale—to tea! Now he had gone a little further even than this. He was independent, he had a fortune of his own,

no need to depend upon his father for everything as he had been doing. And he had come to an age and to circumstances which not only justified, but made it necessary that he should act for himself. Nevertheless, he was not even now prepared to break the bond of the old habits. He went back as before for the family meal, then, escaping, once more hurried through the night to the scene which was ever in his thoughts.

The moon was later of rising, the night was not so clear and frosty as on that other evening when he had surprised her with the other lover, the man who had roused such fury in his breast. Since then they had met every evening, and Walter no longer feared that vulgar rival. They had no secrets from each other now. She had told him everything, or so he thought, about that other: how he had persecuted her to marry him, notwithstanding the opposition of his parents, who were very rich, and did not think her good enough—how she had come here to be out of his reach—and how she feared, now that he had discovered her hiding-place, he would

give her no peace. She had confessed frankly that before she met Walter she had not 'minded' the other. He was well off, he could give her a home; and if she had not met Walter she might have been happy enough; but now, never.

The boy's heart was penetrated by this sweet confession; his boyish love sprang up all at once into a chivalrous and generous passion. He had talked to her vaguely, splendidly, of what they could do. If, as seemed inevitable, his studies must be accomplished, why then they must be married at once, casting prudence to the winds, and he must find a little nook at Oxford, where they could live like babes in the wood—like Rosamond in her bower. Yes, that was it—like Rosamond, with a flowery labyrinth all round her cottage, from whence he should come every morning with his books, and return when his work was over to love and happiness. The picture had been beautiful, but vague, and she had listened and laughed a little, now and then putting a practical question which confused but did not daunt the young man. How were they to live? What was enough for one, would not

that be enough for two, he asked? and he cared for nothing, no pleasure, no luxury, but her sweet company. She let him talk, and perhaps enjoyed it; at least it amused her: it was like a fairy-tale.

But to-night—to-night! there were other things to say. The foolish boy caught her arm and drew it within his as soon as she appeared.

‘Are you warm, are you comfortable?’ he whispered. ‘I have so much to tell you; everything is changed. You must not hurry in again in a moment, there is so much to say.’

‘What is changed? If you have tired of your romancing that would be the best thing,’ she said.

‘I shall never tire of my romancing. It is all coming right; everything is clearing up. It will be almost too easy. The course of true love this time will be quite smooth.’

‘Ah, that’s what I like,’ she cried, ‘but how is it to be? You don’t mean to say that your father and mother—they would never be such fools—’

‘Fools!’ he cried, pressing her arm to his side; ‘they’re not fools, but they know nothing about

it; it is something—something that has happened to me.’

‘I am glad,’ she said, composedly, ‘that you have not told them; it would be a wild thing to do. And I know what young men’s parents are, they will sometimes pretend to consent to set you against it—they think that if there is no opposition it will die away of itself.’

‘It will never die away,’ he said, ‘opposition or no opposition; but, Emmy, it isn’t a penniless fellow that you’re going to marry. We shan’t have to live on my little bit of allowance—I’ve got—money of my own.’

She gave a little suppressed scream of pleasure.

‘Money of your own!’

‘Yes: that has nothing to do with my father, that nobody can interfere with. It comes from my old relative, old Sir Walter. He has left me ten thousand pounds.’

‘Ten thousand pounds!’ she repeated, with a quickly-drawn breath, then paused a little; ‘that is a very nice sum of money. I am very

glad you've got all that. How much will it bring in by the year ?'

He was a little checked in his enthusiasm by this enquiry ; and, to tell the truth, it was not a question he had considered or knew very well how to answer.

'You might get five hundred a year for it if you were very, very lucky ; but I don't think,' she said, 'you will get so much as that.'

'At all events,' he said, somewhat sobered, 'it will be my own ; it will be something I can spend as I please, and with which nobody will have any right to interfere. We could have existed perhaps on my allowance ; but it would have been hard upon my darling cooping her up in a small cottage, with scarcely money enough to live upon——'

He thought perhaps she would interrupt him here, and cry out, as he himself would have done, what did that matter, so long as they were together ? But she did not do this. She was quite silent, waiting for him to go on.

'But now,' he continued, 'it will be different.

We can enjoy ourselves a little. I don't suppose we shall be rich even now.'

'No,' she said, quietly, 'you will not be rich.'

He turned and looked into her face, but in the darkness he could see nothing. And then he was used to these little prudential ways she had, and the superior knowledge which she claimed of the world.

'Perhaps not rich, but well off, don't you think?' he said, with a little timidity, 'to begin upon: and then there would be Penton in the distance. Penton is a noble place. All the time of the ball I was thinking of you, how you would have liked it, and how much more beautiful it would have been had you been there. We must give a ball some time, when we come home—'

'You mean,' she said, for he made a pause, 'when you succeed; but your father is not an old man, and that may be a long, long time.'

'I hope so,' said Walter, fervently; 'loving you makes me love everybody else better. I hope it may be a long, long time.'

Again she made no remark—which she might

have done, perhaps saying she hoped so too ; but no doubt she thought it unnecessary to say what was so certain and evident.

‘But,’ he cried, pressing her arm again closer to his side, ‘I didn’t mean anything so lugubrious, I meant when I brought you home. That will be a triumph, darling ! They will put up arches for us, and come out to meet us. It shall be a summer evening, not cold like this. We shall have a pair of white horses fit for a bride, though you will be a little more than a bride by that time, Emmy ?’

‘Shall I ?’ she said, with a tone of mockery in her laugh.

‘Why, of course,’ he cried, bending over her, ‘since it is winter now ! You don’t suppose it is to be put off so long. Why, you say yourself you are a Will-o’-the-wisp. You would have disappeared by that time if I left you to yourself.’

‘That’s true enough,’ she said, with another soft suppressed laugh, which made him turn and look at her again, for there seemed a meaning in it more than met the ear.

‘Don’t laugh so,’ he said, softly. ‘It sounds

as if you would like to wring my heart, only for the fun of it ; but it would be no fun to me.'

'Did I?' said she. 'No, it is you who are making fun.'

'It is not a thing to laugh about,' cried the boy. 'It is tremendous beautiful earnest to me. But I was talking of the coming home. My people would never say a word when they knew it was done, Emmy, and that you and I were one. They might object perhaps before, not knowing you. I am not even sure of that when they knew how I cared for you. Father might : but mother would be on my side.'

'No,' she said, 'don't tell me that ; I am sure they are not so silly, your mother above all.'

'Do you call that silly ? Well, I think she is silly then, dear old mother !' cried the young man, with his voice a little unsteady.

Walter felt to the bottom of his heart what he had said to his unresponsive companion, that in loving her he loved them all so much better. The faculty of loving seemed to have expanded in him. He had not an unkind feeling to anyone in the world, except perhaps to that fellow

—no, not even to him, poor beggar, who was losing her. To lose her was such a misfortune as made even that cad an object of pity to gods and men.

‘And how is all this to come about?’ she said, after a pause. ‘It’s easy talking about what’s to happen in summer, and coming home to Penton, and all that sort of thing—but in the meantime there are a few things to be done. How is it all to come about?’

‘Our marriage?’ he said.

‘Well, yes, I suppose that’s the first step,’ she answered.

‘That is the easiest thing in the world,’ said Wat. ‘I shall go to town and arrange all the preliminaries. Why, what did you tell me that fellow wanted to do? Do you think I’m less fit to manage it than he is?’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘for one thing, he’s older than you are; he has more freedom than you have. He knows his way about the world. Will they let you go to London by yourself, for one thing?’ she asked, with again that mocking sound in her voice.

Walter caught her arm to his side with a kind of fond fury, and cried 'Emmy!' in an indignant voice.

'I shouldn't if I were your people,' she continued, with a laugh; 'I should feel sure you would be up to some mischief. But, supposing you get off from them, and get to London, what will you do then?'

'I shall do—whatever is the right thing to do. I am not so foolish as you think me. There is a licence to be got, I know—a special licence.'

'Oh,' she cried, 'but that costs money! You will want money.'

'Of course I shall want money,' said Walter, with a certain dignity, though his heart grew cold at the thought. 'You have not much confidence in me, Emmy; but I am not so ignorant as you think.'

There was something like a tone of indignation this time in his voice, and she pressed his arm with her hand.

'I am sure you have the courage for anything,' she said.

‘Courage! Well, that is not precisely the quality that is needed.’ He thought it was his turn to laugh now. ‘I am not afraid.’

‘I know you are not afraid of fighting or—anything of that kind. But to walk into an office, and face a man who is grinning at you all the time, and ask for a marriage licence——’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I am capable of that.’

‘And of all the questions that will be asked you? You will have to answer a great many questions—all about me, which you don’t know, and all about yourself.’

‘I know that, I hope. And I shall know the other, for you will tell me.’

‘And first of all—goodness!’ she cried, suddenly, pushing him slightly away from her, gazing at him in the darkness; ‘a thing I never thought of—are you of age?’

‘Of age!’

He stood facing her, motionless. He had put out his hand to take hers again, to draw it through his arm once more. But this question startled him, and his hand dropped by his side.

Each stood a dark shadow to the other in the dark, staring into each other's face, seeing nothing; and Walter's heart gave a jump that seemed to take it out of his breast.

‘Yes, of age. Oh, you fool! oh, you pretender! oh, you boy trying to be a man! You have known it all along, but you have not told me. You are not of age!’

‘No,’ said the poor boy, humbly. For the first moment he felt no sensation of anger or disappointment, but only the consternation of one who feels the very sky thundering down upon his head, the pillars of the earth falling. ‘Fool!’ did she call him—‘pretender!’ What did she mean by fool? What did she mean by that tone of sudden indignation—almost fury? He felt beaten down by the sudden storm. Then the instinct of self-defence woke in him. ‘What have I done?’ he said. ‘I have concealed nothing from you. No, I am not of age—not till October. What has that to do with it?—age cannot be counted by mere years.’

‘It is, though, in Doctors’ Commons,’ she said, with a mocking laugh. ‘We might have saved ourselves a great deal of trouble and talking nonsense if you had said so at once. Didn’t I tell you you were too young to know what was wanted? Do you think they will give any kind of licence to a boy who is under age?’

‘I am not a boy,’ said Walter, feeling as if she had struck him upon the naked heart, which was throbbing so wildly. ‘Perhaps I might be before I knew you, but not now, not now! And do you mean to tell me that for a mere punctilio like that——’

‘Well, it is a punctilio,’ she said, taking his arm suddenly again, her voice dropping into its softer tone. ‘That is true; nobody thinks anything of it, it is merely a matter of form. Even if you are found out, they never do anything to you.’

‘Found out in what?’

‘In saying you are twenty-one when you are not: for that is what people have to do. It is

just a punctilio, as you say. Nobody thinks anything of it. It is only a matter of form.'

'Why, it is perjury!' he cried, confused, not knowing what he said.

'If you like to call it so; but nobody minds. No one is harsh to a fib of that sort. Everything's fair, don't you know, in love?—or so they say.'

Walter's head seemed going round and round. He could not feel the ground under his feet. He seemed to be lifted away from his firm and solid footing and plunged into a dark and whirling abyss. He could feel her leaning almost heavily upon his arm—all her weight upon him, both her hands clasping that support. That palpable touch seemed the only reality left in earth and heaven. He seemed to himself for a long time unable to speak, and when his voice came forth at last it was not his voice at all—it was a hoarse outburst of sound such as he had never heard before. Nor was it he who said the words. He heard them as if some one else had said them, hoarse, harsh, like the cry of an animal.

‘Should you like me to do that?’ the question was asked by some one, in that horrible way, in the midst of the chilled but heavenly stillness of the night.

He heard the question, but he was not conscious of any answer to it; nor did he know any more till he found himself, or rather heard himself, stumbling down the steep road to the Hook, almost falling over the stones in the way, making a noise which seemed to echo all about. He knew the way well enough, and where the stony places were, and generally ran up and down as lightly as a bird, his rapid elastic steps making the least possible sound as he skimmed along. But this evening it was very different. He stumbled against every obstacle in his way, and sent the stones whirling down the road in advance of him as though he had been a drunken man. He felt indeed as if that were what he was, intoxicated in a way that had no pleasure in it, but only a wild and stupefied confusion, which made a chaos all around—a noisy chaos full of the crash of external sounds—full of voices, conversations, in none of which

he took any part, though he heard things said that seemed to come from himself flitting across the surface of his dream.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.