CARITÀ

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CHAPTER XXXII.

TAKING UP DROPT STITCHES.

NEXT day Mr. Beresford paid Mrs. Meredith a visit of condolence. It was natural and necessary, considering their friendship; but the manner in which that friendship had been interrupted, and the occasion upon which it was resumed, were both embarrassing. It had been a short note from Maxwell which had communicated the news to him, and in this it had been taken for granted that he would now remain at home. Old Mr. Sommerville had himself communicated the information to Maxwell, and his letter was enclosed. 'I hear your friend Beresford had made up his mind to go away, out of consideration for Mrs. Meredith,'

he had written, 'which was very gentlemanly on his part, and showed fine feeling. I think it right accordingly to let you know at once of the great change which has taken place in her position. I have received the news this morning of her husband my poor friend John Meredith's death at Calcutta, on the 3rd inst. It was sudden, but not quite unexpected, as he had been suffering from fever. This of course changes Mrs. Meredith's situation altogether. She is now a widow, and of course responsible to no one. I would not for the world be answerable for depriving her of the sympathy of a kind friend, *which may in the long run be so important for her*, at a period of trouble. So I trust you will communicate the news to your friend with the least possible delay. I have not seen Mrs. Meredith; but as they have been long separated, I do not doubt that she bears the loss with Christian composure,' said the sharp-witted old man. 'I send you old Sommerville's letter,' Mr. Maxwell added on his own account; 'it does not require any comment of mine; and of course you will act as you think proper; but my own opinion is, that he is an old busybody, making suggestions of

patent absurdity.' Mr. Beresford was much nettled by this note. Whatever Sommerville's suggestion might mean it was for him to judge of it, not Maxwell, who thrust himself so calmly into other people's business. Sommerville's letter might not have pleased him by itself, but Maxwell's gloss was unpardonable. He tore it up and threw it into his waste-basket with unnecessary energy. But for that perhaps he might have felt more abashed by the embarrassing character of the reunion; but being thus schooled, he rebelled. He went to the house next door in the afternoon, towards the darkening. The spring sunshine had died away, and the evening was cold as winter almost. There had been no reception that day —visitor after visitor had been sent away with the news of the 'bereavement.' The same word has to be used whether the loss is one which crushes all delight out of life, or one which solemnly disturbs the current for a moment, to leave it only brighter than before. All the servants at Mrs. Meredith's were preternaturally solemn. The aspect of the house could not have been more funereal had half the population succumbed. Already, by some

wonderful effort of millinery, the maids as well as their mistress had got their black gowns.

Mrs. Meredith herself sat in the drawing-room, crape from head to foot, in all the crispness of a fresh widow's cap. Never was black so black, or white so white. She had an innocent satisfaction in heaping up this kind of agony. Already a design drawn by Oswald was in the hands of the goldsmith for a locket to hold her husband's hair. She would not bate a jot of anything that the most bereaved mourner could do to show her 'respect.' Even the tears were ready, and they were sincere tears. A pang of compunction, a pang of regret, of remorseful pity and tenderness, melted her heart, and there was a certain pleasure of melancholy in all this which made it spontaneous. It was the very luxury of sentiment, to be able to feel your heart untouched underneath, and yet to be so deeply, unfeignedly sorry, to be so true a mourner at so little real cost. Mrs. Meredith held out her hand to her visitor as he came in—he was the only one whom she had received.

'This is kind,' she said—'very kind. As

you were always such a good friend to us, I could not say no to you.'

'I was very sorry,' he said; as indeed what else was there to say?

'Oh, yes, I knew you would feel for us. It was so sudden—quite well when the last mail came in, and this one to bring such news! You scaacely knew him; and, oh, I feel it so much now, that none of my friends, that not even the boys knew him as they ought to have known him. It seems as if it must have been my fault.'

'*That* it could never have been. You must not reproach yourself; though one always does, however the loss happens,' he said, in a low and sorrowful tone. He was thinking of his wife, for whom he had mourned with the intensity of despair, but the same words answered both cases. He stood as he had done the last time he was there, not looking at her in her panoply of mourning, but looking dreamily into the fire. And she cried a little, with a childish sob in her throat. The grief was perfectly real, childlike, and innocent. He was much more affected by the recollection of that last meeting at which he had taken leave of her than she was—he

remembered it better. The new incident even kept her from seeing anything more than the most ordinary every-day fact, one friend coming to see another, in his return.

'I suppose you have no details?'

'Not one. We cannot hear till the next mail. It will be some comfort to have particulars. Poor John! he was always so strong, one never had any fear. I was the one that could not stand the climate; and yet I am left and he is taken!'

'But you have not been exposed to the climate,' said Mr. Beresford. She was not wise in these expressions of her personal grief, though her friends always thought her so wise in her sympathy. She resumed softly:

'I have no fears about the boys to embitter my grief. I know they will be well cared for. He was so good a father, though he had them so little with him. Oh, why did you not tell me to send him one of the boys?'

Mr. Beresford would have felt himself the cruellest of malignants, had he ventured to make such a suggestion in former days, but he did not say this now. 'You did what you thought was best for them,' he said.

'Ah, yes,' she said eagerly, 'for them; there was their education to be thought of. That was what I considered; but I do not think—do you think,' she added, with an unconscious clasping of her hands and entreating look, 'that, since the great occasion for it is over—Edward need go to India now?'

The form of the speech was that of an assertion—the tone that of a question. She might follow her own inclinations like other people; but she liked to have them sanctioned and approved by her friends.

'Surely not, if you don't wish it. There is only your wish to be considered.'

'It is not myself I am thinking of. It is for him,' she said, faltering. Of all things that could happen to her, she was least willing to allow that her own will or wish had any share in her decisions. It was a weakness which perhaps the more enlightened of her friends were already aware of. As for Mr. Beresford, he was more critical of her than ever he had been before, although more entirely sympathetic, more ready to throw himself into her service. She looked at him so anxiously. She wanted his opinion and the support of his concurrence. There was

nothing for him to do, to be of use as he proposed, but to agree with her, to support what she had thought of—that was friendship indeed.

On the next day Miss Cherry paid a similar visit of condolence, but she was not so tenderly sympathetic as, under other circumstances, she would naturally have been. She looked at the new-made widow with a critical eye. A short time before no one had been more anxious than Miss Cherry that Mrs. Meredith should suffer no harm, should lose no tittle of the respect due to her. She had with own soft hand struck a blow, the severity of which astonished herself, at her favourite and only brother on Mrs. Meredith's account; but the sudden revolution in their neighbour's affairs, instead of touching her heart, closed it. The position was changed, and a hundred tremors and terrors took at once possession of her gentle bosom. Who could doubt what James would wish now—what James would do? and who could doubt that the woman who had permitted him so intimate a friendship would respond to these wishes? This idea leaped at once into the minds of all the lookers-on. Old Sommerville sent the news with a chuckle of grim cynicism yet kindness; Max-

well communicated it with a grudge; and Miss Cherry received it with an instant conviction yet defiance. They had no doubt of what would, nay, must ensue, and jumped at the conclusion with unanimous agreement; and it would be quite true to say that Mr. Meredith's death brought quite as great a pang to Miss Cherry, who had never seen him, as it did to his wife, though in a different way. If the first marriage, the natural youthful beginning of serious life, brings often with it a train of attendant embarrassments, almost miseries, what is a second marriage to do? Good Miss Cherry's maidenly mind was shocked by the idea that her brother, so long held up somewhat proudly by the family as an example of conjugal fidelity and true sorrow, had allowed feelings less exalted to get possession of him. And what would Cara do? How would her imaginative delicate being, too finely touched for common issues, conform to the vulgar idea of a stepmother? Miss Cherry grew hot and angry as she thought of it. And a man who had such a child, a grown-up daughter, sweetest and only fit substitute for the mother dead, what did he want with a new companion, a new love? Faugh! to use such a word dis-

gusted her; and that James—*James!* the most heart-broken and inconsolable of mourners, should come to that! With all this in her mind, it may be supposed that Miss Cherry's feelings when she went to see Mrs. Meredith and found her in all her crape, crying softly by the fire, were not so sweet as they ought to have been. She said the usual things in the way of consolation—how, as it was to be, perhaps it was best that they had heard of it all at once, and had not been kept in anxiety; and how she supposed such afflictions were necessary for us, though it was very sad that the dear boys had known so little of their father; but, on the other hand, how that fact must soften it to them all, for of course it was not as if he had died at home, where they would have felt the loss every day. This last speech had a sting in it, which was little intentional, and yet gave Miss Cherry a sense of remorse after it was said; for though she had a certain desire to give pain, momentary, and the result of much provocation, yet the moment the pain was given, it was herself who suffered most. This is what it is to have a soft nature; most people have at least a temporary satisfaction in the result when they have been able to inflict a wound.

'Oh, yes, my dear, she feels it, I suppose,' Miss Cherry said, when she returned. 'She was sitting over the fire, and the room much too warm for the season; for it is really like spring to-day. Of course a woman must feel it more or less when she has lost her husband. I have never been in these circumstances, but I don't see how one could help that—however little one cared for the man.'

'Did she care little for the man?' Cara was at the age when most things are taken for granted. She had not entered into any peculiarities in the position of Mrs. Meredith with her husband. She was like Hamlet, recognising more and more, as she realised her own position, the quagmires and unsafe footing round her—was this another? There was a sinking sensation in Cara's youthful mind, and a doubt and faltering wherever she thought to place her foot.

'My dear child,' said Miss Cherry, 'when a woman spends years after years away from her husband, never making any effort to join him, quite satisfied with a letter now and then, receiving her own friends, making a circle, going into society—while the poor man is toiling to keep it up, thousands and thousands of

miles away'—here Miss Cherry paused, a little frightened by the blackness of the picture which she had herself drawn. 'I hope I am not doing anyone injustice,' she faltered. 'Oh, my dear, you may be sure I don't mean that. And I believe poor Mrs. Meredith could not stand the climate, and of course there was the boys' education to think of—children always must come home. Indeed, how anyone can settle in India knowing that their children must be sent away——'

'Aunt Cherry, no one is to be trusted,' said the girl, tears coming to her eyes; 'there is no truth anywhere. We are all making a pretence one way or another; pretending to care for people who are living, pretending to mourn for people who are dead; pretending that one thing is our object, while we are trying for another; pretending to be merry, pretending to be sad. Ah! it makes my heart sick!'

'Cara, Cara! What do you know about such things? They say it is so in the world, but you and I have very little to do with the world, dear. You must not think—indeed, indeed, you must not think that it is so with us.'

'I don't know anything of the world,' said

Cara. 'I only know what is round me. If Mrs. Meredith is false, and papa false, and other people——'

'My dear,' said Miss Cherry, trembling a little, 'it is always dangerous to apply abstract principles so. When I say that Mrs. Meredith was a long time away from her husband, I do not say that she is *false*. Oh, Cara, no! that would be terrible. If I say anything, all I mean is that she could not be so grieved, not so *dreadfully* grieved, as a woman would be whose husband had been always with her. Think of the boys, for instance; they did not know him really; they may be very sorry; but, how different would it be if it was a father like your father! And other people—what do you mean by other people?'

'Nothing,' said Cara, turning away, for she could not reply to Miss Cherry's argument. Would she indeed, in her own person, grieve for her father more than the Merediths did for theirs? Here was another mystery unpenetrated by Miss Cherry, incomprehensible to herself. Nobody knew the gulf that lay between her and him, and she could not tell herself what it meant. How kind he had been to

her, though she repaid him in this way; but did he love—really love—his child any more than she loved him? Did anybody love any other, or only pretend and go through the semblance of loving? She did not doubt her aunts, it is true; but then her certainty in respect to them took, to some degree, the form of indifference. Taken for granted, not inquired into, that love itself might have failed, perhaps—but Cara never thought of it as possible. It was like the sunny house it dwelt on, always open, due not to anything in her, but to the mere fact that she was Cara. They would have loved any other kind of girl, she said to herself, under the same name just as well. Poor child! she was like Hamlet, though unaware of that sublimity. Friends, lovers, relations, all had failed her. Every soul thought of himself—no one truly or unfeignedly of others. Her head swam, her heart sank, the firm ground gave way under her feet wherever she turned. It might not cost the others much, but it cost her a great deal; even she herself in her own person: did she love more truly than they did? No; she was not devoted to her father, nor to Oswald, whom she was supposed to care for;

and if to—anyone else, then they did not care for her, Cara said to herself, and fled from her thoughts with a beating heart.

That evening there was an interchange of visits, something in the old fashion. Edward thought he might come in, in the evening, when the public about would not be scandalised by the idea that he was able to visit his friends so soon after his father's death; and Mr. Beresford said to himself that, surely he might go for a little to comfort his neighbour who was in trouble, and who had not herself been out of doors for these two long days. The young man and the older man crossed each other, but without meeting; and both of the visits were very pleasant. Miss Cherry was as kind to Edward as she had been cold to his mother. She got up to meet him and took his two hands in hers. She called him, inarticulately, her dear boy, and asked after his health tenderly, as if he had been ill. As for Cara, she did nothing but look at him with a wistful look, trying to read in his eyes what he felt; and when her aunt entered into the usual commonplaces about resignation to God's will, Cara broke in almost abruptly, impatient even of this amiable fiction.

'You forget what you were saying to-day,' she said: 'that Edward did not know his father, and therefore could not grieve as—I should.'

'That is quite true,' he said, 'and therefore it is a different kind of feeling. Not the grief that Cara would feel; but that painful sense of not being able to feel, which is almost worse. I never thought of my father—scarcely knew him. Some time, of course, we were to meet—that was all; and gratitude to him, or any attempt to repay him, was not in my thoughts. And now it is impossible ever, in any place, were one to go to the world's end—or at any time, were one to live as long as Methuselah, to say a kind word to him, to try to make up to him a little. This is more painful than Cara's worst grief would be, knowing she had done everything, made everything bright.'

'Oh, no, no!' she said, putting up her hands.

'Ah, yes, yes!' he said, looking at her with melting eyes, softened and enlarged by the moisture in them, and smiling upon her. Cara, in her confusion, could not meet the look and the smile.

'Oh, Edward,' she said, 'it is you who are

the best of us all. I am not good, as you think me. I am a sham, like all the rest; but if there is one that is true——'

'Cara is foolish,' said Miss Cherry. 'I don't know what is come to her, Edward. She talks as if nobody was to be relied upon; but I suppose she is at the age of fancy, when girls take things into their heads. I remember when I was your age, my darling, I had a great many fancies too. And I am afraid I have some still, though I ought to know better. I suppose you will take your mother away somewhere, Edward, for a little change?'

'I have not heard anything about it, Miss Cherry; but there will be one change, most likely, very important to me, if I settle to do it. I need not go out to India now—unless I please.'

'Oh, Edward, I am so glad; for, of course, you would not wish it—you did not wish it?'

'No,' he said, slowly. 'I did not wish it; but, after all, if that seemed the best way to be good for something—to make some use of one's life——'

He spoke to Miss Cherry, but his eyes were on Cara. If she had said anything; if she had even lifted her eyes; if she had made any sign

to show that even as her brother—her husband's brother—he could be of use to her! But Cara made no reply either by word or look. She put her hand nervously upon the book which lay on the table—the book he had been reading.

'Oh, Cara, you must not think of that,' said Miss Cherry; 'we can't be so selfish as to ask Edward to read to-night.'

'Yes; let me read,' he said. 'Why should not I? I am glad to do anything after these two days. It seemed unkind to *him*, not to make some break in life—though I don't know why; and there is nothing within reach to do. Let me read.'

Then Cara looked at him, with eyes like his own, suffused; her heart was melting, her mind satisfied. 'But this is the one who does not care for me,' she was saying to herself.

Next door there was less conversation between the elder people. Mr. Beresford tried, indeed, to take upon him the part of consoler—to talk to her and lessen her burden; but that change of all their relations did not answer. He fell silent after a while, and she dried her eyes and began to talk to him. The

maid who brought up tea announced that Missis had picked up wonderful; while the other servants in the kitchen looked at each other, and shook their heads.

'Anyhow, *that's* better than the other way,' the cook said, oracularly, 'and we knows what we has before us—if the young gentlemen don't find nothing to say.'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LITTLE EMMY'S VISITORS.

OSWALD had found his particular pursuit interrupted by his father's death. He could not go that day, which happened to be the hospital day, to meet Agnes at the gate; indeed, for once, his own inclinations were, for the moment, driven out of his head; and, in the many things there were to think of, from hatbands upwards, he forgot that this was the day on which alone he could secure a little conversation with the object of his thoughts. When the recollection flashed upon him in the evening, he was more disturbed than was at all usual to his light-hearted nature. What would she think of him? that he had deserted her, after compromising her; an idea equally injurious to his pride and to his affection; for he had so much real feeling about Agnes, that he was not self-confident where she was concerned, and

shrank from the idea of appearing in an unfavourable light. Ordinarily, Oswald did not suppose that anyone was likely to look at him in an unfavourable light. And then there was the fear which sprang up hastily within him that this day which he had missed might be the last hospital day. Little Emmy had been gradually getting better, and when she was discharged, what means would he have of seeing Agnes? This thought took away all the pleasure from his cigar, and made him pace back and forward in his room, in all the impatience of impotence, ready to upbraid his father with dying at such an inconvenient moment. Yesterday would not have mattered, or to-morrow —but to-day! How often, Oswald reflected, it happens like this in human affairs. Given an unoccupied day, when an anything might occur without disturbing your arrangement—when, indeed, you have no engagements, and are perfectly free and at the command of fate—nothing, even under the most favourable circumstances, happens; but let it be a moment when something very urgent is on your hands, when you have an opportunity that may never occur again, and immediately earth and heaven con-

spire to fill it with accidents, and to prevent its necessary use. At that hour, however, nothing could be done. It was nearly midnight, and the House, with all its swarms of children and kindly attendants, must be wrapped in the sleep of the innocent. Would Agnes, he asked himself, share that sleep, or would any troubled thoughts be in her mind touching the stranger who had so sought her society, and who had exposed her to reproof, and then left her to bear it as she might? This, it is to be feared, drove out of Oswald's mind any feeling he might have had for his father. In any case, such feeling would have been short-lived. He had no visionary compunctions, such as Edward had, though it was Oswald, not Edward, who was supposed to be the poetical one of the brothers; but then Edward was not 'in love,' at least not in Oswald's way.

A week had to elapse before the day on which he could hope to see Agnes again, and this contrariety made him more earnest in his determination to let nothing stand in his way a second time. He was so eager, indeed, that he neglected what would otherwise have been so important in his eyes—the arrival of the

mail, which brought definite information as to Mr. Meredith's property, and must settle what his own prospects were to be.

No man could give a warmer evidence of his love than this he felt within himself as he took his way towards the hospital. During the intervening week he had seen the little teacher almost daily, accompanying the procession of schoolgirls, and she had, he thought, been conscious that he was there, though she would not look at him. Naturally, Oswald made all he could of his deep hatband, his black gloves, and even the black border of his handkerchief, as he crossed the line; and once he felt that Agnes perceived these indications of woe in a quick glance she gave at him, though she avoided his eyes. This then was a point in his favour—if only little Emmy were still at the hospital. This time he was more bold than usual, and asked to be admitted to see the child, explaining who he was, and what was his connection with the accident. In this respect he took upon himself more than was necessary, blaming himself for being the cause of it—and at length got admittance, his mourning naturally standing him in stead with all the officials.

Little Emmy had been by this time transported into the convalescent ward, and was lying on a sofa there, very bright-eyed and pale, looking eagerly, as Oswald saw, with a leap of his heart, for some visitor. When she perceived him a cloud of disappointment passed over her little face, then a glimpse of surprise and recognition, then the swift-rising colour of weakness.

'Do you know me?' said Oswald, taking the chair the nurse offered him.

'Oh, yes!' cried the child, with a mixture of awe and delight. No further preliminaries were necessary.

He listened, with patience, to an account of all the stages of her recovery, and delicately introduced his own inquiries. The ladies at the House had been very kind to her; had they not? They had come to see her?

'Oh, yes, sir,' cried little Emmy. 'Miss Burchell came every week, and Sister Mary Jane has been twice. Miss Burchell is the kindest of all. I thought she was coming to-day; oh, isn't she coming to-day?' the child added, after a pause, looking at him with rising tears. 'Did she send you instead, please?' and though Oswald was so grand a gentleman, and his

inquiries filled her with pride, yet his possible substitution for her more beloved visitor made Emmy ready to cry. Oswald did not like to be thus thrust into a secondary place, even with a child. A momentary irritation arose in his mind; then he laughed and forgave Emmy, remembering who it was that she preferred to him.

'Don't be afraid,' he said; 'I have not come instead of Miss—did you say Burchell? Is she one of the Sisters?' he asked, hypocritically. 'I thought you called them by their Christian names.'

'Oh, sir, Miss Burchell is not a Sister. She is the teacher. I am in the third division,' said the child, with pride; 'and she teaches us. She is a lady—not like Miss Davies, in the infant school, you know; but a real, real lady. And all the Sisters are ladies. It is for goodness they take care of us, and not because they are obliged. Such a trouble as they take!' said little Emmy, with the *naïve* surprise of her class, 'and for nothing at all! And Miss Burchell is the kindest of them all.'

'She has come to see you very often?'

'Oh, sir, every open day! and she told me

that—that—you had come to ask for me. She said it was so good and kind. She said, sir, as you were a very kind gentleman, and took an interest in poor children—especially orphans like me.'

'Yes; I take a great interest in you, my poor little Emmy,' said Oswald, blushing with pleasure. 'I think you ought to have change of air after your long illness. Is there not a place where the children at the House go to when they have been ill?'

'Oh!' cried the little girl, with eyes as round as her exclamation, 'Nelly Brown went to Margate after the fever. She used to tell us about the sands and the shells, and riding on donkeys; but Nelly had a kind lady who took an interest in her,' said Emmy, her countenance falling, 'and paid for her. There are such a many orphans, sir,' she added, with a wistful look at him. 'Such a many! They would do more for us, if there wasn't such a many of us, Sister Mary Jane says.'

A certain half-aggrieved and serious wonder was in the child's eyes. Why there should be so many orphans puzzled little Emmy; and she felt that it was a special grievance to her, as

one of them, debarred from the privileges which a smaller number might have shared.

'And you have a kind gentleman, Emmy,' said Oswald. 'I hope it comes to the same thing. This is what I came to talk to you about——'

'Ah, there she is!' said little Emmy, growing red with delight.

Oswald got up precipitately from his chair. What would she say to find him here already installed before her? She came up, light-footed, in her nun's dress; her face looked doubly sweet, or so, at least, her young lover thought, in the close circle of the poke-bonnet, to meet the rapture in the child's eyes.

Agnes had no thought that Oswald was likely to penetrate here; therefore, she did not see him or think of him as she came up to the child, and he was a witness of the clinging of the little orphan's arms, the tender sweetness of the salutation. Agnes could not have said anything more homely than the 'How have you been, dear?' but it sounded like the very softest utterance of loving kindness—maternal, dove-like murmurings, tender and caressing, to Oswald's ear.

'Oh, I am well—almost well; and here is the kind gentleman come to see me!' cried little Emmy.

Agnes turned quickly, and looked at him. She thought it was the surgeon, who was young too, and had shown an almost unprofessional eagerness to explain to her all the peculiarities of this interesting case. When she saw who it really was she turned crimson, gave him a look which was half reproach and half satisfaction, and went away to the other side of the sofa, keeping the little patient between them. This suited both parties very well; for while Agnes felt it at once a demonstration of displeasure and flight out of a dangerous vicinity, it brought her face to face with him, and gave him a favourable point of view for all her changes of countenance. And who could object to his visit here, which charity—only charity—could have brought about? By little Emmy's sofa, Oswald felt brave enough to defy all the Sisters in the world.

'I came to inquire into Emmy's prospects of convalescence,' said Oswald, insinuatingly; 'and she tells me there is some place in Margate where children are sent to from the House. If

the Sisters will let me pay for the child—she wants sea breezes, I think,' and he looked at her in a serious parental way, 'before she can be fit for work again.'

'Oh, I think they will be very glad!' said Agnes, somewhat breathless. She did not want him to know that she had as much as remarked his absence; and yet, in spite of herself, there was a slight tone of coldness and offence in her voice.

'May I ask you to arrange it for me? I don't know when she will be able to be moved; but when she is—summer is coming on, and the weather is quite genial already.' (The weather *is* quite genial generally, one time or other, in April, to take the unwary in.)

'Oh, yes,' said Agnes again, assenting out of sheer timidity and embarrassment. Then she said, hesitating a little, 'Perhaps it would be better to send word to the Sister Superior yourself.'

'Is it necessary? I have been in great trouble lately, which is why I could not ask for poor Emmy last week,' he said; and so managed as that the deep hatband should catch the eye of Agnes. Her face softened at once, as he

saw, and her eyes, after a momentary glance at the hatband, returned inquiring and kind, not furtive or offended, to his face.

'I am very sorry,' she said, looking again at the hat, and in an eager, half-apologetic tone. 'I will speak of it, if you wish. It is very kind of you to think of her—very kind.'

'Kind! How can I be sufficiently grateful to Emmy?' he said, low and quickly, in a tone which the child could not hear; and then he took the little girl's thin small hand into his, and folded the fingers on a gold coin.

'This is to hire donkeys on the sands, Emmy,' he said; 'but mind, you must tell me all about it when you come back.'

'Oh, sir! Oh, Miss Burchell! look what he has given me,' said the child in ecstasy. But Oswald knew how to beat a retreat gracefully. He gave a little squeeze to Emmy's fist, keeping it closed over the sovereign, and, bowing to Agnes, went away.

Was that the last of him? Better, far better, that it should be the last of him, poor Agnes felt, as her heart contracted, in spite of herself, at his withdrawal; but the surprise, and that pang of disappointment, which she would have

gone to the stake rather than acknowledge, made her incapable of speech for the moment. It is very wicked and wrong to speak to a gentleman to whom you have never been introduced; but, then, when that gentleman has a legitimate opportunity of making al ittle acquaintance in a natural way, how strange, and rather injurious, that he should not take advantage of it! This failure of all necessity for resistance at the moment when she was buckling on her best armour to resist, gave an extraordinary twist to Agnes Burchell's heart. It almost would have brought the tears to her eyes, had not she started in instant self-despair—though she would not have shed such tears for all the treasures of the world.

'Oh, look what he has given me!' cried little Emmy, 'a sovereign, a whole sovereign—all to myself!'

'He is—very kind,' said Agnes, stiffly, and she was restrained even in her intercourse with Emmy, not saying half so much to her as she did on ordinary occasions, which was wrong; for, in fact, Emmy could not justly bear blame for anything committed, neither for his coming nor his going away. The child was quite cast down by Miss Burchell's coldness. She began

to inquire if Agnes was ill, if she was tired, if she thought the Sisters would object to let her go to Margate; thus plainly showing that she perceived her visitor's abstraction, which was, of all things in the world, the last thing which Agnes wished to be remarked. And poor Agnes could not conceal how worried she was by these questions; she could not account for the discouragement, the sickness of heart, that had come over her. She was tired all at once—overcome by the heat or the cold; which was it?

'It is the spring, miss,' said the nurse.

And she was very willing to allow that it must be the spring.

"I will send you word as soon as I have spoken to the Sister,' she said, kissing little Emmy as she went away; 'and forgive me, dear—for I have a headache. I have not been able to talk to you to-day.'

'Oh, have you a headache?' cried poor little Emmy, ready to cry for sympathy. What perverse things hearts are when they are young! Agnes walked away through the wards the emblem of peaceful quiet, in her black bonnet, her soft face breathing serenity and ease, as one sufferer and another thought as she passed, but

under that conventual drapery a hundred thoughts rustling and stinging, so that the girl was afraid lest they should be heard. Oh, she was glad that he was gone! Glad to be spared the struggle and the necessity for telling him that he must haunt her steps no more. Glad to be let alone, to do her work in peace; her work, that was what she lived for, not absurd romances which she was ashamed even to dream of. Her mind was brimful and running over with these thoughts. It was like carrying a hive full of bees, or a cage full of birds through the place, to walk through it like this, her heart beating, and so many voices whispering in her ears. But suddenly, all at once, as she came out of the great doors, they all hushed in a moment. Her heart stopped (she thought); her thoughts fled like frightened children. She was stilled. Why? It was all for no better reason than that Oswald Meredith was visible at the gate, in his black clothes, looking (the hospital nurses thought) like an interesting young widower, bereaved and pensive, yet not inconsolable. He had put on a look in conformity with his hatband, and stood there waiting for her as she came out, claiming her sympathy.

Agnes grew still in a moment, the tumult and the commotion ceasing in her mind as by magic. She tried to look as if she did not see him, and then to pass him when she got out beyond the gate; but he stepped forward quickly into her path.

'May I ask if you will speak for me about little Emmy?' he said. 'The child looks weak and rather excitable. I should like, if the authorities will permit me, to pay her expenses to the sea.'

'Oh, yes, they will permit you,' said Agnes, smiling in spite of all her terrors. 'You are very kind. I will speak—if you wish it.'

'And write to me,' said Oswald, eagerly. 'It will be necessary to write to me to let me know.'

But Agnes demurred to this easy settlement of the matter. 'Sister Mary Jane will write. She manages these things herself. But she will be pleased. Good morning,' she said, making an attempt to quicken her steps.

'I am going this way,' said Oswald. 'I could not come last week. We had bad news.'

She looked up at him, half alarmed, half sympathetic. She was sorry, very sorry, that

he should suffer. It was not possible (she thought) to be like the priest and the Levite, pass on on the other side, and pretend to care nothing for one's neighbour. But then she ought to tell him to go away. So Agnes compounded with her conscience by uttering nothing; all she did was to look up at him with tender brown eyes, so full of pity and interest, that words would have been vain to express all they were able to say.

'My father is dead in India,' said Oswald. 'You may fancy how hard it is upon us to hear of it without any details, without knowing who was with him, or if he was properly cared for. I have not had time for anything since but to attend upon my mother, and see to what had to be done.'

He felt that this was a quite correct description; for had he not sacrificed the last hospital day to the shock of the news, if not to the service of his mother; and there had been things to do, hatbands, &c., which had kept him occupied.

"I am very sorry,' said Agnes, with downcast eyes.

'You who are so tender and sympathetic, I

knew you would feel for—my mother,' said Oswald; upon which name the girl looked up at him again. To feel for his mother—surely there could not be anything more natural, more right, than this.

'You would like my mother—everyone does. It is amusing the way in which people run after her. Not that there is any room for amusement in our mournful house at present,' said Oswald, correcting himself. 'This is the first day the sun has seemed to shine or the skies to be blue since I saw you last.'

'I am very sorry,' said Agnes again; and then, after a pause, she added nervously, 'It is not that I think anything—and, oh, I hope you will not be vexed now that you are in trouble! —but you must not come with me. The Sister thinks it is not right, and neither do I.'

'Not right!' said Oswald, with an ingenuous look of surprise.

Agnes was driven to her wit's end. 'I do not want to seem absurd,' she said, trembling, 'and indeed there is no need for explanation. Please, you must not wait for me at the hospital, or walk back with me any more.'

'Alas! have we not been planning to send

little Emmy away? That means that I shall not have the chance, and that the brightest chapter in my life is almost over. Must it be over? You don't know what it has been to me. You have made me think as I never thought before. Will you abandon me now, just when I feel on the threshold of something better?'

'You must not talk so,' said Agnes, roused to something like anger. 'You know very well that, meeting me as you have done, it is wrong; it is not the part of a gentleman to talk so.'

'Is it not the part of a gentleman to admire, to reverence—to love?' Oswald said the last words almost under his breath, and yet she heard them, notwithstanding the noises in the street.

'Mr. Meredith!' She gave him an indignant look, but it ended in a blush, which ran like a warm suffusion all over her, and checked further words on her lips.

'I know your name, too,' he said. 'And it is not love only, but reverence, that is in my heart. Oh, Agnes! don't turn me away! May not my mother come, when she is well enough to go anywhere, and plead my cause? She might speak if I may not.'

'Oh, go away, please, go away,' said Agnes, in distress. 'We are almost at the House again.'

'And why should not we be at the House, if you will let me hope?' cried Oswald. 'I don't want to skulk away! Yes, I will go and hide myself somewhere if you will not hear me. I shall not care what becomes of me. But, Agnes——'

'Oh, Mr. Meredith! Go, please. I cannot think it is right. I—don't understand you. I ought not to listen to you—in this dress; and I have only begun the work.'

'There are other kinds of work. There is the natural work. Is not a wife better than a sister?'

Agnes lighted up with the sudden flash which was characteristic of her. She raised her eyes to him glowing with indignant fire, her face suffused with colour. 'Better?' she said; 'better to live for one's self and one other than for the poor and helpless and the miserable! Oh! do you know what you say? You are a tempter; you are not a true Christian! Better! when there are so many who are wretched and friendless in the world, with no one to care

whether they live or die? Do you think a woman does better who tries to make *you* happy than one who gives herself up for *them?*'

In the heat of this sudden burst of controversial eloquence, she turned aside into another street, which led out of the way of the House. Nothing else would have tempted her to such a curious breach of decorum; but the argument did, which filled her with indignant fervour. She did it only half consciously, by impulse, burning to know what he would answer, what plea he could bring up against her. But here Oswald's cleverness failed him. He was not wise enough to see that a little argument would have led her on to any self-committal. He answered softly, with mistaken submission.

'I will retract. I will say anything you please. No, not better; only happier. You would make me the most blessed of men; and what can you do for the poor? So little; everybody says, so little! But for me there would be no limit to what you could do. I have the most need of conversion. Ah! let your mission be me!'

Agnes started and came to herself. She

looked round her, alarmed and scared, when she knew, yet only half knew, that she had left the direct road. 'I have taken the wrong turn,' she said, with confusion. 'Mr. Meredith, let us forget that we have ever met. How could I turn back, having just put my hand to the plough? Oh, it is very weak and wicked of me, but I do not want the Sister to see you. She will think—but you have been kind, and I will say good-bye here.'

'Do you want to say good-bye? Why should we forget we have ever met? Tell me to forget that I am born!'

'Oh, no, no; it is not like that. Mr. Meredith, we have only known each other four or five—a few weeks.'

'Six—I have kept closer count than you.'

'And what does that matter in a life?' said Agnes, looking up at him with a courageous smile. 'Nothing! no more than a moment. We have not done any harm,' she added, collecting all her strength. 'We have not neglected our work nor wasted our time. And we never meant anything. It was all an accident. Mr. Meredith, good-bye. I shall pray that you may be happy.'

'Ah! that is like what the world says of saints,' he said, sharply. 'You make me wretched and then pray that I may be happy.'

'Oh, no, no,' she cried, the tears coming to her eyes. 'How can I have made you wretched? It was only an accident. It has been only a moment. You will not refuse to say good-bye.'

Foolish Agnes! she had nothing to do but to leave him, having said her say. But, instead of this she argued, bent upon making a logical conclusion to which he should consent, convinced, though against his will. On the whole she preferred that it should be against his will —but convinced she had determined that he must be. They walked away softly through the little street into the sunset, which sank lower every moment, shedding a glory of slant light upon the two young figures so sombre in garb, so radiant in life. Where they were going they did not know, nor how the charmed moments were passing. Every shade of the coming evening lay behind them, but all the glory of the rose tints and glowing purple, the daffodil skies and gates of pearl, before.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WIDOW.

THE full particulars of Mr. Meredith's death and Mr. Meredith's will came by the next mail; and this information acted as a kind of funeral ceremony and conclusion to the melancholy period. All his affairs were in order; his will unassailable, the provisions sufficiently just. There was more money than anyone expected, and it was divided into three unequal shares—the largest for his eldest son, the second for Edward, the least of all for their mother. This arrangement took them all by surprise, and it was with some little difficulty that Mrs. Meredith was brought to see how it affected herself. That there would be any difference to her had not occurred to her. She had thought only of her children. 'They certainly will not be worse off than they have been,' she said five minutes before the contents of the will were communi-

cated to her; but any question as to how she herself would be affected had not entered her mind. Even after she had heard it she did not realise it.

'I am afraid you will scarcely be able to keep up this house unless the boys stay with you, which is not to be expected,' said old Mr. Sommerville.

She looked at him, taking her handkerchief from her eyes. 'My house?' she said, faltering. Mr. Beresford was present and one or two other old friends.

Oswald was playing with a paperknife, balancing it on his finger, and paying no attention. He was thinking of something else with a vague smile on his face. He was as rich almost as he had hoped—made an 'eldest son' of, in so far at least that his portion was the biggest; and he was thinking of a house of his own, taking no thought for his mother, and a wife of his own soon to be beguiled out of poke-bonnets and convent cloaks, yet all the more piquant from the comparison. Naturally this was more interesting to him than his mother, and the house that he had been used to for years. But Edward, who, whatever he was himself doing,

managed somehow to see what Oswald was about, and who thought he knew what that preoccupation and absorption meant, interposed hastily. 'Of course my mother will keep her house. It is quite unnecessary to enter into such questions. The economy of the household is unchanged,' he said.

'But, my lad, I don't agree with you,' said old Sommerville. 'You may both take to chambers, your brother and you. Most young men do now-a-days, so far as I can see. I will not say whether it's better for them, or worse for them. Anyhow, your mother must be on her own footing. You must not be dependent on the whimsies of a boy. I would advise you, my dear madam, to look out for a smaller house.'

'A smaller house?' she repeated again, in dismay. 'Why a smaller house?' Then her eyes fell upon Oswald. 'Yes, I understand. Oswald will perhaps—marry. It is quite true; but I have lived in this house so long—I am used to it. I do not wish to change.'

'You will not be able to afford it—on your income, madam,' said old Sommerville, watching her keenly. He was fond of studying

mankind, and to see how a fellow-creature encountered a change of fortune was keenly interesting to the old man.

She looked at him, opening her eyes wider with a curious gaze of surprise; then paused a moment, looking round her as if for some explanation. 'Ah,' she said, 'I begin to understand.' Nobody spoke to her; the other two old friends who were present turned aside and talked to each other. Mr. Beresford looked over a photograph book as earnestly as if he hoped to find a fortune between the pages; only the old spy watched the new-made widow, the admired and beloved woman to whom in this distinct way it was becoming apparent that she had not been so much beloved after all.

And her face was worth a little study—there came over it a momentary gloom. She had been thinking with so much tender kindness of *him*; but he, it was evident, had been less tender in his thoughts of her. But then, he had died, and she lived. No doubt, if it had been she who had died, his mind too would have been softened and his heart grown tender. The cloud lightened, a soft smile came into her eyes; and then two tears sprang quickly over

the smile, because he had slighted her publicly in these last settlements; he had put her down willingly and consciously out of the position she had held as his wife. She felt this sting, for love and honour were the things she prized most. Then her courageous spirit roused up, and this time the smile descended softly, seriously, to touch her mouth.

'What does it matter?' she said, with her habitual sweetness. 'My husband knew I had a little of my own. If I am not able to keep up this house, I must get another house, Mr. Sommerville, that I can keep up.'

'Madam,' said Mr. Sommerville, 'that is the way to take it. I respect you for what you say; many a woman now would have raged at us that cannot help it, would have abused the maker of the will, and made a disturbance.'

'Made a disturbance?' said Mrs. Meredith. The smile brightened into a momentary laugh. It was the first time she had allowed herself to stray beyond the gloomy pale of memory which she considered her husband's due. But the sound of her own laugh frightened her. She shrank a little, saying hastily, 'Oh, Edward, my dear boy, forgive me!' He was not her

favourite son, or at least he had thought so; but he was the one to whom she clung now.

'I thought you knew my mother,' said Edward, proudly, 'after knowing her so long. That is all; is it not? We can settle among ourselves about houses, &c. I think my mother has had enough of it now.'

'No,' she said, 'oh, no; whatever ought to be done, I am quite able for; if there is any stipulation as to what I must do, or about the boys—if the boys should marry; but to be sure they are of age, they are their own masters,' she added, with once more a faint smile. 'Whether their mother is considered wise enough—oh, Edward! no, I am in earnest. Perhaps there is some task for me, something to do.'

This was the only little resentment she showed; and even the sharp-witted old Sommerville scarcely took it for resentment. The friends took luncheon with the family at an early hour, and departed, carrying away the unnecessary papers, and leaving everything as it had been; the blinds were all drawn up, the sunshine coming in as usual. Oswald, with his hat brushed to a nicety and his cigars

in his pocket, went out just as usual. The usual subdued domestic sounds were in the house, and in the course of the afternoon four or five visitors were allowed to come in. Everything was as it had been; only Mrs. Meredith's pretty ribbons, all soft in tint as in texture, her dove-coloured gown, her lace, her Indian shawls and ornaments, were all put away, and crape reigned supreme. There was no further conversation on the subject until after dinner, when Edward and his mother were alone. Oswald was dining with one of his friends; it was hard to hold him to the etiquette of 'bereavement.' 'Besides,' Mrs. Meredith said, 'no one thinks of these rules with a young man.'

'It will be strange to have to leave this house,' she said, when the servants had left the dining-room. 'It was the first house I had in England, when I brought you home. Some people thought the country would have been best; but I liked the protection of a town, and to see my friends, and to be near a good doctor; for you were delicate, Edward, when you were a child.'

'Who, I, mother? I don't look much like it now.'

'No, heaven be praised—but you were delicate; two little white-faced things you were, with India written in your little pale cheeks. That was the first thing that brought me home. You could not have stayed in India; and then the question was, Edward, to leave your father, or to leave you—and, oh—you seemed to have so much more need of me!'

'Do not go over the question again, mother. You did not do it, I am sure, without thought. Let us think of the future now. You are to stay in the house you like, and which is all the home I have ever known; as for a smaller house, or for what you are able to afford, that is simple nonsense. It appears I have a separate income now, not merely an allowance. You don't mean to turn me out, do you, to the streets?'

'My dear boy!—of course, wherever I have a roof, there is a place for you.'

'Very well, mother; this is the place You don't want me to go off and live in chambers?'

'Not unless—you think it necessary; unless—you would like it better, Edward. Oh, I hope not, my dear!'

'So do I,' he said, smiling. 'I hope you

don't mean to turn me out for the sake of something you can afford. We must live together, mother, you and I. I can't be idle; you know, I must do something; and all the pleasure I shall ever get out of life,' he added, with the solemnity of youthful conviction, 'will be to find my home always the same—and my mother. I look for no other happiness.'

'My dear,' she said, 'that is all very well at present, till you see some one who is dearer to you than either your mother or your home. That will come some time; but in the meantime, dear——'

'The meantime will be always, mother—the other time will never come.'

Mrs. Meredith gave him a sudden look—then checked herself when about to say something, sighed a little, and made a pause; and then she began to talk on another subject between which and this there seemed little connection, though Edward perceived the connection easily enough.

'We shall have it all to ourselves apparently,' she said, with a faint smile. 'Oswald, I suppose, will be thinking of a house for himself; and why should he wait? There is no

reason why he should wait. To be sure, they are young. Has he said anything to you, Edward?'

'Nothing, mother.'

'Well; they must have their reasons, I presume. One does not like to be left quite out; but it is the thing one ought to expect as one gets old. Old people are supposed not to sympathise with youth. It is a mistake, Edward—a great pity; but I suppose it will be the same as long as the world lasts. I did the same, no doubt, when I was young too.'

He made no reply. So sure as he was that he never could have such secrets to communicate, how could he say anything? and she went on.

'I am not finding fault with Oswald. He has always been a good boy—both of you,' she said, smiling upon him. 'You have never given me any great anxiety. And everything has turned out well hitherto. They will have plenty of money; but so long as Oswald does not say anything, how can I speak to her father, as I should like to do? Men do not notice such things; and it seems uncandid with so good a friend; but till Oswald speaks—I

hope he will be an attentive husband, Edward. He will be kind; but there are many little attentions that a fanciful girl expects—and feels the want of when they fail her.'

Edward said nothing to all this; how could he? He winced, but bore it stoutly, though he could not make any reply. It was better to accustom himself to have it talked about; but he could not himself enter upon the subject. 'Will you mind if I leave this evening, for a little?' he said.

'No, dear; certainly not—but, Edward,' she said, coming round to him as she rose from the table, and laying her hand on his arm, 'are you sure it is good for you, my dear boy? are you not making it harder for yourself?'

'Let me alone, mother—so long as I can,' he said, hoarsely. 'No; it does not make it harder; and it can't last long now.'

'No—there is no reason why they should wait. I wish—I wish he may not be a careless husband, Edward. Why should he spend all his evenings away? There is something in it I cannot understand.'

'He has always been the happy one, mother. Whatever he has wished for has come to him.

He does not know what it is to be so fortunate —nothing has cost him any trouble—not even this.'

'Still, he should not be away every evening,' said the mother, shaking her head; and she drew him down to her and kissed his cheek tenderly. '*My* boy! we must comfort each other,' she said, with soft tears in her eyes. Her heart bled for him in the troubles she divined, and she was one of the women who never lose their interest in the trials of youthful love. Yet, sympathetic as she was, she smiled too as she went upstairs. He thought this would last for ever—that he would never change his mind, nor suffer a new affection to steal into his heart. She smiled a little, and shook her head all by herself. How short-lived were their nevers and forevers! She went up to the drawing-room, where she had spent so many quiet evenings, pleased to think that her boys were happy, though they were not with her; where she had thought of them at school, at college, in all the different places they had passed through, trying to follow them in her thoughts, anxiously wondering what they were doing, often pausing to breathe out a

brief, silent prayer for them in the midst of her knitting, or when she closed her book for a moment. This had become so habitual to her, that she would do it almost without thinking. 'Oh, bless my boys; keep them from evil!'—between how many sentences of how many books—in the pauses of how many conversations—woven through and through how many pieces of wool, had those simple supplications gone!

By-and-bye she heard the door close of the next house, the bell ring in her own, the familiar step on the stair, and the neighbour came in and took his usual place. They sat on each side of the fireplace, in which still glimmered a little fire, though the season was warm. It irked her that she could not continue with him the conversation she had been having with Edward; but till Oswald spoke what could she say? and they had plenty to talk about.

'I wonder,' he said, 'if it was a bad dream when I was sent away—not knowing why, or where to go?'

'Where were you going? I never wished it. How I should have missed you now! It is in trouble that we want our friends most.

Edward has been so good and kind. He says he will never leave me; that we must live together. And he thinks he will always think so —poor boy! I have not the heart to tell him that he will soon change.'

'Why should he change? He may search far enough before he will find such another home. If I were he, I would not change either. He is more to be trusted than Oswald.'

'Oh, you are mistaken. My boy is——'

'I am not saying ill of him. If I ever wish to do that, I will not come to his mother with it. But Oswald thinks more of himself. Where is he to-night? He has left you alone, to bear all your loneliness, to think over everything.'

'You know I never taught my children that they were to keep by me. I might have liked it, but I did not think it right. They are very, very good; but no one can upbraid me with keeping them at my apron-strings.'

'That is one thing I object to in women,' said Mr. Beresford. 'The most sensible are so sensitive about those wretched little things that people say. What does it matter what people say who know nothing? Do you think a club is so much better than your apron-strings, as

you call them? Why should you care for such vulgar reproach?'

'I don't know why; we are made so, I suppose; and if women are sensitive, you must know the best of men will talk about our apron-strings; when all we are thinking of is what is best for the children—trembling, perhaps, and wondering what is best—giving all our hearts to it—some careless fool will spoil all we are planning with his old joke about our apron-strings—or some wise man will do it. It is all the same. But, never mind; I have locked up all my tremblings in my own mind, and left them free.'

'And you have not repented? You have more confidence in them now than if you had been less brave. But I wish Oswald had stayed at home with you to-night.'

'Oh, you must not blame Oswald,' she cried, doubly anxious not to have her son blamed, and not to allow Cara's father to conceive any prejudice against him. 'It is in the evening he sees his friends; he is always ready when I want him—during the day. It would not be good for the boy to let him shut himself up. Indeed, it is my own doing,' said

Mrs. Meredith, smiling upon him, with one of those serene and confident lies which the sternest moralist cannot condemn.

Mr. Beresford shook his head a little; but he could not undeceive the mother about her son, any more than she could confess how well she was aware of all Oswald's selfishnesses. They were selfishnesses, to be sure; or, at least, the outside world would naturally call them so. To her the boy's conduct bore a different appearance. He thought of himself—this was how she explained it. And how natural that was for anyone so watched over and cared for as he had been! Was it not, indeed, her fault, who had always supplied every want, satisfied every wish she knew of, and trained him, so to speak, to have everything his own way, and to think that every other way should yield to his? It was *her* fault; and as he grew older, and his mind enlarged, he would grow out of it. This, though with an uneasy twinge now and then, Mrs. Meredith believed, and though as clear-sighted as anyone to her boy's faults, thought less hardly, and perhaps more truly, of them than strangers did. But there was a little pause after this, and a sense in her

mind that she had not convinced this critic, who considered himself more clear-sighted than Oswald's mother, and internally half pitied, half smiled at her blindness. If critics in general only knew! for who is so sharp-sighted to all these imperfections as the parent who thus endeavours to convince them of the excellence of a child!

'Edward gives up India, then?' said Mr. Beresford. 'I do not wonder; but it is a fine career, and with his connections and antecedents——'

Mrs. Meredith gave a little shiver. 'Do you think he should still go?' she asked, anxiously. 'Indeed, I have not persuaded him. I have held my tongue. And he never liked the idea. He did it for duty only. But he does not mean to sink into idleness—he will work here.'

'At what will he work? The Bar? Every young man I ever meet is going to the Bar. There will soon be nobody left to make the necessary mischief, and provide work for them. But if a man wants a fine career, India is the place. You are going to stay in this house, notwithstanding your old adviser?'

'It does not matter to me,' she said. 'I can be as happy in one house as another. It is Edward who wishes it.'

'And then, if he sees some one he likes—and marries, and leaves you in the lurch? Boys who are independent so young are sure to marry young.'

She shook her head. 'Ah! how I wish it might be so! I would forgive him for leaving me—if only my boy was happy.'

Mr. Beresford got up, and walked about the room. It was nothing extraordinary, but only a way he had, and did not suggest to his friend any *accès* of excitement.

'You think marriage, then, so much the happiest condition?' he said.

Mrs. Meredith made a pause before she replied. 'Is that the question? How can I answer at my age, and in—the circumstances you know. We have not to settle abstract happiness. Feelings of that kind die out, and I am not the person to speak. I think a woman—at one time of life—loves her children more than ever she loved *man*.'

'Some women——'

'But it is not marrying in the abstract

My boy would be happy if he could get—what he wants. But he never will get that,' she added, with a sigh.

'What is so tragic about Edward's love affairs?' he asked, half laughing; 'is it ever so serious at two-and-twenty?'

'Ah, you laugh! but you would not have laughed, at his age, if you had seen some one you were fond of secured by—another—who was not half so true a lover perhaps; or, at least, you thought so.'

'No,' he said, growing grave. 'That was different, certainly.' And the mind of the man travelled suddenly off, like a flash of lightning, back to the flowery land of youth, that lay so far behind. The mind of the woman took no such journey. Her love had ended, not in the anguish of a death parting, but in estrangement, and coldness, and indifference. She remained where she was, thinking only, with a sigh, how willingly she would give a bit of her life, if she could—a bit of her very heart—to get happiness for her boy; yet believing that to make one happy would be to ruin the other, and standing helpless between the two. This was the only complication in her mind. But in

this the complications were many. Why did she say this, and send him back to the days of young romance and passion? just when his mind was full of the calmer affections and expedients of middle age, and the question whether—to secure such a tender companion as herself, whom he loved in a way, and whose absence impoverished life beyond bearing—he should endeavour to return into the traditions of the other love which was past for him as for her. Was it her friendly, gentle hand, so unconscious of what he was meditating, that put him thus back at a touch into the old enchanted world, and showed him so plainly the angel at the gates of that faded, unfading Paradise; an angel, not with any flaming sword, but with the stronger bar of soft uplifted hands? Impossible! So it was—and yet what else could be?

CHAPTER XXXV.

ROGER'S FATE.

ROGER BURCHELL had made two unsuccessful visits to the Square—the first absolutely painful, the second disappointing. On both occasions he had failed to see Cara, except surrounded by strangers, who were nothing, and indeed less than nothing to him; and both times he had gone away resolute that nothing should induce him to tempt fate again, and come back. But a young man who is in love persuades himself with difficulty that fate is against him. It seems so unlikely and incredible that such a thing should be; and short of a distinct and unmistakable sentence, hope revives after the shock of a mere repulse has a little worn off. And then Roger had heard that Cara was coming back to the Hill, and his heart had risen. When she was there again, within his reach, without 'these fellows' by, who had troubled

him, Cara, he flattered himself, would be to him as she used to be; and, distance lending enchantment to his vision, it appeared to him that she had been much kinder in those days than she ever really was, and that she must have understood him, and had seriously inclined to hear what he had to say. Soon he managed to persuade himself that Cara had never been cold, never had been anything but sweet and encouraging, and that it was only her surroundings which had led her far away from him, and forced the attention which she would have much more willingly bestowed upon himself, the companion of her youth. This idea brought a rush of tender feeling with it, and resolution not to be discouraged—never to take an answer again but from Cara herself. How likely that she might have wondered too why he did not take the initiative, why he did not insist upon speaking to her, and getting her own plain answer! From this to the thought that Cara was looking out for him every Sunday—wondering, disappointed, and alarmed that he did not come—was but a step; and then Roger made up his mind to go again, to insist on seeing her, and *to ask her*—simply to ask her, neither more nor

less—for there was very little time to lose. In the autumn he was going to India; already his importance had risen with all belonging to him. Up to this moment he had been only one of the boys, more or less, wasting money, and limiting the advantages of the others; but in autumn he would have an income of his own, and would be independent. The sense of importance went to his head a little. Had he met the Queen, I think that he would have expected her Majesty to know that he was going out to India in October. It was not that he was vain of himself or his prospects; but a man *with an income* is very different from a man without that possession. This is a fact which no one can doubt. It was late in April when he came to the Square for the third time, and so fine a day that everybody had gone out, except Cara, who was not well. When he was ushered into the drawing-room, he found her seated in an easy chair, with a shawl round her. Though it was very sunshiny outside, it was rather cold indoors. Miss Cherry, who stood by with her bonnet on, and her prayer-book in her hand, had just ordered the fire to be lighted, and Cara, with her cold, had crept close to it. Miss Cherry was going to the afternoon service.

'I shall not be long, my darling. You will not miss me,' she was saying, 'though I don't like to leave you on my last day.'

'Don't say it is the last day—and look, here is Roger to keep me company,' said Cara. 'He will sit with me while you are away.'

How glad he was, and how eager to promise!

Miss Cherry thought no more of poor Roger than if he had been a cabbage. She thought it might be an amusement to her niece to hear his little gossip about home; and though she saw through his eagerness, and suspected his object, yet she was not alarmed for Cara. Poor blind moth, coming to scorch his wings, she said to herself, with a half-amused pity. She did not pay very much attention to what he might have to suffer. Indeed, unless one has a special interest in the sufferer, such pangs always awake more or less amusement in the mature bosom; and, tender-hearted as Miss Cherry was, her mind was too full of other things to have much leisure for Roger, who was, she thought, anyhow too shy and awkward to commit himself. She had her mind full of a great many things. She was going away, now that her brother was

not going. But though she was anxious about her old aunt, and her home, which she had left for so long a period, she was anxious about Cara too, and did not know which of these opposing sentiments dragged her most strongly to one side or the other. And then she was angry with her brother—angry with him for staying, and angry that there had been an occasion for his going away. She went to afternoon church at that drowsiest hour, when, if the mind has any temptation to be dejected, or to be cross, it is crosser and more downcast than at any other moment, and attended a sleepy service in an old dingy chapel, one of the few which are still to be found remaining, in which a scattered congregation drowse in big pews, and something like a clerk still conducts the responses. Miss Cherry had been used to this kind of service all her life, and in her gentle obstinacy of conservatism clung to it, though it possessed very few attractions. She said her own prayers very devoutly, and did her best to join in the irregular chorus of the clerk; and she sat very erect in the high corner of the pew, and gave an undivided attention to the sermon, sternly commanding every stray thought out of the

way. But the effort was not so successful as the valour of the endeavour merited. Miss Cherry did not like, as she said, to have the good effect all dissipated by worldly talk after a good sermon (and was not every sermon good in intention at least—calculated, if we would only receive its directions, to do good to the very best of us?), and for this reason she was in the habit of avoiding all conversation on her way from church. But her resolution could not stand when she saw Mr. Maxwell coming towards her from the other side of the street. He had not been at church, she feared; but yet she had a great many things to ask him. She let him join her, though she liked to have her Sundays to herself.

'Yes, I hope Miss Charity is better,' he said. 'Her energy has come back to her, and if the summer would really come—— I hear of another change, which I can't say surprises me, but yet—your brother then is not going away?'

'No—why should he?' said Miss Cherry. It is one thing to find fault with one's brother, and quite another thing to hear him criticised by his friend.

'I thought so,' said Maxwell; 'he has no stamina, no firmness. I suppose, then, he has made up his mind?'

'To what, Mr. Maxwell? He has made up his mind not to go away.'

'And to all the consequences. Miss Cherry, you are not so simple as you wish people to think. He means, of course, to marry again. I had hoped he would have more sense—and better feeling.'

'I don't know why you should judge James so harshly,' said Miss Cherry, with spirit. 'Many people marry twice, of whom nothing is said—and when they do not, perhaps it is scarcely from good taste or feeling on their part.'

'You are kind,' said the doctor, growing red, and wondering within himself how the d—— could she know what he had been thinking of? Or was it merely a bow drawn at a venture, though the arrow whistled so close?

'Whatever wishes I might have,' he added, betraying himself, 'are nothing to the purpose. Your brother is in a very different position. He has a pretty, sweet daughter, grown up, at a companionable age, to make a home for him. What would he have? Such a man might cer-

tainly be content—instead of compelling people to rake up the past, and ask unpleasant questions.'

'Questions about James? I don't know what questions anyone could ask about my brother——'

'Well,' said Maxwell, somewhat hotly; 'I don't like doing anything in the dark, and you may tell Beresford, if you like, Miss Cherry, all that I have to say, that I shall oppose it. I shall certainly oppose it. Never should I have said a word, had he let things alone; but in this case, it will become my duty.'

'What will become your duty?' said Miss Cherry, aghast.

He looked at her wondering face, and his own countenance changed. 'It is not anything to bother you about,' he said. 'It is—a nothing—a matter between your brother and me.'

'What is it?' she said, growing anxious.

He had turned with her, and walked by her side in his vehemence. Now that she had taken fright, he stopped short.

'It is only that I have a patient to see,' he said; 'and I am glad to be able to make your mind quite easy about Miss Beresford. She is twice as strong as either you or I.'

And before she could say another word he had knocked at a door they were passing, and left her, taking off his hat in the most ordinary way. What did he mean? or was it nothing—some trifling quarrel he had got into with James? Miss Cherry walked the rest of the way home, alone indeed and undisturbed, but with a strange commotion in her mind. Was there something serious behind these vague threatenings, or was he only depressed and cross, like herself, from the troublesome influence of spring, and of this east-windy day?

Meanwhile, Roger sat down in front of Cara's fire, which was too warm, and made him uncomfortable—for he had been walking quickly, and he had no cold. He thought she looked pale, as she reclined in the big chair, with that fleecy white shawl round her, and he told her so frankly.

'It is living in town that has done it,' he said. 'When you come back to the country you will soon be all right.'

'It is only a cold,' said Cara. 'I don't know now when we shall go to the country. Aunt Cherry leaves us to-morrow.'

'But you are coming too? Yes, you are!

Miss Charity told my mother so. In a few days——'

'Ah, that was before papa changed his plans; he is not going abroad now—so I stay at home,' said Cara.

The young man started up from his seat in the sudden sting of his disappointment. He was too unsophisticated to be able to control his feelings. Still, he managed not to swear or rave, as Nature suggested. 'Good Heavens!' was the only audible exclamation he permitted himself, which, to be sure, is merely a pious ejaculation; though a lower 'Confound!' came under his breath—but this Cara was not supposed to hear.

'Home?' he said, coming back after a walk to the window, when he had partially subdued himself. 'I should have thought the Hill, where you have lived all your life, and where everybody cares for you, would have seemed more like *home* than the Square.'

'Do not be cross, Roger,' said Cara. 'Why should you be cross?' Something of the ease of conscious domination was in her treatment of him. She did not take the same high ground with Oswald or Edward; but this poor boy

was, so to speak, under her thumb, and, like most superior persons, she made an unkind use of her power, and treated her slave with levity. 'You look as if you meant to scold me. There is a little red here,' and she put up her hand to her own delicate cheek, to show the spot, 'which means temper; and it is not nice to show temper, Roger, especially with an old friend. I did not choose my home any more than my name. You might as well say you should have thought I would prefer to be May, rather than Cara.'

'It is you who are unkind,' said the poor young fellow. 'Oh, Cara, if you remember how we have played together, how long you have known me! and this is my last summer in England. In six months—less than six months —I shall be gone.'

'I am very sorry,' she said. 'But why should you get up and stamp about? That will not make things any better. Sit down and tell me about it. Poor Roger! are you really going away?'

Now, this was not the tone he wished or expected; for he was far from feeling himself to be poor Roger, because he was going away.

Offended dignity strove with anxious love in his mind, and he felt, with, perhaps, a vulgar yet very reasonable instinct, that his actual dignity and importance made the best foundation for his love.

'It is not so much to be regretted, Cara, except for one thing. I shall enter upon good pay at once. That is worth sacrificing something for; and I don't care so much, after all, for just leaving England. What does it matter where a fellow is, so long as he is happy? But it's about being happy that I want to speak to you.'

'I think it matters a great deal where one is,' said Cara; but she refrained, out of politeness to him, who had no choice in the matter, to sing the praises of home. 'I have been so used to people wandering about,' she said, apologetically; 'papa, you know; but I am glad that you don't mind; and, of course, to have money of your own will be very pleasant. I am afraid they will all feel it very much at the Rectory.'

'Oh, *they!* they don't care. It will be one out of the way. Ah, Cara, if I only could think *you* would be sorry.'

'Of course I shall be sorry, Roger,' she said, with gentle seriousness. 'There is no one I shall miss so much. I will think of you often in the woods, and when there are garden parties. As you are going, I am almost glad not to be there this year.'

'Ah, Cara! if you would but say a little more, how happy you might make me,' said the young man, self-deceived, with honest moisture in his eyes.

'Then I will say as much more as you like,' she said, bending forward towards him with a little soft colour rising in her cheeks. 'I shall think of you always on Sundays, and how glad we used to be when you came; and if you have time to write to me, I will always answer; and I will think of you at that prayer in the Litany for those who travel by land and water.'

'Something more yet — only one thing more!' cried poor Roger, getting down upon one knee somehow, and laying his hand on the arm of her chair. His eyes were quite full, his young face glowing: 'Say you love me ever so little, Cara! I have never thought of anyone in my life but you. Whenever I hoped or planned anything it was always for you. I never had a

penny: I never could show what I felt, anyhow: but now I shall be well enough off, and able to keep——'

'Hush!' said Cara, half frightened; 'don't look so anxious. I never knew you so restless before; one moment starting up and walking about, another down on your knees. Why should you go down on your knees to me? Of course I like you, Roger dear; have we not been like brother and sister?'

'No!' he said; 'and I don't want to be like brother and sister. I am so fond of you, I don't know what to say. Oh, Cara! don't be so quiet as if it didn't matter. I shall be well off, able to keep a wife.'

'A wife?—that is a new idea,' she said, bewildered; 'but you are too young, Roger.'

'Will you come with me, Cara?' he cried, passing over, scarcely hearing, in his emotion, the surprise yet indifference of this question. 'Oh, Cara! don't say no without thinking! I will wait if you like—say a year or two years. I shall not mind. I would rather wait fifty years for you than have anyone else, Cara. Only say you will come with me, or even to me, and I shall not mind.'

Cara sat quite upright in her chair. She threw her white shawl off in her excitement. '*Me?*' she said; 'me?' (That fine point of grammar often settles itself summarily in excitement, and on the wrong side.) 'You must be dreaming,' she said; 'or am I dreaming, or what has happened? I don't know what you mean.'

He stumbled up to his feet red as the glow of the fire which had scorched him, poor boy, as if his unrequited passion was not enough. 'If I am dreaming!' he said, in the sharp sting of his downfall, 'it is you who have made me dream.'

'I?' said Cara, in her surprise (the grammar coming right as the crisis got over); 'what have I done? I don't understand at all. I am not unkind. If there was anything I could do to please you, I would do it.'

'To please me, Cara?' he cried, sinking again into submission. 'To make me happy, that is what you can do, if you like. Don't say no all at once; think of it at least; the hardest-hearted might do that.'

'I am not hard-hearted,' she said. 'I begin to see what it is. We have both made a mistake, Roger. I never thought *this* was what

you were thinking; and you have deceived yourself, supposing I knew. I am very, very sorry. I will do anything—else——'

'I don't want anything else,' he said, sullenly. He turned his back upon her in the gloom and blackness of his disappointment. 'What else is there between young people like us?' he said, bitterly. 'My mother always says so, and she ought to know. I have heard often enough of girls leading men on—enticing them to make fools of themselves—and I see it is true now. But I never thought it of you, Cara. Whatever others did, I thought you were one by yourself, and nobody like you. But I see now you are just like the rest. What good does it do you to make a fellow unhappy—to break his heart?' Here poor Roger's voice faltered, the true feeling in him struggling against the vulgar fibre which extremity revealed. 'And all your smiling and looking sweet, was it all for nothing?' he said—'all meaning nothing! You would have done just the same for anybody else! What good does it do you? for there's nobody here to see how you have made a laughing-stock of me.'

'Have I made a laughing-stock of you? I

am more ready to cry than to laugh,' said Cara, indignantly, yet with quivering lip.

'I know what you will do,' he said; 'you will tell everybody—that is what you will do. Oh, it's a devilish thing in girls! I suppose they never *feel* themselves, and it pleases their vanity to make fools of us. You will go and tell those fellows, those Merediths, what a laugh you have had out of poor Roger. *Poor* Roger! but you shan't have your triumph, Miss Beresford,' said the poor lad, snatching up his hat. 'If you won't look at me, there are others who will. I am not so ridiculous as to be beneath the notice of some one else.'

He made a rush to the door, and Cara sat leaning forward a little, looking after him,—her blue eyes wide open, a look of astonishment, mingled with grief, on her face. She felt wounded and startled, but surprised most of all. *Roger!*—was it Roger who spoke so? When he got to the door he turned round and looked back upon her, his lips quivering, his whole frame trembling. Cara could scarcely bear the pitiful, despairing look in the lad's eyes.

'Oh, Roger!' she said; 'don't go away so. You can't imagine *I* ever laughed at you, or

made fun of you—I?—when you were always the kindest friend to me. Won't you say "good-bye" to me kindly? But never mind—I shall see you often before you go away.'

And then, while he still stood there irresolute, not knowing whether to dart away in the first wrathful impulse, or to come back and throw himself at her feet, all these possibilities were made an end of in a moment by Miss Cherry, who walked softly up the stairs and came in with her prayer-book still in her hand. Roger let go his hold of the door, which he had been grasping frantically, and smiled with a pale countenance as best he could to meet the new-comer, standing out into the room to let her pass. and doing all he could to look like any gentleman saying 'good-bye' at the end of a morning call. Cara drew the shawl again upon her shoulders, and wrapped herself closer and closer in it, as if that was all she was thinking of. If they had not been so elaborate in their precautions they might have deceived Miss Cherry, whose mind was taken up with her own thoughts. But they played their parts so much too well that her curiosity was aroused at once.

'Are you going, Roger? You must stop

first and have some tea. I daresay Cara had not the good sense to offer you some tea; but John will bring it directly when he knows I have come in. Is it really true, my dear Roger, that you are going away? I am sure I wish you may have every advantage and good fortune.'

She looked at him curiously, and he felt that she read him through and through. But he could not make any attempt to make-believe with Miss Cherry, whom he had known ever since he could remember. He muttered something, he could not tell what, made a hurried dash at Cara's hand, which he crushed so that her poor little fingers did not recover for half an hour; and then rushed out of the house. Miss Cherry turned to Cara with inquiring eyes. The girl had dropped back into her chair, and had almost disappeared in the fleecy folds of the shawl.

'What have you been doing to Roger?' she said. 'Poor boy! If I had known I would have warned him. Must there always be some mischief going on whenever there are two together? Oh, child! you ought to have let him see how it was; you should not have led him on!'

'Did I lead him on? What have I done? He said so too,' cried poor Cara, unable to restrain her tears. She cried so that Miss Cherry was alarmed, and from scolding took to petting her, afraid of the effect she had herself produced.

'It's only a way of speaking,' she said. 'No, my darling, I know you did not. If he said so, he was very unkind. Do not think of it any more.'

But this is always so much easier to say than to do.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BETWEEN THE TWO.

OSWALD'S spirits very soon recovered the shock of his father's death. He was as light-hearted as ever after that day when he had visited little Emmy at the hospital. Perhaps the satisfaction of having done a good action was in his mind, for he was permitted to send Emmy to the sea-side to the abode of another sisterhood there. Agnes undertook after all to make the proposal for him, which was graciously accepted, though she herself received another admonition from the Superior. Sister Mary Jane appointed a meeting with the other culprit who had made this charitable offer. As usual, he was not supposed to be at all in fault. He was allowed to enter the sacred convent gates, and wait in St. Elizabeth (for so the Superior's room was entitled) till Sister Mary Jane made her appearance, who made all the arrangements, and took

his money with much gracious condescension, but said nothing about his ambassadress. Neither did he say anything, though he looked up eagerly every time the door opened, and made furtive investigations, as well as he could, through the long bare passages, where all sorts of instruction were going on. When he opened (as he had no right to do) one of the doors he passed, he found it to be full of infants, who turned round *en masse* to his great terror, and saluted him with a simultaneous bob. They knew their manners if he did not. But nowhere could he see Agnes, and not a word about her did these unfeeling Sisters utter. To tell truth, they both waited for each other. Sister Mary Jane had little doubt that his real mission at the 'House' was to find out all he could from her, whereas he on his part had a lively anticipation of being called to task for following and talking to the governess. Oswald had something of the feeling of a schoolboy who has escaped when he found that no explanation was asked from him, and this was the only reason he gave to himself for not making those inquiries into Agnes Burchell's family which he felt it was now really necessary to make. But

why immediately? Let him make a little more ground with her first, and establish his own position. It charmed him a great deal more to think of winning her in this irregular way than to plan the proper formal approach to her parents, and application for their consent. To go and hunt up an unknown family and introduce himself to them in cold blood, and ask them, 'Will you give me your daughter?' was quite alarming to him. He put it off, as it is so easy to do. Certainly it would be his duty to do it, one time or other, if his suit prospered, and he was not much afraid of the non-success of his suit. But to go to them once for all, and inform them of his engagement with their daughter, would, he thought, be a less difficult matter—and all the delightful romance of the strange wooing would be lost should he adopt the other plan. He felt that he had got off when the door of the House closed upon him without any questioning from Sister Mary Jane; but on her side the feeling was different. She was disappointed. She had guessed how things were going, though not that they had gone nearly so far, and she had been convinced that the young stranger's anxiety to see her arose from his

honourable desire to set everything on a proper footing. The reader will perceive that Sister Mary Jane was too simple and too credulous. She was half vexed at the idea of losing the girl whom she had grown fond of, and half glad that Agnes had found a new life more suited to her than the routine of the House, for Agnes, it was evident, had no 'vocation,' and she did not doubt for a moment what Mr. Oswald Meredith's real object was. She had made up her mind to allow herself to be sounded, to yield forth scraps of information diplomatically, and finally to divulge everything there was to tell, and set the eager lover off to the rectory at the foot of the hill. But Sister Mary Jane was much dismayed to be asked no questions at all on the subject. She could not understand it, and all the disagreeable stories she had ever heard of the wolves that haunt the neighbourhood of a fold came into her mind and filled her with dismay. Instead of being honourable and high-minded, as she had taken it for granted he must be, was he designing and deceiving, according to the ideal of men who used to appear in all the novels? Up to this moment Sister Mary Jane had felt disposed to laugh at the Lothario

of fiction. Was this that mythical personage in his improper person? The result of the interview on her side was that she reproved poor Agnes gently for a few days, and declined to allow her to go anywhere, and would not make any reference whatever to little Emmy's going to the seaside. Yes, she was to go. Oh, certainly, everything was arranged; but not a word about Emmy's friend, whose liberality procured her this change. Agnes felt her heart sink. She had expected at least to be questioned about the young stranger who must, she felt convinced, have asked questions about her, and the silence was hard to bear. Once more, indeed, she was permitted to go out to see Emmy before she went away; but the lay-sister, the porteress, was sent with her on some pretext or other. Thus it happened that when Oswald appeared as usual, he found himself confronted by a respectable visage of forty under the poke-bonnet which he had supposed to enshrine that Perugino countenance to which he had addressed so many uncompleted verses. To be sure, the Perugino face was close by, but the dragon kept so near that nothing could be said. Oswald talked a little about Emmy loudly, by way of

deceiving the respectable attendant. Then he ventured upon a few hurried words in a lower tone. 'Is this an expedient of the Sisters?' he said, hastily. 'Am I never to speak to you again? Do they think they can send me away like this, and get the better of me? Never! You need not think so. You may send me away, but no one else shall.'

'Mr. Meredith, for heaven's sake——'

'I am taking care; but you don't mean to cast me off, Agnes?'

She gave him a sudden look. Her face was full of emotion. Fright, melancholy, wistfulness, inquiring wonder, were in her eyes. What did he mean? Was he as true, as reverent, as real in his love, as he had said? He could not have realised in his confident happiness and ability to do everything he wished the sense of impotent dejected wondering, and the indignation with herself, for thinking about it so, which were in Agnes's mind. But something in her eyes touched and stopped him in his eager effort to continue this undertone of conversation, to elude the scrutiny of her companion. 'Good-bye,' she said, with a slight wave of her hand, hurrying on. Oswald

was overcome in spite of himself. He fell behind instinctively, and watched her moving quickly along the street with the other black shadow by her in the sunshine. For the moment he ceased to think of himself and thought of her. Had it been for her comfort that he had crossed her path? It had been the most delightful new existence and pursuit to him—but to her? Oswald could not have imagined the waves of varied feeling, the secret storms that had gone over Agnes in the quiet of the convent, on account of those meetings and conversations; but he did consciously pause and ask himself whether this which had been so pleasant to him had been equally pleasant to her. It was but a momentary pause. Then he went after her a little more slowly, not unselfish enough, even in his new care for her, not to be rather anxious that Agnes should be aware that he was there. And, who knows? perhaps it was more consolatory for her when she half turned round, standing at the door of the House waiting for admittance, to see him pass taking off his hat reverentially, and looking at her with eyes half reproachful and tender, than it would have been had he accepted the

repulse she had given him, and put force upon himself and stayed absolutely away. He had no intention of staying away. He meant to continue his pursuit of her—to waylay her, to lose no possibility of getting near her. He was pertinacious, obstinate, determined, even though it annoyed her. Did it annoy her? or was there some secret pleasure in the warm glow that came over her at sight of him? She hurried in, and swore to herself not to think of this troublesome interruption of her quiet life any more. It was over. Emmy was removed, and there was an end of it. She would think of it no more; and with this determination Agnes hastened to the girls in St. Cecilia, and never left off thinking of it till weariness and youth together, making light of all those simple thorns in her pillow, plunged her into softest sleep.

Oswald went to Cara to unburden his mind next day. He did not quite know what his next step was to be. 'I think it is all right,' he said. 'You should have seen the look she gave me. She would not have given me a look like that if she had not liked me. It set me wondering whether she was as happy as—

such a creature as she is ought to be. Would they scold her badly because I followed her? You know what women do—would they be hard upon her? But why? If I insisted upon being there it was not her fault.'

'They would say it was her fault. They would say that if she had refused to speak to you you would not have come back.'

'But I should. I am not so easily discouraged. Oh, yes, perhaps if she had looked as if she hated me; but, then,' said Oswald, with complacence, 'she did not do that.'

'Don't be so vain,' said Cara, provoked. 'Oh, I *hate* you when you look vain. It makes you look silly too. If she saw you with that imbecile look on your face she would never take the trouble of thinking of you again.'

'Oh, wouldn't she?' said Oswald, looking more vain than ever. 'Because you are insensible, that is not to say that other people are. Of course I should pull up if I did not mean anything. But I do mean a great deal. I never saw anyone like her. I told you she was like a Perugino—and you should hear her talk. She is thrown away there, Cara. I am sure she never was meant to be shut up in

such a place, teaching a set of little wretches. I told her so. I told her a wife was better than a Sister.'

'Are you so very sure of that?' cried Cara; for what she called the imbecile look of vanity on Oswald's handsome face had irritated her. 'Would it be so very noble to be your wife, Oswald? Now tell me. You would like her to look up to you, and think you very grand and clever. You would read your poetry to her. You would like her to order you a very nice dinner——'

'Ye-es,' said Oswald, 'but if she smiled at me sweetly I should forgive her the dinner; and she should do as she pleased; only I should like her, of course, to please me.'

'And you would take her to the Opera, and to parties—and give up your club, perhaps—and you would take a great deal of trouble in furnishing your house, and altogether enjoy yourself.'

'Very much indeed, I promise you,' said the young man, rubbing his hands.

'And now she is not enjoying herself at all,' said Cara; 'working very hard among the poor children, going to visit sick people in the hospi-

tal. Oh, yes, there would be a difference! The wife would be much the most comfortable.'

'I don't like girls to be satirical,' said Oswald. 'It puts them out of harmony, out of drawing. Now *she* said something like that. She asked me in her pretty way if it would be better to make one man happy than to serve a great number of people, and take care of those that had nobody to take care of them. That was what she said; but she did not laugh, nor put on a satirical tone.'

'That shows only that she is better than I am,' said Cara, slightly angry still; 'but not that I am wrong. Your wife! it might be nice enough. I can't tell; but it would not be a great life—a life for others, like what, perhaps, she is trying for now.'

'You are complimentary, Cara,' said Oswald, half offended. 'After all, I don't think it would be such a very bad business. I shall take good care of my wife, never fear. She *shall* enjoy herself. Don't you know,' he added with a laugh, 'that everybody thinks you and I are going to make it up between us?'

Cara turned away. 'You ought not to let anyone think so,' she said.

'What harm does it do? It amuses everybody, keeping them on the stretch for news. They think we are actually engaged. The times that Edward has tried to get it out of me—all particulars—and my mother too. It is far too good a joke not to keep it up.'

'But, Oswald, I don't like it. It is not right.'

'Oh, don't be so particular, Cara. I shall believe you are going to be an old maid, like Aunt Cherry, if you are so precise. Why, what possible harm can it do? It is only keeping them on the rack of curiosity while we are laughing in our sleeves. Besides, after all, Cara *mia*, it is just a chance, you know, that it did not come to pass. If it had not been for *her*, and that she turned up just when she did——'

'I am much obliged to you, Oswald. You think, then, that it all depends upon you, and that the moment it pleased you to throw your handkerchief——'

'Do not be absurd, my dear child. You know I am very fond of you,' said Oswald, with such a softening in his voice, and so kind a look in his eyes, that Cara was quite dis-

armed. He put his hand lightly upon her waist as a brother might have done. 'We have known each other all our lives—we shall know each other all the rest of our lives. I tell you everything—you are my little conscience keeper, my adviser. I don't know what I should do without you,' he said; and, being of a caressing disposition, Oswald bent down suddenly, and kissed the soft cheek which was lifted towards him. There were two doors to the room—the one most generally used was in its second division, the back drawing-room; but another door opened directly out upon the staircase, and the two were standing, as it happened, directly in front of this. By what chance it happened that Miss Cherry chose this door to come in by, and suddenly, softly threw it open at this particular moment, will never be known. There is something in such a salutation, especially when at all ambiguous in its character, which seems to stir up all kinds of malicious influences for its betrayal. The sudden action of Miss Cherry in opening this door revealed the little incident not only to her but to Edward, who was coming up the stair. Cara rushed to the other end of the room, her face scorching with

shame; but Oswald, more used to the situation, stood his ground, and laughed. 'Ah, Aunt Cherry, are you really going?' he said, holding out his hand to her, while Edward stalked into the room like a ghost. Of all the party, Oswald was the least discomposed. Indeed, it rather pleased him, his vanity and his sense of fun being both excited. He had a kind of notion that Edward was jealous, and this added to his mischievous enjoyment. Where was the harm?

'Yes, I am going away,' said Miss Cherry, 'and perhaps it is time—though I sometimes don't know whether I ought to go or stay,' she added, mournfully, with a glance at her niece. Cara had turned her back upon the company, and was in the other room arranging some music on the piano, with trembling fingers. She could not bear either reproach or laughter, for her shame was excessive, and out of all proportion to the magnitude of the offence, as was to be expected at her years.

'Oh, you must not be uneasy about Cara,' said Oswald, lightly. 'Cara will be well taken care of. We will all take care of her. I must go now, Cara. Good morning. I am going to

look after the business I have been telling you of. Why, there is nothing to make a bother about,' he said, in an undertone. 'Cara! crying! Why, what harm is done?'

'Oh, tell them, Oswald; if you have any pity for me, tell them!'

'Tell them what? There is nothing to tell. If they put foolish constructions on the simplest incident, it is not our fault. Good-bye; only look unconcerned as I do; there is no possible harm done.'

And with this he went away, shaking hands with Miss Cherry, who was very pale with agitation and disapproval. As for Edward, he gave her a very formal message from his mother about a drive which Cara was to take with her in the afternoon. He scarcely spoke to the girl herself, who indeed kept in the background and said nothing. Edward had grown quite pale: he bowed in a formal way, and spoke so stiffly that Miss Cherry was almost driven to self-assertion. 'Pray don't let Mrs. Meredith take trouble about Cara's drive,' she said, drawing herself up. 'Cara can get an airing very easily if this is troublesome.'

'What I said was that my mother would

call at four,' said the young man; and he bowed again and went away. With what a heavy heart he went downstairs, not seeing the pitiful look Cara stole at him as he went out, this time through the legitimate door, the neglect of which had caused all the mischief; no, not the neglect, but Oswald's dreadful wicked levity and her own (as it almost seemed) crime.

'I am going away,' said Miss Cherry with dignity. 'I will not ask you what you don't choose to tell me, Cara. I have seen enough for myself; but I can't help saying that I go with a heavy heart. Your father and you have both gone out of my reach. It is not for me to blame you. I am old-fashioned, and prefer old ways, and perhaps it is you who know best.'

'Oh, Aunt Cherry,' said the girl, in a passion of tears. 'What can I say to you? You are mistaken, indeed you are mistaken. I am not concealing anything.'

'We will not speak of it, my dear,' said Miss Cherry with trembling lips. 'You are out of my reach, both your father and you. Oh, when I think how things used to be! What a good child you were—so true, so transparent! and now I don't seem to know what truth is—

everything is muddled up. Oh, I wonder if it is our fault! They say that to have a mother is everything; but I thought I had tried to be like a mother,' cried Miss Cherry, giving way to the inevitable tears.

'I am not false,' said Cara, putting her arms round her. 'Oh, Aunt Cherry, believe me. I did not know what he was doing to do. It was to thank me, because he had been asking—my advice——'

'*Your* advice! Ah, you will be fine guides to each other, if this is how you treat your best friends,' said Miss Cherry. But she yielded a little to the girl's caressing, and dried her eyes. 'I am going away with a heavy heart,' she added, after this partial making up, shaking her head sorrowfully. 'I don't know what it is all coming to. *He* is never at home—always *there*: —and you——. In my time we thought of what was right, not only what we liked best; but they tell us in all the books that the world is getting wiser, and knows better every day. I only hope you will find it so. Oh, Cara,' said Miss Cherry, 'it is thought a mean thing to say that honesty is the best policy, though it was the fashion once; but it is. I don't mean to

say that is the highest way of looking at it; but still it is so. For one vexation you may have by speaking the truth, you will find a dozen from not speaking it. I wish you would think of this. But I will not say any more.'

'I am not a liar,' said Cara, with a wild indignation in her heart which was beyond words; and she refused to speak again, and saw her aunt off with a throbbing heart, but neither tears nor words beyond what were absolutely needful; never had she parted with anyone in this way before. She came in and shut herself up in her room, directing them to say that she was ill, and could not drive when Mrs. Meredith came for her. Honesty the best policy! What breaking up of heaven and earth was it that placed her amid all these shadows and falsities, she whose spirit revolted from everything that was even doubtful? She lay down upon her little bed, and cried herself, not to sleep, but into the quiet of exhaustion. Aunt Cherry, who had been like her mother to her, had gone away wounded and estranged. Edward—what a countenance his had been as he turned and went out of the room! And Oswald, who had dragged her into this false

position and would not clear her, laughed! Cara hid her eyes from the light in one of those outbursts of youthful despair, which are more intolerable than heavier sorrows. Such pangs have before now driven young souls to desperation. She was hemmed in, and did not know what to do. And where in all the world was she to find a friend now?

While she was lying there in her despair, Oswald, walking along lightly, could scarcely keep himself from laughing aloud when he thought of this quaint misadventure. How absurd it was! He hoped Miss Cherry would not be too hard upon Cara—but he took the idea of the scolding she would receive with a certain complacence as well as amusement. It was as good as a play; Miss Cherry's look of horror, the blanched face of the virtuous Edward, and poor little Cara's furious blush and overwhelming shame. What an innocent child it must be to feel such a trifle so deeply! But they were all rather tiresome people with their punctilios, Oswald felt, and the sooner he had emancipated himself, and settled independently, the better. Thanks to that sensible old governor, who, after

all, could not have chosen a better moment to die in, there was no need for waiting, and nobody had any power to raise difficulties in respect to money. No, he could please himself; he could do what he liked without interference from anyone, and he would do it. He would win his little wife by his spear and his bow, without intervention of the old fogeys who spoil sport; and when the romance had been exhausted they would all live happy ever after like a fairy tale. As for any harm to be done in the meantime, any clouding of other lives, he puffed that into the air with a 'Pshaw, nonsense!' as he would have puffed away the smoke of his cigar.

But it surprised him when he returned home to find his mother in tears over Edward's resolution, after all, to carry out his original plan and go out to India. Mrs. Meredith was broken-hearted over this change. 'I thought it was all settled. Oh, Oswald, there are but two of you. How can I bear to part with one of my boys?' she said.

'Well, mother, but you had made up your mind to it; and, to tell the truth, it is a shame

to sacrifice such prospects as his,' said the elder son, with exemplary wisdom. 'I am very sorry, since you take it so to heart; but otherwise one can't deny it's the best thing he could do.'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CRISIS APPROACHING.

WHILE Oswald went about the streets so lightly, and thought so pleasantly of his prospects, another mind, still more agitated than that of Cara, was turning over and over all he had done for the last five or six weeks, and all that he might be about to do in the future. Agnes in her convent, with all her routine of duties—with the little tinkling bell continually calling her to one thing or another, to matins or even-song, to 'meditation,' to this service or that, to choir practice, to dinner and tea and recreation—carried a tumult of fancies about with her, which no one, except perhaps Sister Mary Jane, guessed. Oswald would have stood aghast could he have seen into that little ocean of excited feeling, where the waves rose higher and higher as the hours went on, and sometimes a swelling tide almost swept the

thinker herself away—though indeed he would have been so unable to understand it that the inspection would probably have taught him little. How easily he took all this, which was so tremendous to her! and that not only because of the difference between man and woman, but because of the fundamental difference in temperament, which was greater still. Agnes had known but little that was lovely or pleasant in her life. Her rectory-home was neither; her father and mother and brothers and sisters were all vulgar and commonplace, struggling for existence, and for such privileges as it contained, one against another, and against the world, each grumbling at the indulgences the other managed to secure. The parish and its poor—and its rich, who were not much more attractive—had been all the world she had known; and the only beings who had crossed her horizon, who were not struggling like her own people, in the sordid race of existence, to get something, whatever it might be, were the Sisters in the House, and such a gentle retired person as Miss Cherry, who was not fighting for anything, who was ready to yield to anyone, and whose

mild existence was evidently not pervaded by that constant recollection of self which filled up all the life of the others. This was what had brought the visionary girl into the House, which was sordid, too, in its details, though not in its spirit. Then there had been suddenly presented to her, just as she settled down to the work of the House, an image of something new, something more spontaneous, more easy in generosity, more noble in liberality than anything she had ever encountered. What did it matter that this type of nobleness was a handsome young man? Visionary Agnes, in the daring of her youth, saw no harm, but rather a beautiful fitness, in the fact that this revelation of the ideal should have all that was best in external as well as in more important things. He had stopped short—no doubt with all the brilliant world, which she did not know, waiting for him, arrested till he should rejoin it—to carry the wounded child to the hospital. He had left those mysterious glories of life, day after day and week after week, to go and ask for little Emmy. How wonderful this was! The devotion of Sister Mary Jane, the loving-kindness of Miss Cherry, faded before such an

example; for they had not the world at their feet as this young paladin evidently had.

This was how the first chapter of the story came about. It opened her eyes (Agnes thought) to nobleness undreamed of, and for the first few weeks the universe itself had grown more bright to her. Could it be possible, then, that in 'the world' itself, which the Sisters had abjured—in that splendid glorious 'society' which even ascetic books spoke of as something too full of entrancements and seductions to be resisted by any but the most heroic, there were still opportunities of living the highest unselfish life, to the glory of God and the comfort of man? When Agnes found that this ideal hero of hers had thoughts less exalted in his bosom—that so small a motive as the wish to see herself and talk to her, had something to do with his devotion to the orphan, her visionary mind received a shock. Probably, had Oswald's enthusiasm been for another, she would have been permanently disquieted by the discovery; but there is something strangely conciliatory in the fact that it is one's self who is admired and followed. Such trivial emotions

detract from the perfection of an ideal character; but still it is a much more easy thing to forgive your own lover than anyone else's. And the more he sought her, the more Agnes's heart, in spite of herself, inclined towards the man who could be thus moved. The ideal stole away, but so insensibly, in rose-coloured clouds, that she had not discovered the departure of her first admiration and wonder before something else stole in. It was not all goodness, nobleness, Christian charity, perhaps, that moved him; but what was it? Love, which in its way is divine too. Only after this altogether new influence had made itself felt did doubts appear, making a chaos in her mind. Were his sentiments as true as she had first thought? Was it right to counterfeit goodness, even in the name of love? Was not, after all, the life of the Sisters, the life of sacrifice, more noble than the other smiling life, of which he was the emblem? Was it not a mean thing to go back from that, and all one's high thoughts of it, to the common romance of a story-book? Might not this romance lead back again to those vulgar beaten paths out of which Agnes had supposed herself

to have escaped? And, ah! was it true after all? this was the refrain which kept coming back. Was it love and not levity? Was he seeking her seriously, in honour and truth; or was it possible that he was not noble at all, seeking her only for his own amusement? These thoughts shook Agnes to the bottom of her soul. They were like convulsions passing over her, tearing her spirit asunder. She went on with her work and all her religious exercises, and nobody found out how curiously unaware of what she was doing the girl was; living in a dream, performing mechanically all outside functions. Who does know, of those who are most near to us, what is going on in our minds? And not a calm Sister, not a little orphan in the House, would have been more incapable of comprehending, than was Oswald—to whom it would have seemed impossible—that anything in the world could produce so much emotion. Not only was it incomprehensible to him, but he could not even have found it out; and that his conduct should move either Agnes or Cara to this passionate suffering was an idea out of his grasp altogether. He would have been astounded, and more than astounded, had he

been able to see into these two strange phases of unknown existence, which he could not have realised; but yet he was interested as warmly as his nature permitted. He was 'in love;' he was ready to do a great deal to secure to himself the girl he loved. He was ready to proceed to the most unmistakable conclusions, to commit himself, to blazon his love to the eyes of day. Perhaps even the sense that it was in his power to do this, without waiting for a key-note from anyone else, had something to do with his perfect calm.

After this, however, the departure of Emmy brought a new phase to the strange wooing. There was no reason now why Agnes should go out alone; and watchful Sister Mary Jane, who was not satisfied with the shape the affair was taking, exercised an undisclosed surveillance over her young disciple. Things 'of the world,' like love and marriage, are out of the way of professed Sisters, Anglican or otherwise; but Sister Mary Jane had long recognised that Agnes Burchell had not a 'vocation,' and she was a woman, though she was a Sister, and had a soft spot in her heart which would have made her not inexorable to an incipient

romance. But why didn't he ask me about her friends? Sister Mary Jane said to herself. This seemed to her the test by which Oswald was to be known, and he had borne its application badly. Accordingly she watched over Agnes with double zeal, scarcely letting her out of her own sight. Someone was always ready to accompany her, when she went out; and even in the daily procession of the school-girls Agnes was never left alone. Here, however, Oswald was just as much in advance of everything Agnes could have thought of, as she was in advance of him in intensity of feeling. Nothing could exceed the cleverness, the patience, the pertinacity with which he baffled this attempt to shut him out from her. He would not be shut out; he haunted the neighbourhood like the air they breathed. The door seemed never to open but he was within reach, and Agnes never went to a window without seeing him. He passed the procession as it went demurely along the street; he was present somewhere when it came out, and when it went in; whenever Agnes was visible he was there. This might have been the most intolerable persecution,

enough to drive the victim crazy; but oddly enough it did not produce this effect. On the contrary, the sense of his constant presence near her, watching her perpetually, became like an intoxication to Agnes. She went about more and more like a person in a dream. To feel that when you lift your eyes you will most probably see a handsome face full of tender interest, anxiously waiting to secure your answering glance, and beautiful eyes full of love and eagerness watching you wherever you go, is not a thing which produces a very displeasing effect upon the mind of a girl. He could not approach her directly, had not a chance of speaking to her; but he never gave her time to forget him. The excitement of this pursuit delighted Oswald. It would have pleased him, even had he been much less truly touched by genuine love than he was, so far as that love can be considered genuine which springs from the sudden impression made by a fair face, and which has no foundation (to speak of) of personal knowledge or intimate acquaintance. As this, however, is what is called love by the great majority of the world, we need not apologise for Oswald's sentiment,

which was quite real and very engrossing. But it suited his character admirably to carry it on in this way. He enjoyed the sensation of foiling all precautions, and conveying by a glance, by the taking off of his hat, by his mere appearance, as much as other men do by chapters of more practical wooing. Agnes, after a week or two of such treatment, began to forget all her doubts, and to feel herself floated upwards into a visionary world, a kind of poetical paradise, in which the true knight worships and the fair lady responds at a saintly distance, infinitely above him yet beneath him, half angelic yet half parasitic, owing to his worship the greater part of her grandeur. She made a little feeble resistance, now and then, saying to herself that she did not know him, that he did not know her; asking herself how could this interchange of glances and the dozen words they had spoken to each other form any foundation for 'friendship,' which in the trouble of her mind was what she chose to call it? But such arguments do not count for much in the mind of a girl who feels and knows that all her comings and goings are marked by adoring eyes, that some instinct

guides her lover across her path whenever she leaves the shelter of her home, and that his love is great enough to encounter perpetual fatigue and trouble, and to make him give up his entire leisure to the chance of seeing her. If it ever gleamed across her mind that he might have found out an easier way by making love to her parents, and that this would at once have delivered them both from all possibility of misunderstanding, the idea faded as quickly as it entered, driven away by the next appearance of Oswald's reverential salutation, his eager glance, his apparently accidental presence. Sister Mary Jane very seldom went with the procession, and it was not etiquette to talk of what was seen or heard outside, and the Superior of the House was so occupied as to be beyond the possibility of gossip. So that she did not hear of the daily appearance of the intruder. Sister Catherine was short-sighted, and very much taken up with the demeanour of the girls. If she remarked him at all with her dim eyes, she took it for granted that he lived in the neighbourhood and was going to his occupation, whatever it might be, when the girls went out for

their walk. 'I don't keep up the practice of recognising the people I knew in the world,' she said on one occasion, seeing somebody taking off his hat. 'Never mind whether it was for you or for me; it is best to take no notice—unless, indeed, with real friends.' But she did not mention the incident to the Superior, and Agnes, though she trembled, said nothing. The daily encounter was like wine in her veins. It intoxicated her with a curious dreamy intoxication of the spirit. Her head was in the clouds as she walked, and she did not know which was real—the curious life which she passed like a dream in the House, or that glimpse of freedom and light and sunshine which she had abroad, light in which he stood enshrined like the young Saint Michael in the painted window. By degrees that moment of encounter became the principal fact in the day. Who was she to resist this fanciful, delicate worship? and Agnes did not know that it was to him no visionary reverential distant worship, but the most amusing and seductive pursuit in the world.

It was evident, however, that this could not go on indefinitely without coming to some

conclusion. A few weeks stole by; Oswald did not tire, and Agnes grew more and more self-absorbed. She struggled, but ineffectually, against the sweet, strange fascination which rapt her out of the vulgar world altogether, in which she still went on mechanically doing her duties, very good to the children, very submissive and sweet to the Sisters, caring for nothing so much as to sit still in a corner and muse and dream when her work was done. Agnes felt herself a very unsatisfactory person all these weeks. She was ashamed to think how little her heart was in her work, although she did it to all appearance more dutifully than ever. All her little disquiet was over. She bore the dulness of routine like an angel, because of this visionary refuge of dreams which she had; but with all this outward sweetness Agnes felt that in her early days in the House, when her heart rebelled at the details, but was warm as an enthusiast's in the spirit of the place, she was more true than now. Now she was patient, docile, gentle with everybody, and when she had an opportunity of quiet would stroll into the little rude chapel with its bare walls—for what; for prayer? She had gone

there to pray for strength many a time when her patience was nearly at an end before; but now what visions stole unwittingly yet too sweetly upon her dreamy soul, what words imagined or remembered kept echoing in her ears! Poor Agnes, how happy she was and how miserable! Good Sister Catherine, short-sighted and dull, wondered over the young teacher's growth in grace, and whispered to the Superior that a great work was going on, and that their young helper would soon devote herself, as they had done, and join them altogether in their work. But Sister Mary Jane, who was wise, shook her head. She saw something in the dreamer's eyes which did not mean devotion. And oh, how guilty poor Agnes felt when, stealing out of chapel where her prayers had so soon melted away into those musings, she encountered the blue eyes which Oswald had thought too beautiful not to be merciful as well! Agnes trembled daily to be asked, 'What are you thinking of?' What was she thinking of? how could she tell anyone —much less Sister Mary Jane? It was shameful, terrible, to carry such thoughts into such a place. How she had fallen off from the first

fervour, the early enthusiasm of self-devotion! to what was that devotion now turned aside? Alas! alas! But, all the same, in external matters the change was for the better. The more pious of the girls thought her a true Agnes, fit votary of the saint who bears the lamb. They hoped she would keep that gentle name and be Sister Agnes when she was professed.

Thus Agnes got an altogether fictitious reputation while Oswald carried on his wooing; and summer came, and the long evenings grew more and more akin to dreams. Oswald did what few men of his class would do for love or anything else—went without his dinner, evening after evening. In the hot days the girls had their walk later; and, as soon as he found this out, love and the excitement of pursuit and the determination to succeed, persuaded him, between them, to this sublime point of self-sacrifice. After a while he was rewarded. And this was how it came about.

It was June; the summer had expanded until the days were almost at their longest, and, as the season had all through been a very warm and bright one, everything was in its

perfection of summer beauty. Oswald had seen the school procession trip in one evening by the door of the House, leaving behind all the lovely glow of a summer sunset. He turned round and walked away towards that brilliant western blaze with a sigh; twilight was in his face, which the golden light caught aslant and glorified. It was getting on to the wistful moment of the day when the excitement of the sun's departure is over, and Nature, too, sighs in exhaustion and gentle sadness; and it was the wistful moment for the lover, his lady just disappeared out of sight, and the impossibility of following her, speaking to her, getting any point of connection with her, overwhelming his mind. Was this how it was always to be; never to get any further; never to do anything but wait and gaze and salute her as she passed; was this to be all? Rather indeed this for her, than anything with another! But yet the days were long, and it is dreary always to wait:

When there suddenly appeared against the blaze in the west a black poke-bonnet, the ugliest of its kind. He pricked up his ears and quickened his steps. How he could think it might be she whom he had just seen to dis-

appear at the convent door, I don't understand; but his heart began to beat and his steps quickened as if by magic. Nothing short, however, of a novel adaptation of the great Indian juggling trick could have brought Agnes there. She was, on the contrary, safe in the House, superintending the girls who were getting ready for tea, with the sweetest angelic smile upon her face. The girls were hot from their walk, tired and troublesome and noisy; but Agnes bore with them like a saint—did not hear them, indeed, having retired into her private chapel and place of musing. But if it was not Agnes, if indeed it was some one as unlike Agnes as could be conceived, Agnes herself could scarcely have been so desirable to meet. It was the old porteress of the House, the lay Sister who had several times accompanied her on her expeditions to the hospital. A sudden inspiration came to Oswald. There could be nothing improper in addressing her, a perfectly safe person to whom his interest in little Emmy could bear nothing but the most natural and genuine aspect. He hastened up to her with anxious looks and asked how the little patient

was, and if any news of her had been received at the House.

'Oh, bless you, sir, yes!' said the lay Sister; 'she's been very bad, but now she's better. She won't be a long liver, that child. She's very delicate, but come when it will the little lamb is prepared. She is the piousest child I ever came across.'

'Do you mean to say she is dying?' said Oswald, alarmed in spite of himself.

'Oh, no, sir! Some time, I make no doubt, but not now; but she has been that delicate—you could blow her away with a puff of wind. So she has never come back. Indeed, I hear the teacher of the third division, that's Miss Burchell—you've seen her—the one as always went to the hospital——'

'Oh, yes, I have seen her!'

'Delicate, too, sir. I'm not easy deceived, and I saw in a moment as she was not fit for the work.'

'Is she ill?' said Oswald, all tremulous and excited, feeling disposed to rush forthwith to the House without rhyme or reason, and carry her off.

'Oh, no, sir; not at all! But Sister Mary Jane, she's the Superior——'

'Yes, yes; I know.'

'She thinks that she'd be the better for a change, and so, as she wants to send some more children to the Sanatorium, she's made up her mind to send her, for she'd be a deal the better she says of a little sea air herself.'

'Ah!' said Oswald, '*she* who is going to the Sanatorium is Sister Mary Jane?'

'Not at all, sir, oh no, the one that is going is Miss Burchell. Sister Mary Jane is the Superior, and she thinks it will do her good and take off her thoughts.'

'Ah, I see,' said Oswald, gravely. 'When does Miss Burchell go? you might ask her from me to remember me to little Emmy; when does she go!'

'To-morrow, sir. I am sure, sir, you're very good to think so much about such a little thing as that; but she *is* a dear little thing. I have understood, sir, that it was you that paid for her going——'

'That is a trifle, Sister——'

'Oh, I am not called Sister,' said the por-

teress, blushing with pleasure, 'I am not a lady like the rest. I am only in the House to open the door and to do the chars; but if I was the Superior I could not be more interested for little Emmy. Bless you, sir, she is the piousest little thing! And thank you, sir, for your goodness to her; that child's prayers will bring down a blessing on you.'

'Amen!' said Oswald, himself feeling much more pious than usual. 'I want it badly enough——'

'And I'll tell Miss Burchell to give Emily your love——'

'On second thoughts,' said Oswald, astutely, 'it will be better not to say anything about it. The Sister Superior might not like a stranger to send messages.'

'That is very true,' said the lay Sister, perceiving all at once that she too might have come in for a rebuke; and after this she ran on into sundry communications about Sister Catherine who was newly arrived and not quite up to the work. 'For them that know such ladies as Sister Mary Jane and Miss Burchell is naturally particular,' said the porteress.

'Very naturally,' said Oswald, with fervour.

He asked her to put a sovereign for him into the poor-box at the chapel door, and then sent her off well pleased, while he turned back in great haste to prepare for his going. Here was his opportunity at last.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SUPREME MOMENT.

It was a beautiful morning in June when Agnes started from the House with her little charge, who was going to the Convent Sanatorium at Limpet Bay. She scarcely knew so soon as the porteress did, who had thus fortunately warned the eager lover—for Sister Mary Jane had thought it best to screen Agnes from all risks, and informed her only upon the day before the expedition.

'You want a little change; it will do you good,' the Sister Superior said, pinching the girl's pale cheek. 'I thought we should have had to send you home; but a little breath of sea air will do you good.'

'Oh, I do not require to be sent home!' Agnes said, with a sudden flush of fright. To go home was far from being what she desired. Indeed, she did not quite like to leave the

House and the girls' procession even for one day. The pale little girl who was her companion was excited and noisy with joy; but as she took her seat in a corner of a second-class carriage Agnes felt less exhilarated than depressed, though there was a curious jumble of feelings in her mind. The motion was pleasant, the fresh air—after the languid breezes of London—revived and refreshed the country-born girl. Ah! green fields still looked just so, the birds sang as of old, only there was something in the breeze and the sunshine and the birds which she never had known before—something—which suggested a want, a void, and yet a hope. She would not say to herself what that void was, but yet felt that it was strange, looking out from the window of the carriage, not to see one face which she always saw when she looked out. Very strange—and yet, when she reminded herself, so much more strange would it have been had she seen it. It was quite early when they started; the fresh morning lights, still so soft in their early brightness, caught the dews lying still here and there in the corners. The child prattled on for an hour or so, then got tired, and leaned her head

against Agnes, and went to sleep. Agnes was glad. It saved her from the necessity of answering, and allowed her to plunge into all the sweet enchantment of dreams. There is a time in most lives when one's own thoughts are more entertaining, more absorbing, than the highest fiction, and when poetry is nothing to the vague glory of musing which envelopes the young soul like an atmosphere of its own. This was what Agnes had come to now. She supposed she was thinking, but she was no more thinking than the pale child, whose soft little sickly cheek leant up against her shoulder with such confiding ease. The child slept, being sick and weakly; the girl dreamed, being young, and feeling the sweetness of life to her very finger-tips. There was nobody to disturb them, nothing but the wind of their rapid going, the rush of motion, the vision of green fields and trees flitting past, the clouds in the sky sailing over them. In such circumstances even a dusty railway journey grows poetical. The black poke bonnet and the conventual cloak did not make it less so, though, alas! they made those thoughts, when she suddenly woke up to a consciousness of them, very guilty and

dreadful to Agnes. But for this morning at least, once in a way, she had escaped from the duties of life, and the soft haze which crept over her seemed more allowable during this interval in which it was evident she could do nothing else. She had her duty with her in the shape of the little invalid by her side, to whom Providence had sent this soothing medicine of sleep: then was not Agnes free? Something as subduing as sleep itself, and more sweet than dreams, brought a film over her soft eyes. It was only a second-class carriage on a dusty railway, but one wonders if in any human paradise ever dreamt by poets there could be anything more sweet.

In the same train there was another traveller by no means sharing in this soft trance of enchantment. Oswald, you may be sure, was travelling first-class. His morning dress had all the easy perfection which belongs to an English gentleman's morning toilette; he was the very impersonation of that simple luxury which pleases our insular vanity, which costs the utmost possible with the least possible show. And he was delighted with his adventure, with his own cleverness in bringing this adventure

to so prosperous a point, with the chance of seeing Agnes and having her to himself; but anxious, and turning over a hundred plans in his mind as to how he was to manage it all.

Limpet Bay was a very small place on the banks of the Thames, just where the river becomes sea, and had to be reached by a branch from a junction whence trains only went at very awkward hours. This was why it had been necessary to start so early. The question was where and how he was to show himself, so as not to alarm too much the shy object of his pursuit, and at the same time to take full advantage of this propitious moment. Oswald's mind was busy with this subject all the way to the junction. He had no time for the dreams which wrapped Agnes in a delicious stillness of thought; he had to debate this important question with himself. If he showed at once, she might think it right to shut herself up in the Sanatorium until the time came for her return. Even if she did so he had still all the chances of the journey in his favour, but these were limited, and subject to interruption; whereas, if he kept concealed, who could doubt that Agnes would stray out upon the sands, or

to the little pier, or about the low rocks on the beach to taste the salt breezes coming strong and cheery over the sea? He resolved at last to deny himself, and trust to this after certainty, notwithstanding that the temptations to premature self-discovery were strong. Fortunately the carriages in which they were seated went through, and there was no change made at the junction, which must have betrayed him; and there he sat, his heart beating, his mind exhilarated and in lively action, pleased with himself and his plans and his prospects, as well as delighted with the thought of so soon meeting her. It was an emotion altogether different from that of Agnes—less poetical, less spiritual, less entrancing. He knew what he wanted, and would in all probability get it; but what she wanted was that vague infinite which no soul ever gets, in this universe at least. To him the moments when he should have met her, when he should have persuaded her into saying anything or everything that a shy maiden could say, when he should carry her off triumphantly and marry her, and make her his own, were all quite distinct, and better than this moment, when he held himself in leash—

waiting and impatient; but to her would any moment ever be equal to that hour of dreams? Thus they swept along, each alone, characteristically occupied, making progress, conscious or unconscious, out of the sweet preface and overture of existence into life.

It came about as Oswald had foreseen. The day was one of the loveliest days of early June, the foliage still fresh in its spring livery, the earth still downy in soft green of the springing corn and softer velvet of the grass; the daisies and buttercups, simplest of delights, were still a wonder to behold, the wild roses sweet on all the hedgerows, lighting up the country with delicate flushes of colour. Then as they neared the sea came the greyer greenness of the downs, soft undulations, yellow stretches of sand, surrounded by the blue glory of the salt water, broken and cheerful with white wavelets, not big enough to trouble anything save in elvish mischief, the nearest approach to laughter that is in nature. The red roofs of the village, the fishing-boats, even the half-built chaos of a Marine Parade, by means of which Limpet Bay meant to tempt visitors one day or other, were beautiful to Oswald as they approached, and

wove themselves like a picture into Agnes's fancies. Her little charge woke, and was clamorous with pleasure. Was that the sea? were those the sands where Emmy went to play? were these brown things rocks? Her questions were innumerable. A Sister of the same order, a mild-eyed woman, made half-beautiful by the close white cap and collar, which threw up the healthful tints of her face, met them, and conducted them to the Sanatorium, or Convalescent-home of the sisterhood, which rose, with its peaked roofs, in the semi-ecclesiastical cottage-Gothic which Anglicanism has appropriated to itself, a little apart from the village. Oswald, watching anxiously from his window, kept himself out of sight till the little party had gone with their boxes and baskets. He was the only first-class passenger who had come that day, or for many days, to Limpet Bay, and the population, so much as there was, received him with excitement. It seemed possible that he might be going to stay, and what a success for the place to have a gentleman—*a gentleman!*—so early in the year. Two or three loungers volunteered to show him the inn, others to carry his things, though he

had nothing to carry, others to guide him to the port. A *bourgeois* family might be more profitable in the long run, but it is not so exciting to the imagination as a gentleman—a real gentleman, generally supposed to be a creature to whom money is absolutely indifferent, and whose pockets are full for everybody's benefit. He shook them all off, however, and went through the village to the sands, where he sat down under a rock to wait. There was nobody there, not even little Emmy and her convalescent companions, nothing but a boat or two on the shore, a fisher-boy or so, half in half out of the water. And the little waves leaped and laughed and gurgled, and the big ones rolled softly in with their long hus—sh on the warm sands. Scenery there was none to speak of—a blue sea, a blue sky, the one flecked with wavelets, the other with cloudlets; a brownish-yellow slope of sand, a grey-green shoulder of velvety mossy down, a few low fantastic rocks, a rude brown-red fishing coble; yet with what a sense of beauty and pleasantness those nothings filled the mind! mere air and sunshine and summer sounds, and simplest life—nothing more.

Oswald sat and waited, not very patiently, behind the bit of rock. Sometimes he forgot himself for a moment, and mused almost like Agnes, but with thoughts more active. If he could but get her into one of those boats and take her out upon the blue silence of the sea, where no one could interfere with him, no one interrupt his love-tale, not even her own scruples! Now the decisive moment of his life (he said to himself) was at hand. Never again would he have such an opportunity—everything must be settled to-day. It was the last day of this sweet clandestine romance which pleased his fancy so much more than serious wooing. After this it would be necessary to descend to the precautions of ordinary life, to see her family, to ask the consent of her father and mother, to arrange horrible business, and fall into the groove like ordinary men. But to-day! was there not anything wild, adventurous, out of the usual jog-trot, that they could do to-day? Her dress was the chief thing that restrained Oswald. He could have carried off a girl in the habiliments of ordinary life, could have persuaded her into a boating expedition (he thought), in defiance of all the

conventional rules of society; but a girl in a convent dress, a girl in a close cap and poke bonnet! She only looked the fairer for that rim of solid white which made the warm tints of her complexion tell so powerfully; but the cap was a visible sign of separation from the world which daunted the boldness of the youth. Nevertheless the laughing brightness of the water and the tempting nearness of the boat made Oswald restless. He called the owner to him, who was stolidly lounging about, from time to time looking at his property, and hired it, then sent for a little basket of provisions from the inn, enough for luncheon. Was it possible that he might be able to beguile her to go out with him? He went back to his rock, and sat, with his heart beating, to wait.

Before long a little band of the small convalescents came trooping on to the sands. Oswald felt that he was lost if he was discovered by these small women, or at least by Emmy, who was among them, and he stole round to the other side of his rock, hiding himself till they passed on. There was a little donkey-chair, with two who were still invalids, tenderly driven along the smooth sands by the mild-

eyed Sister whom he had seen receiving Agnes at the railway. They went on, passing him to a further point, where shells and sea-weed were to be found; and the voices and laughter of the children sounded sweetly from that distance upon the fresh breeze from the sea. If they had been nearer he would not have found them so musical. Finally there appeared a solitary figure in black robes, intercepting the light. She was gazing at the sea, so that Oswald could not see her face. It seemed to him that he knew her step though it was noiseless; that no one could mistake her; but still it was not absolutely certain it was she. She came along slowly, her footsteps altogether undirected by her eyes, which were fixed on the sea. It was not the maiden meditation of the poet. Her eyes were with her heart, and that was far away. She had kept behind, happily, while the Sister took out her little band, and now came alone, moving softly over the long stretch of beach, now and then stopping to look at the sea. It was during one of these pauses that Oswald rose from his place of partial concealment, and went along the sands to meet her. His steps were inaudible upon that soft footing, and it

was impossible to say what influence it was which made Agnes turn round suddenly and meet him straight, face to face. The start she gave made every line of her figure, all shrouded in the black cloak, tremble. She uttered a little cry unawares, and put up her hands in alarm and wonder. You would have said he was the last person in the world whom she expected to see; and yet she had done nothing but think of him every step of the way as she came along; and the last person she wished to see—though even the thought of him, which accompanied her wherever she went, made the world a changed place to Agnes. But to be thinking of an individual whom you believe to be far off, and entirely separated from you, and then to turn round and see him at your elbow, is startling, even when the sentiment is less intense than that which was in the girl's mind.

'You are surprised to see me,' he said, hastening to her side.

'Yes,' she said; 'very much surprised.' Then trying to regain her composure, 'I did not know—it is a coincidence—this is such a very quiet place——'

'Very quiet, and how lovely! I have been

sitting under that rock (Agnes turned round to look at it) waiting for you.'

'Waiting—for me!'

'Why should I make believe,' said Oswald; 'or why should you wonder? What should I come here for but to see you? to watch over you at a distance, and—I confess it, though it may seem selfish—to speak to you when I could find an opportunity——'

'Indeed, indeed!' she said, clasping her hands, 'you ought not—you must not! I have said so before.'

'Do you think it likely,' said Oswald, with fine seriousness, 'that I should have followed you like your shadow for so long, and leave off all at once, without explanation, without reason? Agnes, here we are safe and quite out of the reach of interruption. Here you may listen to me without shocking—yourself, or anyone. Hear me first. The poorest beggar in the street you will give a hearing to, why not to me? Let me tell you everything. Let me ask you what I *must* ask—let me know my fate.'

'Mr. Meredith,' she said, speaking very low and quickly, 'these are not words to be used to me. I—I do not know you——'

'Not know me!' he repeated with ingenuous wonder.

'I mean—of course I have seen you a great many times. Of course I—but I ought not to know you,' she went on, with a little vehemence. 'I have—nothing to do with you.'

'How unkind, how unkind you are!'

This reproach silenced her. She gave him a hasty look, with a sudden, half-supplicating movement of her hands.

'When a man loves a woman,' said Oswald, with anxious art, 'they are almost always strangers to each other. Do you blame him if he takes every means to introduce himself, to try to get her to know him, to believe in him, to reply to him? You are not at home; not in circumstances to allow this. What could I do? I would have brought my mother; but I told you what happened to us, and the trouble my mother is in. And, besides, pardon me if I had a hope that you, who were not a common girl like others, would understand me, would let me speak without all the vulgar preliminaries——. We are not like two nobodies, two butterflies of whom no one knows any-

thing,' he said, with a vague flourish of trumpets.

Agnes made him no reply; she was without words. Indeed, she was a little overawed by this explanation—'not like two nobodies, of whom no one knows anything.' Who was he? what had he done to lift him to the rank of those whom other people knew?

'At all events,' he said, after a pause, 'will you not give me my chance now? We are here, with no one to say a word, nobody to interfere with us, no one to think we are doing wrong. Let me have my chance now. If you condemn me I promise to go away, I shall have no heart to trouble you longer,' he said, in a pathetic tone, which made poor Agnes tremble. Had she the heart to condemn him? Oh, how little he knew! She yielded, saying to herself that it was the shortest way; that anything else would be foolish; and gave her consent, without looking at him, with a grave little movement of her head. He led her to the rock where he had been sitting waiting for her, and where she now followed him without a word. How their hearts were beating, both of them, though all was so still! She sat down

on the smooth rock, he half kneeling on the sand by her side. The soft summer air surrounded them; the sea, dropping out of its morning smiles, fell into a hush of listening, and stilled everything about that the tale might not be disturbed. 'Hus—sh,' said the soft, long waves as the tide stole in. A few soft clouds flitted over the sun, softening his mid-day radiance: the hush of noon fell upon earth and sea. And there Agnes sat, throned in that momentary judgment-seat of her womanhood, with his fate, as he said, in her hands. The words had a deeper meaning than Oswald thought of. The fate of other lives hung on that decision—of her own more than of his. But neither of them thought of that. Would she accept him? it was incredible that she could refuse him. This was the real conviction in his heart; and yet he trembled too.

Neither of them knew how long they sat there, while Agnes on her throne listened—trembling, blushing, weeping, hiding soft gleams of sympathetic looks, keeping back kindred confessions that stole to her own lips. She heard the story of Oswald's love. It did not lose in the telling, and yet it was true.

Though his poetry was not of a very elevated kind, as the reader knows, it gave him a command of words, it gave him skill enough to know how that story should be told. He paused for no instant reply, but went through the record from beginning to end. Never had the girl heard such a tale. Romance, even in books, was little known to her; she had been brought up upon matters of fact; and lo, here was a romance of her own, poetry living and breathing, stealing the very heart out of Agnes's bosom. She resisted as long as she could, hiding her tears, hiding the quivering of her mouth, keeping her eyes down that no chance look might betray her, marshalling all her forces to do battle against this subtle influence. After all, those forces were not great; devotion to her work—but, alas, for weeks past the insidious foe had been undermining her walls, whispering of other duties more natural, more gracious, pointing out all the defects in that work to eyes which could not refuse to see them: regard for the prejudices of conventional life, the want of proper introduction, &c., a formidable horror to the girl's inexperienced mind, and yet with no real force in it, for had

not she, too, broken the bonds of society? Eventually the strength ebbed away from her as she listened. Last of all her routed forces took refuge in the last yet frailest citadel of all —her dress. It was that, too, that Oswald had thought of. In the absence of all real objections to this mutual understanding, this little barrier of *chiffons* erected itself. How could she in that garb of self-sacrifice choose personal happiness, her own way, and all the brightnesses instead of all the sadnesses of existence? This thought gave her a little temporary strength.

'Agnes,' he said, with agitation, 'those wretched children are coming back again. I must go away unless you will acknowledge and receive me. Agnes! think; can all this go for nothing, all this chapter in our lives? Can it end and be as if it had not been! Oh, look at me! Speak to me! Don't say no with your voice. I will not believe it. Let me see your face——'

She turned to him slowly, her mouth quivering, flashes of flying colour going and coming, her eyelids—which she could not lift —heavy with tears, every line in her face

moving and eloquent with feeling. 'What can I say?'—her voice was so low and hurried that he had to bend forward to hear her—'in this place, in this dress. Is it right? Oh, why should you ask me? What can I say——?'

'Look at me, Agnes!'

With an effort, as if she could not help it, she slowly lifted her eyes. There were two great tears in them, oceans of unspeakable meaning, veiling yet magnifying the truth below. One moment and then she covered her face with her hands. There was no more to say.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE HAND OF FATE.

THE afternoon was still, softer, brighter, warmer than the morning; the wind went down, and turned into the softest puff of a caressing breeze; the white caps of the waves melted away into a delicious ripple which crisped without agitating the broad blue sunny surface of the water. Overhead a few flitting specks of white cloud sailed softly by like motes upon the unfathomable blue in which one lost one's self when one looked up. What a day it was! and what a strange dream of happiness to be floating there, between one blue and the other, suspended in that liquid world of air between the two, with soft blessedness of motion, and delicious tinkle of sound, and caressing of the air and of the sun! It was not too warm nor too bright, nor too anything, for the two who were afloat upon that summer sea. Their boat

glided along as it pleased, with a little white sail to catch the little air that was blowing; and kind fortune watched over the voyage to see that no harm came—kind fortune, or some of the younger angels who watch over true lovers—for the captain of the little craft gave but small attention to the helm. Fortunately, the sea was broad, and they were out of the way of the many vessels issuing from the Thames, the sight of which as they floated downward, with white sails wooing the breeze, or even with fussy paddle-wheels or creaking screw which defied it, added, as far as sight could add, a certain additional charm to the blessedness of these two. They were like emblems of the race afloat upon that soft brightness at the edge of ocean, tempting the wind should it rise, tempting the waves should any storm-caprice seize them to toss the unwary dreamers into peril—but heeding nothing, taking the sweet calm and the delight of peaceful nature for granted, and making everything subsidiary to their happiness. Never had the young man known such a soft climax of happiness; never had the young girl received out of the stepdame hands of Life, so bare and

spare to her hitherto, anything at all resembling this hour. It was the first taste of the elixir and cordial which makes the fainting live, and transforms all heaven and earth to the young. Happiness! we can all live without it, and most of us manage to do so very fairly; but when it comes, what a change it makes! Agnes had never known that penetrating, exquisite touch from heaven, which transcends all vulgar things. Since she had been a child, happy without knowing why, the conditions of life had not been sweet to her—flat and dreary and dull, and without fellowship, had been most of those youthful days which are so much longer than days ever are afterwards. But now! the flat preface had surely been designed by heaven on purpose to throw up into fuller loveliness this day of days. Had anyone ever been so happy before? with the sun and the sea, and the soft air, and nature, tender mother, all smiling, caressing, helping, as if there was any need to help! as if the chief fact of all was not enough to make the dullest skies and greyest space resplendent. Agnes felt herself the spoiled child of heaven. She looked up into the wonderful blue above, tears coming to

her eyes and thanks into her heart. Was it not the hand of God that had turned all her life into joy and brightness—what else? when she had not been serving Him as she ought. But that was heaven's celestial way; and oh with what fervour of grateful love, with what devotion and tender zeal of thanksgiving would not she serve Him now! 'Yes,' she said, when Oswald displayed before her his pictures of happiness, and told where he would take her, how they should live, with what beautiful surroundings, amid what pleasures and sweetness and delight. 'Yes!' It was all a dream of impossible blessedness sure to come true; 'but we must still think of the poor,' she said, looking at him with those sweetest tears in her eyes. He called her all kinds of heavenly names in the admiration of his young love—'Angel,' as all lovers call all beloveds; and both of them felt a touch of tender goodness in them in addition to every other blessedness. Yes! they would think of the poor; they would help all who wanted help; they would be tender, very tender, of the unhappy. Were there, indeed, still unhappy people in the world? with what awe of reverent pity these two

thought of them, would have succoured them, served them on their knees! This thought served to give a kind of consecration to their own height of visionary joy.

And yet there was one little thing that disturbed them both, which was no less and no more than the cap and poke bonnet which Agnes wore. She took them off as they floated along, and threw a white handkerchief over her head, which made her look more like a Perugino than ever; and then Oswald produced out of his pocket a letter-case which he was in the habit of carrying about with him, full of verses and scraps of composition, and read to her the lines which he had gone over so often:

> From old Pietro's canvas freshly sprung
> Fair face!

With what a glow of happy yet subdued brightness the fair face was illuminated as he read! Agnes, who never had written a line, had a far more poetical mind than he had, who span them by the mile. Some mysterious tide seemed to rise in her veins as the words fell on her ears. It was all poetry—the situation, the

scene, the voice, the wonderful incredible joy that had come to her beyond all expectation. She sat as in a dream, but it was a dream that was true; and the sunshiny sea stretched round them, and the soft air caressed them, and the soft ripples of water tinkled against the boat with silvery delicious sound, and the sky, unfathomable, awful, yet lovely, stretched over them. They were alone, absolutely free from all interruption, and the charmed hours flew. Oswald had provisioned the boat as he could, while she went to say good-bye to her little charge, and to announce her intention of returning early to town. Agnes had eluded the kind Sisters, making a guilty pretence of having no time to see them. It was wrong, and a sense of guilt was in her heart; but the temptation was so great. He was her betrothed; there was no real *wrong* in these few sweet hours together; and he had pleaded so anxiously, and would have been so unhappy, so much disappointed had she refused him. So nature won the day, as nature does so often, and this was the result. They ate a celestial meal together, biscuits and a little wine, which even in the happiness of the moment Oswald

recognised as bad. They had floated out to the horn of the bay, and there lay moving softly with the gentle lapping of the water, wishing for no more—too happy in the moment to desire any change.

At last, however, the sunset became too apparent, attracting their notice with its low lines of gold that came into their very eyes, low as they were upon the surface of the sea. Agnes had no watch, and Oswald would not look at his. 'There is plenty of time,' he said; 'we shall get our train, too soon; let us have as much of this as we can;' and Agnes assented timidly. 'So long as we make sure of our train.' 'Perhaps there may never be such a day again,' she added softly, under her breath.

'Better days, darling—hundreds of them,' he said, and then looking at her, began to repeat softly poetry which was very different from his own :—

> It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
> The holy time is quiet as a nun,
> Breathless with adoration: the bright sun
> Is sinking down in its tranquillity:
> The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the sea.

These words hushed them, their pulses being toned to all manner of fantasies. The

poetry was more real than the evening, and the evening more real than anything in earth besides. And thus time glided, and the water rippled, and the sun went down, and the evening melted away.

'I am afraid we must get in now,' he said, with a start, waking up. The long summer evening had just begun to wane, the first shadow coming into it from the east. Still all was bright, a high festival of colour where the sunset had been, over the glowing sea towards the west; but from the land the first chill of grey was already afloat, that told the approach of night. There was very little wind, but that was dead against their return, and so when Oswald took to the oars was the tide, which swept him round the horn of the bay with a special force of suction which he was not acquainted with. 'All right,' he said, 'don't look frightened; we'll let ourselves drift past with the tide, and then run into the next little place. It is always a stopping train, and don't you remember we passed all those villages coming down?'

'But we did not stop,' cried Agnes, dismayed.

'The last train stops everywhere,' said the young man; 'you are not cold? Put your cloak round you; and, ah, yes, the bonnet must go on again. I shall always love the bonnet. Yes, you shall keep one in your wardrobe, always; there is nothing like it. "The holy time is quiet as a nun——"'

'Oh,' she said, 'please do not think of anything but to get back; if we should miss our train——'

'Is not this worth even missing a train?' he said, still looking at her. He was rowing indeed, and at last the boat was making way; but what did he care? He was too happy to think about a train. But then, heaven help her, what was to become of *her* if this train was missed? Her face grew pale, then crimson, with the terrible thought.

'Oh, please, please! do not delay; yes, it has been delightful; but my train! What should I do? What would they say? Oh, for heaven's sake—for pity's sake!'

'If you said for love's sake—for your sake, Agnes——'

'Ah, I do!' she said, clasping her hands; and he looked at her smiling, with eyes she

could scarcely meet. He rowed, it is true—yes, rowed at last with a little energy; but still smiled and talked, and would not see the anxiety that began to devour her. What was it to him? But to *her*! She looked at him with beseeching eyes.

'Yes, darling,' he said, 'yes, sweet; yes, my own!' and laughed and looked, and made her face glow with his tender eyes. It was like throwing sugar-plums at someone who was drowning. But Agnes was too much in love herself to be able to realise that this was not the best way of loving. It was very sweet, though it was almost cruel. How quickly the dusk seemed to steal on! The colour faded away bit by bit from the sky, the blue went out of the water, the wind grew a little chill—or was it only anxiety and terror that made her chill? She began to forget everything: what had happened, and even *him*, in her anxiety to get to the shore. Her brain began to swim. What would become of her? what would they say? Oswald was half affronted at last by her anxiety and silence, and swept along with long vigorous strokes that vindicated his character as an oarsman. Agnes sprang

from the boat, almost neglecting his offered hand, when at last it grated upon the beach.

'I will run to the station,' she cried, stumbling over the shingle, her heart beating, and dread in her soul. The train! the train! that was all she thought of; and oh, what would be thought of her? what had she been doing? She rushed along through the darkness, scarcely seeing where she went. Oswald had to stay behind, fuming, to settle about the boat, and engage someone to take it back. He overtook her only as she got to the station. A train was there just ready to start, about which he received rather unsatisfactory information: but she had seated herself in the dark corner of a second-class carriage before he got up to her. After a moment's pause he seated himself by her side. It was better perhaps, at least, to get as far on as they could—to get out of the village, which was quite near enough to the Convalescent Home to permit of gossip reaching that place; and by this time Oswald was as self-reproachful as could be desired. He went and sat down beside her, penitent. It was no trouble to him to take the blame on himself at any time, and Oswald, who had been subject to

much mild blame all his life, though he had never done anything very wicked, knew that to take it upon yourself was to disarm your adversaries. He adopted this facile and touching method of self-defence.

'What a brute I am!' he said; 'can you ever forgive me? to have risked your comfort, my darling, for pleasure to myself!'

'Oh no,' she said, putting her hand timidly into his, which was held out for it. It seemed clear at once to Agnes that it was her fault.

'But yes,' he said. 'I ought to have been more thoughtful. Ah, forgive me, dearest! think what the temptation was. I have never had you to myself before. The day was too sweet to end; I was too happy; but I should have thought of you.'

There was in this a subtle suggestion that she on her side had not been so happy—the delicatest shade of reproach—which Agnes could not bear.

'Oh, do not say so,' she said, 'as if I had not been—happy too.' And then they were both silent, clasping each other's hands. 'And we have not missed it after all,' she added a moment after, with a quaver in her voice.

Oswald kept silence with a horrible misgiving. He knew, though she did not, that this was not the train she thought, and for once he was sincerely shocked and alarmed by the position he found himself in. All the way along, as the carriage rolled through the darkening twilight at a pace which seemed slow and tedious to travellers accustomed to express speed, he was trying to turn over in his mind the best thing to do, looking at her returning confidence and ease with a sense of guilt and horrible anticipations. What was to be done? There was a hope that a train which must pass the junction might be stopped by signal if this lumbering little branch would only push on its feeble engine fast enough. But if not—— The perspiration came to his forehead in great drops. He had never before in his life been so confronted by the results of his own foolishness. He ought to have attended to all the symptoms of the waning afternoon; he ought to have listened to her appeal; he ought to have thought of something else than the pleasure of the moment, and a little lengthening out of the delightful day. Heretofore some happy chapter of accidents had always delivered

Oswald from the penalty of his misdoings, or at the worst it had only been himself whom he had injured. But now the creature dearest to him in the world—the one whom he had chosen out of the world—was she to suffer for his foolishness? All that was manly in him was roused by the emergency. It may be supposed he was not a very entertaining companion during the long three-quarters of an hour which it took them to reach the junction. It was almost dark, the soft dark of a summer night, when they were landed upon the desolate little platform, the sole travellers. One or two languid porters about were evidently waiting with impatience till this last disturber of their repose was cleared away. The day, which had been so deliciously fresh and sweet on the water, had been very hot inland, and the world in general was languid and anxious to be quite still and at rest.

'Wait here till I go and inquire,' he said, depositing Agnes upon a seat. To be so far on her journey quieted her. She ceased to be anxious, supposing that the arrival of the other train was a simple matter of a few minutes' delay, and her mind floated back to the

wonderful day just over, and to all the changes it would make in her life. She must tell Sister Mary Jane at once, who might shake her head perhaps, but who would be pleased, Agnes thought, having long since assured her that she had no 'vocation.' And she must go home to the Rectory, and make all known there, where, Agnes felt, there would be no great objection to parting with her, though her heart recoiled a little before all the questions, of what she thought a 'worldly' description, that would be asked. She thought, as girls of a romantic turn often do, that all the fuss of marriage would be odious, and wished she could steal away quietly, and see nobody till all was over. How sweet that would be, she thought! without any 'fuss,' without the congratulations, the visits, the curiosity, the discussions about dress—all the vulgarities of the time. She sat in the corner where Oswald had placed her, running over all this prospect in her mind, at ease, though her heart was beating still with all that had just been, and all that must so soon be—for she must tell the Sisters to-night, and to-morrow probably she would have to go home. Thus Agnes mused, not sorry to rest, but

wondering a little why Oswald was so long away, and why there were no preparations for the train.

He came up to her in another minute so pale that even through the dark and dimness the girl was startled. 'Is there an accident?' she cried. He seized her hand, and drawing it through his arm, led her away hastily beyond the gaze of the porters. 'Oh, my darling!' he cried, 'oh, Agnes, what will you say to me? It is my fault, and what can I do to mend it? The train has gone.'

She gave a frightened cry, and drew her arm from his: then looked wildly up and down the lines of iron way, clasping her hands with a look first of disbelief, then of despair, that went to his heart. 'Is it true? It cannot be true. Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do!' she cried.

And then, indeed, the whole horror of the position burst upon Oswald. A young woman —a young lady—in her peculiar dress remarked by everybody—left alone with him at a railway junction, night falling, no one to help them within reach, and no possibility, till the morning, of going either one way or the other,

back to the Sisters at Limpet Bay, or to the House in London, or to her own home where explanations could be made. It was nothing for him—that and a hundred escapades much worse than that would be forgiven to Oswald. But for her, what calamity worse than death, what horror of evil-speaking, was involved! He was more to be pitied than she was at the moment, for he saw all that was to be feared with a clearer vision than hers, and felt that it was all his doing. His Perugino, his angel, his bride, his (all, in one word) Agnes—to be thus exposed to the world's jeers by him! The moment was bad enough for her, realising as she did the painful interview at the House, and more still, the scolding and suspicions of her mother, to whom all must be told in her turn; and not knowing what she could do for the moment, save sit there all through the night until the first morning train should come. But it was harder upon him, who was more acquainted with the ignoble part of the world than Agnes, and knew what people might say. She went away from him, trembling and crying, and sitting down once more on the rude bench, covered her face with her hands. What was

she to do? As for Oswald, though it was (as he had just said a hundred times over) the happiest day of his life, this was perhaps the most terrible moment; for the question, what he was to do, was almost more difficult than for Agnes, since all the guilt was his.

At last he went to her and stood by her, grown timid, touching her shoulder softly with his hand. 'Let me speak to you,' he said. 'Agnes—see, we are both in the same trouble, and I worse than you, for it is my fault. Darling, look here, you are going to marry me, anyhow sooner or later. Why should not it be sooner, Agnes? Let me take you down to the inn and settle you comfortably—well, as comfortably as can be in this terrible scrape we have got into,' he went on, his heart lightening a little as he saw that she listened to him, and encouraged even by the shake of her head at his suggestion, which she was too bewildered to understand at first. 'Hush, dearest; hear me out. Then I will go up to town, and—get a licence.'

'No, no, no,' she said once more, covering her face with her hands.

'Think a moment, darling. That is how

it would end, anyhow. Well, it might be banns,' said Oswald, gradually coming to the surface again, feeling his heart rise and a furtive smile come to his lips. 'Think, only. In a week or two, in a month or two, this is what would happen, with nothing but fuss, and bother, and separation, and ceremony between. Agnes! oh, I know you are not just a girl like so many, that care for these foolish things, that like a fine wedding and all the folly of it. I will take you to the woman of the inn, and put you in her care—and I will bring my mother if you please——'

'No, no,' she cried. 'Your mother! Oh, she must not hear, must not see me like this.'

'But it is all my fault. Agnes, the licence is far the shortest way. We will go quietly up to town and be married, and then what can anyone say to us? They may say we have been silly. For my part, I think it is the wisest, by far the most sensible thing that anyone could do,' said Oswald, getting up and up to his natural level of lightheartedness. Agnes seemed to feel her own heart sinking lower and lower as he spoke; but what was she to do?

'There's an inn in the village, sir, that is clean and respectable,' said the station master, coming up. 'And I'm sorry to disturb you, and sorry for what's happened, but you can't keep the lady sitting out here; and the night's getting a bit chilly, for the dew is heavy after such a day. And we're going to shut up,' the man added, becoming imperative, as it were, in this postscript. Oswald asked when the first train stopped in the morning, while Agnes rose and stood by, her whole frame throbbing and thrilling. She whose life had been so calm and still, with never a shock or startling incident in it, no emergencies to call out her judgment, how was she to know now how to act in this terrible crisis which had come unexpected, without a moment's preparation, into her life?

CHAPTER XL.

TWO—PARTED.

THIS early summer had been a time of little pleasure to any one in the Square. Everything had seemed to go wrong from the day Miss Cherry went dolefully away, crying with wonder and disappointment to think that her darling should have been so unkind to her, and her brother fallen so completely out of her influence. Very hopefully she had come, prepared to do her duty, and sure at least of Cara's sweet society and comfort—but as she drove away from the door Miss Cherry felt that this society was over for ever. She had trusted in 'the child' from Cara's earliest days—and now the child shut up her heart, and would not, even after all she had seen with her own eyes, confide in her. She saw now how it was going to be. James would marry 'that woman,' which was the bitter name by which gentle Miss Cherry, so

full of kindly charity, had been driven by suspicion to call Mrs. Meredith—and Cara would fall away from her own relations, and estrangement and doubt would take the place of affection. Oh, that we had never seen them! Miss Cherry said to herself, meaning the Meredith family generally—that 'elderly siren' who had bewitched James, and that harum-scarum son who had persuaded Cara to bind herself to him without telling her nearest relations. For Edward Miss Cherry had a certain kindness. He had been very kind—he had behaved as young men used to do (she thought), as was becoming and respectful—and he too had been disappointed and wounded by the strange secresy of the young pair, who had no motive to make them so desirous of concealing their engagement; why should they conceal it? This was the most provoking, the most exasperating feature of all; there was no reason for concealment—the parents on either side would have been willing enough—no one would have thrown any obstacles in their way. Why had they made a mystery of it? And James?—Miss Cherry went down to the country with a sad heart. But it pained her infinitely to answer

those questions which Miss Charity insisted upon having replies to. She could censure them herself in the recesses of her own bosom—but to hear others find fault with them was more than Miss Cherry could bear.

'You see I have got well without you,' Miss Charity said. 'I hope you have done as well for James and his daughter, Cherry, as nature, without any assistance, has done for me.'

'Oh, they are very well, thank you,' said Miss Cherry, with a tremor. 'Cara has a headache sometimes; but all girls have headaches—and as for James, he is in perfect health.'

'I was not thinking of his health. Is all safe about the other matter?'

'You know, her husband died,' said Miss Cherry, somewhat dreamily.

'What has that to do with it? A woman without a husband has just as much need to be circumspect as a woman with one. What are you insinuating, Cherry? I don't understand you to-day?'

'Why should I insinuate—and what can I say? James was going away, because he could not make up his mind to give up going to her; but now—he means to stay.'

'So that is it!' said Miss Charity. She was not quite decorous in all her ways, but took the privilege of her age, and often shocked her more scrupulous niece. She uttered a sound which was not unlike a low whistle of mingled astonishment and amusement. 'So that is what it is! These men with broken hearts are *incroyable*, Cherry. And will she have him, I wonder?'

'Have him?' Miss Cherry echoed, with something which from her gentle lips was like scorn. She was over-severe in this case as naturally as in other cases she was over-charitable. 'She had not seen her husband for I don't know how many years—there cannot be any very great grief on his account. And James goes there—every night.'

'Ah! but I wonder if they'll care to marry,' said the old lady—'that's different—I should think they would prefer not to marry——'

'Aunt Charity! James may be weak but he is not wicked. He would not do such a thing——'

'You are a little old maid, and you don't know anything about it,' cried Miss Charity, peremptorily. She was an old maid herself,

to speak by the book—but she thought she did understand. Miss Cherry said nothing of her other trouble. She went and got her knitting meekly, and settled down in the old way as if she had never left the Hill. Well! it was home, and this was her natural life—but when her old aunt, who was now quite strong again, went briskly out to the garden to look after the flowers and her gardener, Miss Cherry let her hands fall into her lap, and felt the stillness penetrate to her soul. The troubles of the Square, the commotions and displeasures, Cara who would not open her heart—saucy Oswald who smiled in her face and defied her—poor Edward with his disappointment—and even James, who according to all appearance was going to marry again;—how angry she had been with them! how she had felt their different faults, crying to herself bitterly over them—and yet how she missed them! That was life—this—this was *home*—which was quite a different thing. It was very wicked of her, very ungrateful to God who had given her such a lovely house, such a good kind aunt, nobody to trouble or disturb her; very ungrateful, very wicked. Had she not everything that heart could

desire? and peace and quiet to enjoy it. Miss Cherry acknowledged all this—and cried. How still it was! nothing moving, nothing happening—and yet, ungrateful woman, to be so well off and not to appreciate it! What could she wish for more?—indeed, Mrs. Burchell thought that she had a great deal too much, and that it was sinful for an unmarried woman without a family to be so well off as Miss Cherry was.

Meantime Cara, left alone in the Square, fell into all the melancholy of her beginning. Oswald still came to see her from time to time in the morning, confiding to her all the steps of his progress, and receiving sometimes her sympathy, sometimes reproof, sometimes what they both called 'advice.' Though she had very good cause to be angry with him, yet it was very difficult to be angry with Oswald—for though he was so self-regarding, he was too light-hearted to be stigmatised with the harsher quality of selfishness. It came to the same thing often, but yet the name seemed too harsh. And he was Cara's only friend. She had not had time to form many acquaintanceships, and she was too shy to go by herself to return the calls,

or even to accept the invitations of the people she did know. How was she to go anywhere? Her father took no interest, asked no questions—and Mrs. Meredith was no longer the confidant of everything that happened, to arrange all for her. Therefore she refused the invitations, and shrank more and more into her corner. Between her and Mrs. Meredith a great gulf had risen. Who had caused it or what had caused it no one could tell—but there it lay, separating them, causing embarrassment when they met, and driving them daily further and further apart. Mrs. Meredith was angry with Cara as Miss Cherry was. She saw no sense, no meaning, in the concealment which she too believed in; and it had done a positive wrong to Edward, who never, she felt sure, would have permitted himself to go so far had the position been definitely settled. Edward had resumed his work with greater energy than ever. He was going forward now for his final examination, after which very little interval was left. His mother could not think of it without tears. One of her two boys was thus lost to her—the half of her fortune so to speak, and more than the half, for Edward had

gradually assumed all the kindly offices which Oswald had been too much self-occupied to undertake—and it was all Cara's fault. Thus they blamed each other, not saying a word except in their own hearts—as women will do, I suppose, till the end of time. Mrs. Meredith would have allowed, had you pressed her, that Oswald too was wrong; but in her heart she never thought of his fault, only of Cara's. It was Cara who had done it—a little frankness on her part, natural confidence in one who was to be her mother, and who was so willing (Mrs. Meredith said to herself with genuine feeling) to accept that office, and care for the child and her comforts; how much evil might have been avoided had Cara possessed this quality, so winning in young people! Then Oswald would have been drawn closer to, instead of separated as he now seemed, from his family—then Edward would have checked himself in time, and his thoughts would have travelled in some other direction. All Cara's fault! With a real ache in her heart at the thought of the mischief done, this was what the elder woman thought. So that when Cara withdrew, wounded, and sad, and angry at the position

in which she found herself, Mrs. Meredith made no effort to call her from her retirement. She was full of many reflections and questions of her own—and surely it was the part of the children to inform her of everything, to seek her consent, to conciliate her, not hers to do all this to them.

As for Edward he went no more to the house in which he had spent so many happy hours. Looking back at them now, how happy they seemed! No cloud seemed to have been on his sky when he sat there by the light of Cara's lamp, reading to her, seeing her through all his reading, feeling the charm of her presence. In reality they had been full of very mingled pleasure, and often the bitterness involved had overbalanced the sweetness; but he did not remember that now that they were past —they seemed to have been all happiness, a happiness lost for ever. He made up for the loss, which seemed to have impoverished his whole life, by work. Fortunately he had lost ground which had to be recovered now, if he was to carry out his original intention about India—and he gave himself up to this with something like passion. All the evening through,

in those hours which he used to spend with Cara, he worked, deadening himself, stupefying himself with this like a narcotic, exciting his brain to take the part of a counter-irritant against his heart. Now and then, if the poor young fellow paused for a moment, a sudden softness would steal over him, a recollection of the room next door with Miss Cherry counting her stitches on the other side of the fire—and the soft rose-reflection on Cara's white dress. How could he defend himself against these remembrances? All at once, while his eyes were fixed on his book, this scene would come before him, and lines of exasperating verse would tingle through him—reminding him of Elaine, and how she 'loved him with that love that was her doom.' Thus some malicious spirit played upon the boy—

> I loved you and my love had no return,
> And therefore my true love has been my death.

No, he thought with a faint half-smile, it would not be his death. If such things happened once they did not happen now. It was not so easy to die. A man had got to live and make the best of it—to forget what was so near to

him, yet so unattainable, and fix his thoughts on law-cases instead. This was the modern form of tragedy. To go and work, and to live, and do as other men did—yet never be as other men. Who does not know the poignant yet sweet misery that is in that thought: never to be as other men—to carry the wound all through one's life—to be struck with a delicate arrow which would vibrate in the wound for ever! And then, with renewed zeal, he would plunge into his work. What notes he made, what reports he drew out, digests of the dreariest books, accounts of the dullest trials! I think he liked the dullest best; anything that was interesting, anything that had any humanity in it, seemed by some strange by-path or other to take him back to Cara. Poor boy! and then, when it suddenly occurred to him that Cara was alone on the other side of the wall, the book would fall out of his hand or the pen from his fingers. She was alone as he was alone. Oswald, who ought to bear her company, was away somewhere following his own fancies—her aunt was gone—and her father was *here*. Then Edward trembled in mind and in body, under the force of the temptation to

go to her, to cheer her, whatever might happen to him. He seemed to see her, lonely in a corner. She had not even work to do as he had, to force her from herself. How the poor boy's heart would beat!—but then—if she were his he knew he would not fear solitude, nor dislike having nothing to do—to think of her would keep him happy; and perhaps if she loved Oswald as Edward loved her—— This thought stung him back to his work again with greater energy than ever. Most likely she loved her solitude, which was sweet with recollections. Then there would break through all his law and all his labour a violent hot pulse of resentment. For Oswald's sake!—who went wandering about, gay and light-hearted, from club to club, from dinner to dinner, and had not so much gratitude, so much decency, as to give one evening out of a dozen to her!

But Cara, as the reader knows, had not the consolation with which Edward credited her. Happiness of all kinds, she thought, had deserted her for ever. There was not even a fire to keep her company, to make her an imitation of a companion. If one could choose the time to be unhappy, it would be always best in

winter, when one can cower over the glow of the fire, and get some comfort out of the warmth. It was like stealing away her last friend from her to take away her fire. When she sat in her usual place the dark fire-place seemed to glare at her like a kind of grave. And when she sat at the window, all the evening lights got into her eyes and drew tears, so sweet were they and wistful, even though it was but a London sky. Cara had once read a foolish little poem somewhere, in which the twilight was embodied in the form of a poor girl looking stealthily in at the open windows, to look for her lost lover, and sighing when she could not find him. At her age allegory is still beautiful—and the very dimness shadowed into visionary form about her, looking for something—for what? for happiness, that was lost and could not be found again, never could be found. She did not think any longer as she had done at first, with a half-superstitious tremor, of her mother who might be about, looking at her with anxious spiritual eyes, unable to make herself known. It was a lower level of thought upon which the girl had fallen; she had strayed from the high visionary ground, and had begun

to think of herself. She wanted someone near, some voice, some touch, some soft words breaking the stillness; but these sweetnesses were not for her. By turns she too would study like Edward; but then she had no occasion to study, there was no bond of duty upon her. She read Elaine over again, poring over her book in the twilight, which was a congenial light to read by, and the same words which pursued Edward went thrilling through her also like the note of a nightingale floating through the dark—'Loved him with that love that was her fate'—but how fortune favoured Elaine! what an end was hers! whereas there was nothing wonderful about poor little Cara, only a foolish mistake which she could not set right, which nobody cared enough about her to set right, and which must mar her whole life without remedy. The house was quite still as it had been before Miss Cherry came—but worse than that; for then there was no imbroglio, no web of falsehood about her poor little feet. Things had grown worse and worse for her as the days went on. She wrote little formal letters to the Hill saying that she and papa were quite well. She went out to take a walk every day with nurse, and

according to the orders of that authority. She asked cook what there was to be for dinner, and agreed to it whatever it was. She made her father's coffee in the morning, and was very quiet, never disturbing him, saying Yes or No, when he asked her any question—and sat at the other end of the table when he dined at home. He thought she was a very good little girl—not so clever as he had expected; but children so often grow up different from their promise—a very good little girl of the old-fashioned type, made to be seen and not heard. He had never been used to her, and did not require his child to sympathise with him or amuse him as some men do—and his mind was full of other things. It did occur to him as the summer went on that she was pale—'I think you ought to see Maxwell, Cara,' he said; 'you are looking very colourless; write a little note, and ask him to come to put you to rights.'

'I am quite well, papa—I don't want Mr. Maxwell or anyone.'

'Well, if you are sure—but you look pale; I will speak to Mrs. Meredith, and see what she thinks.' Clara felt a sensation of anger at this suggestion. She denied again with much earnest-

ness that there was anything the matter with her—and though the heat of her reply almost roused her father to real consideration, it did not after all go quite so far as that. He went to his library, and she to her drawing-room. The morning was the cheerful time of her day. It was the hour for Oswald, who came in quite pleasantly excited, and told her of the expedition he was going to make into the country on the chance of having an interview and explanation with his Agnes. Cara thought this was a very good thing to do. 'She ought to know exactly what you feel about her,' she said; 'and oh, Oswald, you ought to tell everybody, and make an end of all these mysteries.'

'That is one word for her and two for yourself, Cara,' he said, laughing; 'you want to be free of me. But no, wait just a little longer. Look here, I will send you the *Vita Nuova*, and there you will see that Dante had a screen to keep people from suspecting that it was Beatrice.'

'I will not be your screen,' said Cara, with energy; 'it is wicked of you to speak so.'

'Why, it is in the *Vita Nuova*!' said Oswald, with indignant innocence; 'but never mind, it will be over directly; and you shall

come and see her, and help us. My mother must come too.'

'I am glad of that. I am sure that Mrs. Meredith would go to-day if you were to ask her.'

'Not to-day, let us get our holiday first. I want to see her blush and her surprise as she sees me—but after that you shall see how good and reasonable and correct I shall be.'

He went away smiling. It was June, and the very atmosphere was a delight. He had brightened Cara for the moment, and she stepped out upon the balcony and breathed the sweet air, which was sweet even there. Oswald thought she was looking after him as he walked away, and was flattered by Cara's affection—and other people thought so too. As she looked down into the Square she caught the eyes of Edward who had just come out, and who took it for granted that this was a little overflowing of tenderness on her part, a demonstration of happy love. He looked up at her almost sternly she thought, but he did not mean it so. He had grown pale and very serious these last few weeks. And he took off his hat to her without a word. Cara went in

again as if she had received a blow. She covered her face with her hands and cried. Oh, if it really was in the *Vita Nuova*! Cara hoped the lady, who was the screen for Beatrice did not feel it as she did—and what did it matter?—that lady, whoever she was, must have been dead for hundreds of years. But *she* was alive, and this falsehood embittered her whole life.

CHAPTER XLI.

TWO—TO BE ONE?

JAMES BERESFORD was full of perturbation and troubled thoughts as well as his child. The romance of middle age is more difficult to manage than that of youth. It is less simple, less sure of its own aim; indeed, it has so often no aim at all, but cherishes itself for itself disinterestedly, as youthful sentiment never does. The death of Mr. Meredith had exercised a great, but at first undefined, influence on Mr. Beresford's affairs. He was as good as told by everybody that there was now no reason for putting restrictions upon his friendship and intercourse with Mrs. Meredith, a thing which had been demanded of him as his duty a little while before; and he had accepted this assurance as an immediate relief, and had gladly fallen back into the old habits in which had lain so much of the comfort of his life. And he could not have left

his friend, who had been so much to him in his trouble at this moment of distress for her. But there was something in the air which made him conscious of a change. He could not tell what it was; no one said anything to him; his own feelings were unaltered; and yet it was not the same. He evaded making any inquiry with himself into what had happened for some time; but the question was not to be evaded for ever; and gradually he gleaned from all sides—from looks and significant words, and a hundred little unexpressed hints, that there was but one thing expected by everybody—and that was, with all the speed consistent with decency, a marriage between himself and his neighbour. Everybody took it for granted that the death of her husband was 'a special providence' to make two good people happy; and that poor Mr. Meredith (though probably he had no such benevolent intention) could not have done a kinder thing than to take himself out of the way at this particular moment. There was not one of their mutual friends who did not think so; no one blamed the pair whose friendship was supposed to have fallen into 'a warmer feeling' in the most innocent way, without any

intention of theirs; and who were ready to make the necessary sacrifice to propriety as soon as they found it out. What so natural as that this should have happened? An attractive and charming woman left in the position of a widow, year after year, by her uncongenial husband—and an intellectual, accomplished man, left alone in the prime of life, to whom in kindness she had opened her doors. Some people had shaken their heads, but everybody allowed that there was but one end to such an intimacy. And it was very seldom that anything so convenient happened in the world as the death of the husband so absolutely in the nick of time. Of course what would happen now was clear to the meanest apprehension. Probably being, as they were, excellent people both, and full of good feeling, they would wait the full year and show 'every respect' to the dead man who had been so considerate of them; but that, at that or an earlier period, Mrs. Meredith would become Mrs. Beresford, was a thing that everyone felt convinced of, as sure as if it had already taken place.

It would be difficult to tell how this general conviction forced itself upon James Beresford's mind. The efforts which had to be made to

send him away awoke him to a startled sense that his intimacy with his neighbour was regarded by his friends under a strange and uncomfortable light; and he had yielded to their efforts with no small agitation on his own part, and a sense of pain and desolation which made him ask himself whether they were right. Probably had he gone away, and Mrs. Meredith been forcibly separated from him, an unlawful object of affection, he would have ended by believing that they were right, and that the consolation and comfort and pleasures of his intercourse with her had grown into 'a warmer feeling.' But now that Mr. Meredith was well out of the way, and even the excitement attending his end over, he was by no means so clear in his mind, and the subject became one of great trouble and complication. Somehow it seems always possible, always within the modesties of nature even to the least vain of men, or women, that some other, any other, may regard him (or her) with a specially favourable eye. No one does wrong in loving us, nor are we disposed to blame them for it. So that there was perhaps a time in which Mr. Beresford took his friends' opinion for granted,

and was not unprepared to believe that perhaps Mrs. Meredith would be happy in being his wife; and that, in his state of mind, was a final argument against which nothing could be said. But lately he had begun to doubt this; his coming did not clear away the clouds that had invaded her brows. She would strike into sudden talk about Edward and his going away, when her friend with much delicacy and anxiety was endeavouring to sound her feelings. She seemed unconscious of his investigation—her mind was pre-occupied. Sometimes, on the other hand, she would betray a certain uneasiness, and change the subject in a way that betrayed her consciousness; but that was only when her mind was quite free. From the time when she began to have a grievance, an anxiety of her own, she escaped from the most cautious wiles of his scrutiny. She was more occupied by thoughts of her son than by thoughts of him. Was this consistent with *love*? Poor James Beresford, feeling that this would decide him in a moment could he know, one way or another, what her feelings were, was thus thrown out and forced to fall back upon his own.

And what were his own?—A maze of conflicting ideas, wishes, prejudices, and traditions of old affection. There was nothing in the world he would not have given up cheerfully rather than lose this sweet friend—this consoler and sympathiser in all his troubles. But he did not want her to be his wife; he did not want to have any new wife. His Annie, it might be, had faded into a distant shadow; but that shadow represented to him a whole world past and over—the world of love and active, brilliant, joyous happiness. His nature, too, had fallen into the shadows—he did not want that kind of happiness now; one passion had been enough for him; he wanted a friend, and that he had—he did not want anything more. And the idea of disturbing all the unity of his life by a second beginning gave him a smart shock. Can a man have more wives than one?—Can he have more lives than one?—He was a fanciful man, of fastidious mind, and with many niceties of feeling such as ruder minds called fantastic. He shrank from the thought of banishing from his house even the shadow and name of her who was gone. To be sure if he could make up his mind that *she*

wished it, all these resolutions would have gone to the winds; and it is very likely that he would have been very happy—happier than he could ever be otherwise. But then he could not make her feelings out. Would she go visibly away from him, even while he was sitting by her, into her troubles about Edward —eyes and heart alike growing blank to him, and full of her boy—if she had given to him a place above her boys in her affections? Surely no. I would not even assert that there was not the slightest possible suspicion of pique in this conclusion, for the man would have been flattered to know that the woman loved him, even though he was conscious that he did not so regard her. But 'the warmer feeling' of which all their friends were so sure, of which everybody concluded that it had grown unconsciously *en tout bien et tout honneur* out of that friendship which the world holds to be impossible between man and woman—was just the one thing about which the principal person concerned could have no certainty at all. He knew what the friendship was—it was almost life to him; it was his strongest support—his best consolation; it was the only thing that

could make a second, a kind of serious sweet successor, to the love that was never to come again; but it was not that love—certainly not in his heart—so far as he could make out, not in hers either; but who could tell? Weak man! he would rather have preferred that she should have felt differently, and that it should have been his duty to marry for her sake.

His life had settled down into all its old lines since Mr. Meredith's death. He had his business about the societies—his meetings—his lectures to arrange—sometimes his articles to write. Now and then he dined out in the best and most learned of company. He was pointed out to the ignorant when he went into society as a distinguished person. He was in the front of the age, knowing a great deal more than most people knew, doing things that few people could do. His mornings were spent in these refined and dignified occupations; and when he dined out with his remarkable friends, or when he dined at home with only his silent little girl to keep him company, as regularly as the clock struck he knocked at the next door, and had his hour of gentle talk, of mutual confidence. They knew all about each other, these

two; each could understand all the allusions the other made—all the surrounding incidents in the other's life. They talked as man and wife do, yet with a little element of unconvention, of independence, of freshness in the intercourse, which made it more piquant than that between man and wife. What could be more agreeable, more desirable, more pleasant? But to break off all this delightful ease of intercourse by some kind of antiquary courtship, by the fuss of marriage, by fictitious honeymooning, and disturbance of all their formed and regular habits of life,—what nonsense it would be—and all for the sake of their friends, not of themselves! But if *she* should wish it, of course that would give altogether another character to the affair.

This was what Mr. Beresford at last made up his mind to ascertain boldly one way or another. It was about the same time as Oswald, approaching the railway junction, was turning over his dilemma and seeing no way out of it. Mr. Beresford had been hearing a lecture, and was in a chastened state of mind. He had been hearing about the convulsions of the early world, and by what means the red-

hot earth cooled down and settled itself, after all manner of heavings and boilings, into something of the aspect it wears. As he walked home he dwelt upon the wonderful grandeur of such phenomena. What did it matter, after all, what happened to a few small insignificant persons on the crust which had formed over all these convulsions? What of their little weepings and lovings and momentary struggles, to one who could study such big and mighty strainings of force against force? A little while at the most, and the creatures who made so much fuss about their feelings would be a handful of dust; but volcanic action would go on for ever. Notwithstanding this philosophy, however, it must be allowed that, whereas he had heard of these convulsions with the calmest bosom, his heart began to beat as he approached Mrs. Meredith's door. If the moon had tumbled out of the sky, or a boiling caldron suddenly revealed itself in the earth, so long as it was at a safe distance, even Mr. Beresford, who was so fond of science, would not have cared a tenth part so much about it as he did to know what his neighbour meant; which was inconsistent, but natural perhaps.

The philosophy went out of his head as he approached the door. Little fusses of loving and of liking—momentary cross-lights, or, let us say, flickering farthing candles of human sentiment—what are they to the big forces that move the world? Is not a bit of chalk more interesting than all your revolutions and changes?—your petty sufferings, passions, heroisms, and the like? Mr. Beresford thought he believed all that—yet, heaven above! how calm he was when the chalk was under consideration, and how much perturbed when he went up the steps of the house next door!

'You have been out to-night?'

'Yes, I have been hearing Robinson—a remarkably interested, intelligent audience. Where are the boys? Edward should come—it would interest him.'

'Edward is always at work. He is killing himself for this examination. I wish he could be interested in something less serious. Oswald has been away all day. I think he said he was going to the country. If we could only mix them up a little,' said the mother, with an anxious smile—'to one a little more gravity, to the other a little more of his brother's light-heartedness.'

Mr. Beresford did not say anything about the superior interest of volcanic action, as he might, nay, perhaps ought, to have done. He said instead, in the feeblest way, 'That will come as they get older. You must give them time.'

Mrs. Meredith did not say anything. She shook her head, but the faint smile on her face remained. There was nothing tragical yet about either one or the other. Mr. Beresford was less calm than usual. He sat down and got up again; he took up books and threw them away; he fidgeted about the room from one point to another. At last even Mrs. Meredith's composure gave way. She jumped to one of those sudden conclusions which foolish women who are mothers are so apt to think of. It suddenly rushed upon her mind that some accident had happened to Oswald, and that Mr. Beresford had been sent to her to break the news.

'You are put out,' she said; 'something has happened. Oh, tell me—something about the boys? Oswald!'

'Nothing of the sort,' he said. 'Don't think it for a moment! The boys are perfectly

well, I hope. I was going to ask you an odd sort of question though,' he added, with an awkward smile, rushing into the middle of the subject. 'Did it never occur to you that you would be the better for having someone to help you with the boys?'

Now, there could not have been a more foolish question—for until a very short time back the boys' father had been in existence—and since then, there had been no time for the widow to take any such step. She looked at him with much surprise. 'Someone to help me? Whom could I have to help me? Their poor dear father was too far away!'

'Ah! I forgot their father,' said Mr. Beresford, with naïve innocence, and then there was a pause. He did not know how to begin again after that very evident downfall. 'I mean, however, as a general question,' he added, 'what do you think? Should you approve of a woman in your own position—marrying, for instance—for her children's sake?'

'That is a curious question,' she said, with a little laugh; but the surprise brought the colour into her face. 'I suppose it would depend on the woman. But I don't know,' she

added, after a moment, 'how a woman could put her children into any stranger's—any *other* man's hands.'

'Ah, a stranger! perhaps I did not mean a stranger.'

'I don't think you know what you meant,' she said, with a smile; but there was some terror in her eyes. She thought she knew what was coming. She was like him in her own sentiments, and still more like him in her speculations about himself. She had been brought to believe that he loved and wanted to marry her. And, if it could not be otherwise, she felt that she must consent; but she did not wish it any more than he did. However, while he thought the best policy was to find out what ought to be done at once, she was all for putting off, avoiding the consideration, trusting in something that might turn up. Mr. Beresford, however, had wound himself up to this interview, and was not to be put off.

'Between people of our sober years such questions may be discussed—may they not?' he said. 'I wonder what *you* think really? There is nothing I so much wish to know—not the conventional things that everybody says—

but what *you* think. You have oeen my other conscience for so long,' he added, jesuitically, in order to conceal the cunning with which he was approaching the subject—asking for her opinion without specifying the subject on which he wanted it.

But she saw through him, with a little amusement at the artifice employed. He wanted to know what she thought without asking her. Fortunately, the being asked was the thing *she* wanted to avoid. But, just when they had got to this critical point, Edward came upstairs. He was not friendly, as he had been to his mother's friend; he came in with the gloom upon his face, and a look of weariness. Mr. Beresford heard the door open with great impatience of the newcomer, whoever it might be. Nothing could be more inopportune. He wished Edward in Calcutta or wherever else it might be best for him to be on the other side of the seas. But, as for Mrs. Meredith, her attention fled on the moment to her boy. She forgot her friend and his questioning, and even the delicate position which she had realised, and the gravity of the relations which might ensue. All this went out of her mind in comparison with Edward's

fatigued look. She got up and went to him, putting her hand very tenderly upon his shoulder.

'You have been working too long, dear. Oh, Edward, don't be so anxious to get away from me! You are working as if this was your dearest wish in the world.'

'So it is,' he said; 'not to leave you, mother; but to feel that I am doing something, not merely learning or enjoying myself.'

'Edward is quite right,' said Mr. Beresford. 'It is by far the most worthy feeling for a young man.'

But Edward did not take this friendly support in a good spirit; he darted a half-savage glance at his backer-up.

'Oh, if you take it in that light, that is not what I meant,' he said. 'I am not of that noble strain. It is not pure disinterestedness. I think it is a pity only to lose one's advantages, and I should have some advantages of connection and that sort of thing. At least, I suppose so; and it is what is called a fine career.'

'Yes, it is a fine career.'

'If it is fine to separate yourself from all you care for in the world,' cried Mrs. Meredith,

'from all who care for you—not only must we be left behind, but when you have got beyond me, when you have a family of your own——'

'Which I never shall have, mother.'

'Nonsense! boys and girls say so, and end just like others; even your own, your very own must be taken from you. You must give up everything—and you call that a fine career.'

'Men do, if women don't,' said the young man, not looking at her. His heart was so wrung and sore that he could not keep the gloom off his face.

'And you don't care what women think? You might have put off that lesson till you were a little older. At your age what your mother thinks should surely be something to you still.'

He gave her a look which was full of pain. Was that what he was thinking? Was he sure to care little for what women thought? 'You know better, mother,' he said, harshly. He was all rubbed the wrong way—thwarted, wearied, unhappy. 'I only came for a book,' he continued, after a moment, picking up the first one he got hold of, and then, with a little nod to the visitor, went upstairs again. What did that visitor want here? Why did he leave his own

house, and Cara alone—poor Cara!—whom nobody loved as Edward did? It would be a great deal better for Mr. Beresford if he would stay at home. After this little episode Edward sat down stubborn and unyielding to his work again. What did it matter if a man was happy or unhappy? He had his day's work to get through all the same.

'Don't think him harsh. I am afraid my boy is not quite happy,' said Mrs. Meredith, with tears in her eyes.

'That is nothing,' he said. 'I am not a friend of yesterday; but he came in when we were talking——'

'Ah, yes,' she said, but her eyes were still full of Edward; 'what was it we were talking about?'

'I am afraid if you say that, it is sufficient answer to my question,' said Mr. Beresford, more wounded than he could have supposed possible; for he wanted to be first with her, though he did not wish it in the vulgar way that was supposed.

'You are not to be angry,' she said, with a deprecating look, laying her hand softly on his arm; 'you must not be hard upon me. When

they are boys we wish them to be men, but anxiety grows with their growth; and now I think sometimes I should be glad to have them boys again.'

'Boys, boys!' he exclaimed, with natural impatience, 'Is that all you think of? Yet there are other interests in the world.'

'How selfish I am!' she cried, rousing herself suddenly. 'That is true. You must forgive me; but I am so used to talk to you of everything, whatever is in my heart.'

This melted him once more. 'Yes,' he said, 'we talk to each other of everything; we have no secrets between us. There is nothing in the world I would not do for you, nor you, I think, for me. Do you know what people are thinking about you and me? They think that being so near we should be nearer; that we might help one another better. That was what I wanted to ask you. Don't you think it is so?'

He wanted her to commit herself first, and she was willing enough that he should commit himself, but not that she should. She was embarrassed, yet she met his eyes with a half smile.

'I think it is not a case for heeding what

people think. Are we not very well as we are? How could we be better than as fast friends—friends through fire and water?'

'That we should always be,' he said, grasping her hand, 'that we should always be; and yet without becoming less we might be more. Speak to me frankly, dear; you know all my heart. Do not you think so too?'

CHAPTER XLII.

A GREAT REVOLUTION.

NOTWITHSTANDING the directness of this questioning, it was by no means a direct reply which Mr. Beresford got from Mrs. Meredith. It was not a refusal, but neither was it a consent. 'Let us not do anything rashly,' and 'I think we are very well as we are,' was what she said, and yet the change was certainly a step nearer accomplishment now that the possibility of it had been mentioned between them. He had grown rather earnest in pressing the expediency of this step as soon as the ice was fairly broken, and had been piqued by her reluctance into more warmth than he had expected himself to feel. Nevertheless, when he came back to his own house, uncomfortable matters of detail came into Mr. Beresford's mind, and annoyed him more than he could have believed, more than they were worth. About the houses, for instance; if this happened, they could not go on living next

door to each other. Would she come to his, or should he go to hers ?—if indeed the matter came to anything. This bothered him, and suggested many other details—changes of habit which would bother him still more. Altogether it was a troublesome business. He liked her best in her own drawing-room; but then he liked himself much best in his own library, and there were moments in which he felt disposed to denounce the fool who had first thought of any change. All things considered, how much better it would have been that they should remain as they were ! but that was no longer to be thought of. How was he to tell Cara? How was she to tell her boys, upon whom she was so much more dependent than he was upon Cara? If the boys disapproved strenuously, then Mr. Beresford felt it would come to nothing after all; and in that case how much better to have said nothing ! for he felt that he would not like to stand in the position of a man refused. So that altogether this middle-aged romance was not without its troubles; troubles —as, for instance, that about the houses—which you may laugh at if you please, but which involved much more personal embarrassment and

inconvenience, you will allow, than many of the sentimental difficulties which you are ready to weep over in the romances of the young.

Mrs. Meredith was kept in some uneasiness also by the fact that Oswald did not return that night. The servants sat up for him, and lights burned all night in the house, affronting the dawn which came so early; but he did not appear. This was not at all usual; for Oswald, though he liked his own way, and was frivolous enough, had never been dissipated in the ordinary sense of that word; and what made it more unpleasant still was the fact that next day was Sunday, and that no communication either by telegram or letter was possible. This fact drove everything else out of Mrs. Meredith's head. When James Beresford went to her, she could talk of nothing but Oswald; where he could have gone, how he might have been detained. That he had not sent them any news of his movements was easily explained. Sunday! 'I would not say a word against Sunday,' said poor Mrs. Meredith, who went to church dutifully as Sunday came; 'but, oh! when one is anxious, when there is no post and no telegraph, what a day!' They were all telling her how

easily explainable Oswald's absence was; and when they stopped explaining it to her, she herself would take up the parable, and protest that she knew exactly how it must have happened. It was all as clear as daylight. He had been detained by his friends whoever they might happen to be, or he had lost the last train. It was Oswald's way to lose the last train, and no one had asked where he was going when he said he was going to the country. And, of course, it had been too late to telegraph on Saturday night, and how was he to know, a boy of his late habits, that the telegraph offices were open early on Sunday morning? All these explanations were most plausible—the worst of such things, however, is that, plausible as they are, they satisfy nobody. But it annoyed Mr. Beresford immensely to find that Oswald's unexpected absence took up all Mrs. Meredith's thoughts. She had no leisure for him, though surely he ought to have been at least as important as Oswald. Whatever he talked to her about, she replied to him with something about her boy. As if her boy could have come to any harm! as if it was not all his own levity and selfishness! Mr. Beresford, having an object of his own to pursue, was

quite indignant with and impatient of Oswald. What was he, a frivolous do-nothing unsatisfactory young man, that so much fuss should be made about *him?* He was one of 'the boys'—what more could be said? and how unsatisfactory the best of women were when this motive came into play! Cara never thus distracted her father's mind; he did not think of her. To be sure she was a girl, and girls never get into scrapes. He did not quite like, it is true, the task of opening this question, of which his mind was full, to Cara. He thought, perhaps, that when all was settled, *she* (meaning Mrs. Meredith) might do it. Women know best how to deal with girls; but to make Cara, whatever might happen to her, into a hindrance of other intercourse, into an obstacle which stopped everything, that was not a weakness of which he would be capable. Mr. Beresford did not scoff at women; it was not a sentiment congenial to him; but still he had a feeling that in this respect the comparative strength and weakness of male and female character was certainly shown. But he would not say so rudely. He was obliged to submit.

On Monday morning a telegram did come

from Oswald. He had been detained; would write to explain, but did not expect to get home till Thursday or Friday; please send portmanteau to Cloak-room, Clapham Junction. 'Do any of his friends live in that quarter?' Mrs. Meredith asked Edward, with astonishment. 'He has friends everywhere,' said Edward, with a half sigh. This pleased the mother, though he had not said it with such an intention. Yes, he had friends everywhere. He was a harum-scarum boy, too careless perhaps, but everywhere, wherever he went, he had friends; and the portmanteau was sent, and the letter of explanation waited for—but it did not come. In short, the week had nearly run round again without any news of him, and everything else was arrested, waited for Oswald's reappearance. Mrs. Meredith evaded all recurrence to the more important subject by constantly falling back upon Oswald—perhaps she was rather glad of the chance of escape it gave her—and Mr. Beresford was no nearer a settlement than ever. This fretted him, and put him in a sort of secondary position which he did not like, but which it was useless to struggle against; and so the days and the hours went on.

It was the Friday when two visitors almost at the same moment approached the two adjoining houses in the Square, both of them with faces full of seriousness, and even anxiety. One of them was Mr. Maxwell in his brougham, who sprang out with a kind of nervous alacrity unusual to him, and knocked at Mrs. Meredith's door. The other was a solid and portly clergyman, who got out of a four-wheeled cab, paying his fare with a careful calculation of the distance which produced bad language from his driver, and knocked at Mr. Beresford's. They were admitted about the same moment, and received in the two corresponding rooms with nothing but a wall between them; and both of them had very serious business in hand. Cara's visitor was Mr. Burchell, from the Rectory, who asked, with a countenance full of strange things, and with many apologies, whether Miss Beresford had lately seen 'our Agnes.' Agnes! the name made Cara start.

'I have not seen anyone but Roger since I left the Hill. I hope he—I mean all, are well. Is Agnes in town, Mr. Burchell?' Agnes was four or five years older than Cara, and therefore out of her sphere.

'I thought your aunt would certainly have mentioned it to you; indeed, Mrs. Burchell was much surprised that she did not see her when she was in town. Agnes has been in—an educational establishment for some time. We are a little anxious about her,' said the Rector, with a quaver in his voice.

'Is she ill?' Cara did not love the clergyman under whom she had sat for ten years, but her heart was touched by that unmistakable trembling in his commonplace voice.

'I don't suppose she is ill; we—don't know. The fact is she left—the House last Saturday—and has never come back. We don't know what has become of her,' he said, with real trouble. 'You won't mention it to anyone. Oh, I suppose it is nothing, or something quite easily explainable; but her mother is anxious—and I thought you might have seen her. It is nothing, nothing of any real consequence,' he added, trying to smile, but with a quiver in his lips. He was stout and commonplace and indeed disagreeable, but emotion had its effect upon him as well as another, and he was anxious about his child. He looked Cara wistfully in the

face, as if trying to read in the lines of it something more than she would allow.

'Agnes! the House—O Mr. Burchell!' said Cara, waking up suddenly to a full sense of all that was in the communication. Do you mean to say that it was Agnes—*Agnes!* that was the Agnes in the House?'

Mr. Maxwell was more uncertain how to open the object of his visit. He sat for some time talking of *la pluie et le beau temps*. He did not know how to begin. Then he contrived little traps for Mrs. Meredith, hoping to bring her to betray herself, and open a way for him. He asked about Cara, then about Mr. Beresford, and how he heard he had given up all ideas of going away. But, with all this, he did not produce the desired result, and it was necessary at last, unless he meant to lose his time altogether, to introduce his subject broadly without preface. He did so with much clearing of his throat.

'I have taken rather a bold thing upon me,' he said. 'I have thought it my duty—I hope you will forgive me, Mrs. Meredith. I have come to speak to you on this subject.'

'On what subject?' she said simply, with a smile.

This made it more difficult than ever. 'About you and Mr. Beresford,' he said, abruptly blurting it out. 'Don't be offended, for heaven's sake! You ought to have known from the first; but I can't let you walk blindly into —other relations—without letting you know.'

'Doctor, I hope you are not going to say anything that will make a breach between us,' said Mrs. Meredith. 'You have no right to suppose that I am about to form other relations —I only a few months a widow! I hope I have done nothing to forfeit my friends' respect.'

'Then I am not too late,' he said, with an air of relief. 'There is still time! I am very glad of that. Respect—forfeit your friends' respect? who could suppose such a thing? You have only too much of your friends' respect. We would all go through fire and water for you.'

'Thanks, thanks,' she said; 'but you must not let me be gossiped about,' she added, after a moment, which made the doctor, though he was not of a delicate countenance, blush.

'That is all very well,' he said, 'but those who have so many friends, and friends so warmly interested, must expect a little talk. It has been spoken of, that there was something, that there might be—in short, that Mr. Beresford and you—forgive me! I don't mean to say that it would not be most suitable. Everybody knows how fond he is of you—and not much wonder.'

'Indeed, indeed you must not talk to me so,' cried Mrs. Meredith, distressed; 'my affairs are not public business, Mr. Maxwell.'

'I came to tell you,' he said, doggedly, 'something you ought to know. I have no dislike to James Beresford. On the contrary, we are old friends; we were boys together. I did my best to shelter him from any reproach at the time. Everything I could do I did, and I think I succeeded. Perhaps now when one comes to reflect, it would have been better if I had not succeeded so well. But I could not stand by and see him ruined, see his peace of mind destroyed.'

'Are you talking of Mr. Beresford? Have you lost your senses, doctor? what do you mean?'

'You remember all that happened when Mrs. Beresford died?'

'I remember—oh yes—poor Annie! how she suffered, poor soul, and how truly he mourned for her—how heartbroken he was.'

'He had occasion,' said the doctor, grimly.

'Had occasion! I cannot imagine what you mean—there was never a better husband,' said Mrs. Meredith, with some fervour; 'never one who loved a woman better, or was more tender with her.'

'Too tender. I am not saying that I condemn him absolutely. There are cases in which in one's heart one might approve. Perhaps his was one of these cases; but anyhow, Mrs. Meredith, you ought to know.'

She got impatient, for she, too, had the feeling that to see her friend's faults herself was one thing, but to have him found fault with quite another. 'I should have thought that I knew Mr. Beresford quite as well as you did, doctor,' she said, trying to give a lighter tone to the conversation. 'I have certainly seen a great deal more of him for all these years.'

'You could not know this,' said Mr. Maxwell, 'nor would I have told you but for the

extremity of the case. Listen! She might have lingered I cannot tell how long—weeks, months —it was even possible years.'

'Yes!' the assent was no assent, but an exclamation of excitement and wonder.

'I believe he meant it for the best. She was mad about having something given to her to put her out of her misery, as soon as we knew that she was past hope. Mrs. Meredith, I feel bound to tell you—when you know you can judge for yourself. He must have given her something that day after the consultation. It is no use mincing words—he must have given her—her death.'

'Doctor! do you know what you are saying?' She rose up from her chair—then sank back in it looking as if she were about to faint.

'I know too well what I am saying. I huddled it up that there might be no inquiry. I don't doubt she insisted upon it, and I don't blame him. No, I should not have had the courage to do it, but I don't blame him—altogether. It is a very difficult question. But you ought not to marry him—to be allowed to marry him in ignorance.'

She made no answer. The shock came

upon her with all the more force that her mind was already weakened by anxiety. Given her her death! what did that mean? Did it mean that he had killed poor Annie, this man who was her dearest friend? A shiver shook all her frame. 'I think you must be wrong. I hope you are wrong,' she said. It was all she could do to keep her teeth from chattering. The sudden horror chilled and froze her. 'Oh, Mr. Maxwell, he never could have done it! No, no, I will never believe it,' she said.

'But I know it,' said the doctor; 'there could be no doubt of it; I could not have been deceived, and it was no crime in my eyes. He did it in love and kindness—he did it to serve her. But still no woman should marry him, without knowing at least——'

'There was never any question of that,' she said, hurriedly, in the commotion of her mind. Then it seemed cowardly of her to forsake him. She paused. 'He is worthy of any woman's confidence. I will not hear a word against him. He did not do it. I am sure he did not do it! or, if he did, he was not to blame.'

The words had not left her lips when the door was opened, and the subject of this strange

conversation, Mr. Beresford himself, came into the room. They were both too agitated for concealment. She looked at the doctor with sudden terror. She was afraid of a quarrel, as women so often are. But Maxwell himself was too much moved to make any pretences. He rose up suddenly, with an involuntary start; but he was shaken out of ordinary caution by the excitement of what he had done. He went up to the new comer, who regarded him with quiet surprise, without any salutation or form of politeness. 'Beresford,' he said, 'I will not deceive you. I have been telling her what it is right she should know. I don't judge you; I don't condemn you; but whatever happens, she has a right to know.'

It is one of the penalties or privileges of excitement that it ignores ignorance so to speak, and expects all the world to understand its position at a glance. James Beresford gazed with calm though quiet astonishment upon the man who advanced to meet him with tragedy in his tone. 'What is the matter?' he said, with the simplicity of surprise. Then seeing how pale Mrs. Meredith was, he went on with

some anxiety, 'Not anything wrong with Oswald? I trust not that?'

Mrs. Meredith stirred in her chair and held out her hand to him. She could not rise. She looked at him with an agitated smile. 'I put perfect faith in you, perfect faith!' she said, 'notwithstanding what anyone may say.'

'In me!' he said, looking from one to another. He could not imagine what they meant.

'Beresford,' said Maxwell again, 'I will not hide it from you. It has been in my mind all this time. I have never been able to look upon you as I did before; at a crisis like this I could hold my tongue no longer. I have been telling all that happened at the death of your first poor wife.'

'My *first*—!' the exclamation was under his breath, and Maxwell thought he was overcome with horror by the recollection; but that was not what he was thinking of: his first wife!—there was something sickening in the words. Was this his Annie that was meant? It seemed profanation, sacrilege. He heard nothing but that word. Maxwell did not understand him, but there was another who did. The doctor went on.

'I have never said a word about it till this day, and never would but for what was coming. You know that I took the responsibility, and kept you free from question at the time.'

'What does he mean?' This question, after a wondering gaze at the other, Beresford addressed to Mrs. Meredith behind him. 'All this is a puzzle to me, and not a pleasant one; what does he mean?'

'This is too much,' said the doctor. 'Be a man, and stand to it now at least. I have not blamed you, though I would not have done it myself. I have told her that you consented—to what I have no doubt was poor Mrs. Beresford's prayer—and gave her—her death ——'

'I—gave her her death—you are mad, Maxwell! I, who would have died a dozen times over to save her!'

'There is no inconsistency in that. You could not save her, and you gave her—what? I never inquired. Anyhow it killed her, poor girl! It was what she wanted. Am I blaming you? But, James Beresford, whatever may have been in the past, it is your duty to be open now, and she ought to know.'

'My God, will you not listen to me?' cried

Beresford, driven to despair. He had tried to stop him, to interrupt him, but in vain. Maxwell had only spoken out louder and stronger. He had determined to do it. He was absolutely without doubts on the matter, and he was resolute not to be silenced. 'She ought to know,' he went on saying under his breath to himself.

'But it is not true. It is an invention, it is a mistake! *I* do anything against her dear life!—even in suffering, even in misery, was she not everything to me?'

'That is all very well to say. You did it in love, not in hatred, I acknowledge that. Beresford, no one here will betray you. Why not be bold and own to what you did? I could not be deceived; it was from your hand and no other your wife got her death. How could I, her doctor, be deceived?'

'Dr. Maxwell,' said a low voice from the door; and they all started with a violent shock, as if it had been Annie Beresford herself come back from the grave. Mrs. Meredith rose hastily and went towards this strange apparition. It was Cara, with cheeks perfectly colourless, with blue eyes dilated, standing as she had

entered, transfixed by those terrible words. But the girl took no notice of her friend's rush towards her. She put out her hand to put Mrs. Meredith away, and kept her eyes fixed on the doctor, as if there was no one else in the room.

'Dr. Maxwell,' said Cara, her young bosom heaving, 'I have come just in time. You are making a great, great mistake, for that is not true.'

'Cara, child, go away, go away; I never meant this for you.'

'No one knows but me,' she said; 'I was in the room all the time. I have never forgotten one thing, nor a word she said. She wanted him to do it, but he would not. He rushed away. I did not understand then what it meant.'

The girl stood trembling, without any support, so slight, so young, so fragile, with her pale face. Her father had scarcely thought of Cara before since she was the plaything of his younger life. All at once his eyes seemed to be opened, and his heart. He went to her by an irresistible impulse, and put his arm round her. Love seemed to come to life in

him with very terror of what he was about to hear.

'It was not you!' he said, with a low cry of anguish; 'it was not you!'

'She would not let me,' said Cara. 'I asked to do it, but she would not let me. She looked up—to God,' cried the girl, the tears rushing to her eyes, 'and took it. Did not He know everything? *You* would not be angry, papa? you would not have cast me away if I had taken something to get free of pain? Would He? He was her father too.'

'O, Cara, no one blames her—no one blames her!' said Mrs. Meredith, with unrestrained tears.

'She looked up to God,' said the girl, with her voice full of awe. 'She said I was to tell you; but I did not understand what it meant then, and afterwards I could not speak. It has always seemed to stand between us, papa, that I had this to tell you and could not speak.'

'My child,' said the father, his lips trembling, 'it has been my fault; but nothing shall stand between us any more.'

The two others looked on for a moment

with conflicting feelings. Mrs. Meredith looked at them with generous tears and satisfaction, yet with a faint pang. *That* was over now. She had always intended it should end thus; but yet for the moment, such is the strange constitution of the heart, it gave her a passing pang. As for the doctor, he gathered his gloves and his hat together with great confusion. He had made a fool of himself. Whatever the others might do, how could he contemplate this solemn disclosure he had come to make, which had been turned into the officious interference of a busybody? He took no leave of anyone; but when they were all engaged with each other, made a bolt for the door of the back drawing-room, and got out, very red, very uncomfortable, and full of self-disgust. He was touched too by the scene which had been so unexpectedly brought before him, and felt tears, very unusual to him, tingling in the corners of his eyes. He met Edward on the stairs; but Edward was too much preoccupied to observe how Maxwell was looking.

'Do you know,' he said, 'if Miss Beresford is in the drawing-room? There is a gentleman waiting for her downstairs.'

'If you mean Cara,' said the doctor, 'she is there, and the mistress of the situation, I can tell you. Oh, never mind; I can let myself out. You'll find them all there.'

Edward stared a little, but went on to deliver his message. 'I hope I am not disturbing anyone,' he said, in the formal manner which he had put on; 'but there is someone, very impatient, waiting for Miss Beresford—I mean Cara,' he added, half ashamed of himself, 'downstairs.'

Cara roused herself from her father's arm. It revived her more than anything else to see that Edward was turning away again to leave the room. She shook the tears from her eyes, and roused herself into sudden energy. 'That was why I came,' she said. 'O, Mrs. Meredith, where is Oswald? We must find him, or they will all break their hearts.'

'Who—you, Cara, my darling? no one shall break your heart.'

'No, no,' she cried, with a little start of impatience. 'It is time this was over. He never would tell you the truth. Oh, we must find him, wherever he is, for Agnes has gone too.'

They all gathered about with looks of wonder, Edward making but one step from the door where he stood. His countenance gleamed over with a sudden light; he put out his hands to her unawares.

'Agnes—who is Agnes!' said Mrs. Meredith. 'O, Cara, what does it all mean? I know nothing about him—where he is. He was to come back to-day.'

'Agnes is Agnes Burchell,' said Cara. 'He has been telling me of her all this time. He has been spending his whole time going after her. And she is gone too, and it is her father who is downstairs. Oh, think how we can find them! Her father is very anxious. Oswald should not have done it,' said Cara, with the solemnity of her age. 'I always begged him, and he always promised, to ask you to go.'

'This is extraordinary news,' said Mrs. Meredith, dropping into the nearest chair. She was trembling with this renewed agitation. 'And you knew it, Cara; you have been his confidant? Oh, what a strange mistake we have all made!'

'It was not my fault,' said Cara, softly.

She gave a furtive glance at Edward as she spoke, and his mother looked at him too. Edward's countenance was transformed, his eyes were lit up, smiles trembling like an illumination over his face. Mrs. Meredith's heart gave a leap in her motherly bosom. She might have been wounded that it was none of her doing; but she was too generous for so poor a thought. He will not go to India now, she said to herself in her heart. The pang which Cara had given her unwittingly was nothing to the compensation thus received from her equally unconscious hands.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE WORST SCRAPE OF ALL.

A RUMOUR had spread in the little hamlet which had gathered about the junction, of some travellers who had missed their train. The faintest rumour echoes a long way in the quiet of the country, and as the village was chiefly formed of the cottages of railway labourers and porters, it was natural that this kind of report should travel more swiftly than anything else. Oswald and his companion walked down the still road in the soft dusk like two ghosts. In the mind of Agnes nothing less than despair was supreme. What was to become of her? Shame, disgrace, destruction, the loss of all things. How could she dare to face the wondering women in the House? Sister Mary Jane might understand her, but who else? And what comments there would be, and what talk! And home—how

could she go home? To spend a night at an inn at all was something entirely strange to Agnes. But thus—all alone, and with a gentleman; one who was not related to her, of whom she could give no account or befitting explanation! A wild fancy seized her of flying from him, disappearing into some corner behind a high hedge, some nook under the trees. But this was as futile as everything else, and might be worse than anything else. She had the bondage of custom before her, though she had put herself into a position in which all her familiar habits were thrown to the winds. And yet going to the inn with Oswald was about as bad as spending a night in direful desolation in the dark corner of a field. The one was not much better than the other! If she could have got away at once, it was the field she would have chosen. She could have crept into a corner in the dark, and there waited, though she might have been frightened, till the morning broke and there was an early train. Had she but done that at once, stolen away before he could see what she was doing! But she could not disappear from his side now, at the risk of being pursued and

argued with and entreated and brought back. So, with her mind in a blank of despair, not knowing what to think, she walked close by his side between the hedgerows through the soft darkness. Oh, what a punishment was this for the indiscretion of the day! It was indiscretion, perhaps, but surely the punishment was more terrible than the guilt. She drew the thick gauze veil which was attached to her bonnet over her face. What could anyone think of her—in that dress? Then there came into her mind, to increase her pain, an instant vivid realisation of what her mother would say. Mrs. Burchell would judge the very worst of any such victim of accident. 'Why did she lose her train?' her mother would have said. 'Depend upon it, such things don't happen when people take common care.' Agnes knew how her mother would look, denouncing the unfortunate with hard eyes in which was no pity; and naturally her mother was her standard. So, no doubt, people would think—people who were respectable, who never placed themselves in embarrassing situations. They would go further, she thought, with a still more poignant touch of

anguish—they would say that this is what comes of religious vagaries, of sisterhoods, of attempts at being or doing something more than other people. They would laugh and sneer, and hold her up as an example—and oh, never, never, never, could she get the better of this! it would cling to her all her life—never, never could she hold up her head again!

Oswald too was full of thought, planning in his mind how he was to carry out his intentions, his mind so overflowing with plans that he could not talk. He had been grieved to the heart by the dilemma into which his carelessness had plunged them. But now he began to recover, and a certain sensation of boyish pleasure in the escapade came stealing into his mind. He would not have acknowledged it, but still there it was. The village was a mere collection of common cottages in yellow brick, as ugly as it was possible to imagine; but the inn was an old roadside inn of past times, red, with a high-pitched roof all brown with lichen, showing the mean modernness of the others. An inquisitive landlady stood at the door watching for them, inquisitive but good-natured, the fame of their failure having travelled before them. Oswald

strode on in advance when he saw the woman. 'Good evening,' he said, taking off his hat, which was a civility she was not used to. 'If you are the landlady, may I speak to you? There is a young lady here who has missed her train. She is very much frightened and distressed. Can you give her a room and take care of her. It is all an accident. Can you take care of her for the night?'

'And you too, sir?' asked the woman.

'Oh, never mind me. It is the young lady who is important. Yes, Miss Burchell,' he said, going back to Agnes, 'here is someone who will attend to you. I will not ask you to talk to me to-night,' he added, dropping his voice, 'but do not be surprised if you find me gone in the morning. I shall be off by the first train, and you will wait for me here. I think you will be comfortable—everything shall be settled directly.'

'Oh, how can I, how can I? Mr. Meredith, it is not possible. I must bear it. It was not our fault. I will tell them everything, and—I will go home.'

'Yes, darling, with your husband. What does it matter this month or next. You have

promised me one way or the other. There is no harm in getting married,' he said, with a breathless eagerness in his voice. 'Is it not by far the best thing? And then all will be settled at once.'

'No, not that!' she said, breathless too with excitement. 'But if you will go to the House and tell Sister Mary Jane everything—you must tell her everything——'

'I will,' he said fervently. 'Surely you may trust me. And I will bring her to you in the afternoon. Everything shall be right. Now go, my dearest, and rest, and don't worry yourself. I will take all the blame upon myself.'

'The blame was mine too,' she said, gravely. She strained her eyes through the darkness to see his face. Was he taking it with levity—was he unaware of the terrible, terrible seriousness of the whole business? She could not bear the idea that it was anything less than tragic to him too.

'No, I cannot allow that. It was my folly, my thoughtlessness. But could I be expected to think to-day? I can't even say good-night to you, darling. Promise me to sleep, and not to worry yourself with thinking. By six o'clock I shall be off to set all right.'

'To bring the Sister?' she said, casting a soft look back at him. 'I shall be very, very grateful. Good-night.'

'Good-night,' he said. He stood in the little hall and watched her going upstairs, her slight little figure drooping in its black drapery, the cheerful landlady preceding her with a light. What a revolution since the morning! Then she had been a kind of divinity worshipped at a distance, now she was his; and not only his, but already dependent upon him, absolutely in his hands. To do Oswald justice, this consciousness only increased the touch of reverence which had always mingled with his love. She was not a girl like other girls, though, indeed, full of levity and carelessness as he was, Oswald had never been disrespectful even of those 'other girls,' who were not to be mentioned in the same breath with Agnes. She was by herself; there was no one like her. Even in this indiscretion which she had committed—and though it was entirely his fault yet it could not be denied that it was an indiscretion—what a delicate veil of maidenly reserve had been about her! Still like one of Perugino's angels just touching earth, ready to fly if exposed to a look or word less

exquisite than her own purity. This was how he thought of her, and it is well for all parties when young lovers think so; though not the wildest extravagance of 'fastness' could be worse than what Agnes thought of it in the silence of the little room upstairs where she had already fallen down upon her knees by the bed, crying her heart out, her face hidden in an anguish of shame. Oswald's feelings were less acute. He went out when she disappeared and sat down on the bench outside, where two or three silent men were sitting smoking, drinking their beer, and giving forth a fragmentary remark at intervals. There was no light but that which streamed from the open door, and the little red-curtained window beside it, where the same kind of dull sociable drinking was going on. Outside, the soft night air and pale yet warm night sky elevated the homely scene. Oswald took off his hat and exposed his head to the fresh caressing of the air, which blew his hair about and refreshed him body and soul. He was tired, for he had taken an unusual amount of exercise, not to speak of the strain of mind he was still undergoing. He took a mighty draught of beer, and felt himself strong

again. Naturally there had been no such beverage in the boat, and even the smile of Agnes, which, though sweet was very timid, did not sustain his strained muscles; and he had rowed hard for the last half-hour at least, and was unaccustomed to the exertion—out of training, as he would have said. So that altogether it was in a very agreeable moment of repose that he set himself to a final arrangement of his plan. He was in a scrape, no doubt; but that he was used to, and this time what a glorious scrape it was! a fit climax to all the others of which he had exhausted the sensations; but for Agnes indeed, and her pain, it was, he said to himself, the very way he would have chosen to settle his marriage. No lingering negotiations, no presentations to her family, and sense of being on his best behaviour while they inspected him, no fuss of presents and trousseau, and tiresome delay (to tell the truth, no one would have enjoyed the presents and the preparations, and all the importance of the intervening time more than Oswald; but his easy mind easily ignored this, and took refuge in the most desirable aspect of the alternative). The only thing he disliked in the prospect before him was the idea of having

to get up very early in the morning, which, especially after the fatigue and excitement of this day, was a bore to think of. Otherwise everything was ideal, he persuaded himself. He watched a light come into a window overhead as he sat resting enjoying the fresh air. That must be her room, bless her! Poor darling, how pale she had grown, how frightened! But never in her sweet life to come should there be anything to be frightened of. Thus Oswald resolved in his tender thoughts.

'Do you know at what hour the first train goes?' he asked of one of the men who were sitting by.

'Well, master, mostly it's at six o'clock,' was the answer; 'but to-morrow, you see, being Sunday——'

'Good heavens! Sunday!' he said, with a cry of dismay.

'Well, wherever 'ave you been a-living not to know it was Sunday? Any fool knows that. I reckon, master, as you've come from abroad. They don't take no notice of Sundays there, I've heard say. It's Sunday, and ten o'clock is the first train; and early enough too,' said the man, who was a porter on the railway, and felt the hardship of the rest disturbed.

Oswald could not find a word to say. He had forgotten this terrible fact. It made everything doubly terrible for the moment, and it turned all his own plans into foolishness. He sat dumb, unable to say a word, unable even to think, his mouth open, his heart beating. What was to be done? Now, indeed, he felt the harm of his folly; a whole day lost, and Agnes kept in this equivocal position, and all tongues let loose. This fairly sobered the light-hearted young man. He stole upstairs to the little bedroom which had been prepared for him, still speechless, as much cast down as Agnes was. What were they to do? He flung himself on his bed in a kind of despair.

Next morning, though it was not his custom, Oswald was awake as early as if the train had been six o'clock, as he thought. It was better not to let her know, not to agitate her further. Having once got this idea into his head, he went further, and resolved upon the most disinterested course of action possible. He would go all the same, though he could do nothing he wished to do—and carry out her will; she should be satisfied. To do this, with newborn delicacy, he left the inn early, so that she might

suppose he had only carried out his original intention. What would Sister Mary Jane say to him? He would be the wolf and Agnes the lamb in her eyes. How could anyone think otherwise? But what did it matter so long as Agnes had justice? He went up to town in the aggravating tedium of a slow Sunday train. It was true he had come down in a slow train the day before, but that was entirely different, there was no tedium in it. The streets were very still when he got to town, everybody being at church, as good Christians ought, and it was only after repeated knockings that he got admission at the big door of the House. The porteress gave a little scream at sight of him. 'Oh, sir, can you tell us anything of Miss Burchell? She never wrote to say she was going to stay, and we've been that anxious about her!'

'Can I speak to the Sister Superior?' said Oswald, somewhat troubled in his mind as to the reception he would receive.

'The Sister Superior has been sent for to the mother-house, sir,' said the porteress. 'She had to go yesterday. It is some meeting—nobody knew it till yesterday. Perhaps she will be

back to-morrow, but we don't know. Would Sister Catherine do? If it was anything about Miss Burchell——'

'It was the Sister Superior I wanted,' said Oswald, and after a pause he turned away. He would not say anything about Miss Burchell. After he had left the House, it occurred to him that even this humble porteress would have been better than nothing, but then it was too late. He walked about the streets for a whole hour, questioning with himself what he ought to do. His mother? She was very kind, but she was not without her prejudices; and would not she recollect afterwards that her first sight of her daughter-in-law had been at the railway inn at the junction, in a semi-conventual dress, and a most equivocal position. If he could but have laid hands on Cara? But on what excuse could he run away with a second young lady? No—there was nothing for it now; he must go back to Agnes, and tell her of his non-success, which was not his fault, and next day he must carry out his own plan. There was nothing else for it. He went to the chambers of a friend, not venturing to go home, and borrowed some clothes; then went back again in the afternoon.

There were few trains, and not many people were travelling so far. He was the only individual who got out at the junction, where already he was a person of importance.

'The young lady said as there was another lady coming,' the porter said to him, who had told him last night about the train; and the man looked suspiciously about the carriage, in the netting and under the seat.

'Do you think I've made away with her?' said Oswald; but he trembled as he walked down the road to the inn between the two high hedgerows. Agnes was walking about, waiting, with wistful eyes. He saw at a glance that she had modified her dress by some strange art not to be divined by man. Her cloak was laid aside; her long black dress looked severely graceful in comparison with the snippings and trimmings of fashion, but not otherwise extraordinary. And she had a simple hat, borrowed from the landlady's daughter, over the warm golden brown Perugino hair. She stood still, clasping her hands, when she saw he was alone.

'It is no fault of mine,' he said, going up to her in hurried apology and desperation. Agnes grew so pale that he lost all his courage.

'She would not come then?' the poor girl cried, with a half-sobbing sigh.

'No, no; not that; she was not there. It is our bad luck. She has gone to the mother-house, whatever that may be. What could I do? I have done nothing but think since I left you. O Agnes, forgive me, my darling, for having brought you into this! My own plan is the only one; but I never thought of this—Sunday—to-morrow, to morrow everything can be arranged.'

This was the text upon which he enlarged for the whole afternoon. There was not another train till the evening, and what could they do even if there had been trains? They had to eat the chicken which the curious landlady had prepared, together, and went out again in the afternoon, and sat under a tree and talked. They were miserable, or at least Agnes was miserable—and yet happy. Oh, if she had but known, if she had but gone on this morning, or back to Limpet Bay, where there were Sisters and a shelter! But now! every moment compromised her more, and made it more impossible to do anything but acquiesce in what he proposed. And so the long, slow, weary, anxious,

miserable, delicious Sunday wore to a close; it was all these things together. They took the landlady into their confidence, and told her all that had happened, while Agnes sat crying. She thought even this woman would shrink from her; but the woman, on the contrary, was deeply interested, delighted, and flattered. There was the parsonage half a mile off, and the clergyman the kindest old gentleman. A wedding in the house! She could not contain herself with pride and pleasure. Crying! what was the young lady crying about? An 'usband that adored her instead of them nunnery places as she never could abide to hear of. This unexpected support quite exhilarated Oswald, and it cowed Agnes, who had no power of self-assertion left.

In this way it all came about according to Oswald's rapid programme which he had sketched out as soon as he knew they were too late on Saturday night. He was so much in earnest, so eager to carry out his plans, that, much as it went against his mind to do so, he went to town again on Monday by the six o'clock train. As soon as the offices were opened he presented himself at the proper

place (wherever that may be; I have not the information) and got his licence. By this time he was so much himself again, his light heart had so regained its characteristic boyish ease, and the tragicality had gone so completely out of the situation, that it seemed to him the best of jokes—a delightful, practical pleasantry, a piece of charming mischief to startle all sober people. He went about in his hansom with involuntary smiles on his lips, the chief thing that alarmed him being the chance of meeting Edward or Cara or someone who would know him. How startled they would be when they knew! Poor dear little Cara, would she *feel* it just a little? But for the rest it was the greatest joke. To come down upon them with his wife—his *wife!* Oswald laughed in spite of himself, half with happiness, half with a sense of the fun. When he had got his licence safe in his pocket—which gave a kind of legality to the whole—he went to a famous milliner's, and had a large boxful of things packed up. This was a business which delighted him. He chose a little white bonnet, a white dress, partially made, which the lady's maid could arrange in an hour, the smiling

milliner assured him, a veil which would envelope the figure of Agnes from top to toe, a hat in which she could travel. How she was to be transported to London in that white silk dress it did not occur to him to ask; for he was still young and thoughtless, though on the eve of being married. He had never seen her surrounded by any of the pretty finery which girls love, in nothing but her black dress and poke bonnet. To throw the veil about her, to see her Perugino countenance under the large leaved hat with its drooping feathers, what a transformation it would be! And when, having done all his business, he travelled back to the junction with his big dressmaker's box, all thoughts except those of delighted anticipation had gone out of Oswald's mind. The junction had a friendly look to him, and he walked down the lane to the inn with the feeling of going home.

What a fortunate thing that the poor old governor had died when he did! Poor old fellow! his son did not grudge him his existence as long as he remained in this world, or rather in the other world across the seas in

India, where he interfered with nobody. But as he did mean to die, what a thing it was that he should have done it just then. Oswald made a hurried run to his banker's while he was in town, and supplied himself with money, that grand requisite of all extravagant and eccentric proceedings. He was as happy as a child walking down the lane, the porters grinning and knowing all about it, carrying the big box after him; he had got his own portmanteau, too, with his best clothes in it, according to the orders which he had telegraphed to the Square; and all was ready for the wedding. Surely a stranger wedding never was. The little cluster of houses at the junction was as much excited as if the event had been a family one concerning each house. How did they know? Who could say? The landlady swore it was no doing of hers. Agnes would not wear the white silk which he had bought for her, but consented to put on a plain white muslin which the dressmaker next door had luckily just made for herself, and which she was free to dispose of at a profit. And so the soft June twilight dropped and the dews fell once more, and quite a little crowd hung about

the inn, trying for a peep at 'them.' Only three days since they came from London in separate carriages to meet 'by accident' on the sands. And now they were bridegroom and bride, and to-morrow was their wedding-day.

CHAPTER XLIV.

CLEARING UP.

MR. BURCHELL was brought upstairs with some solemnity. Though Mrs. Meredith's mind was very full of all that had been passing, and with no small amount of personal feeling, a father in such a case could not be put off. They were all agitated in different ways, the elder people painfully, the young ones happily. As for Edward, his energy and satisfaction knew no bounds. He even jarred upon the feelings of the others, though most innocently, his heart was so light. 'You are like Oswald,' his mother said to him, with a sigh of anxiety; 'you are not like yourself.' 'I feel like Oswald,' said Edward. He did not seem able to put his self-gratulation into fitter words. The sense of being second, of being the shadow to Oswald's sunshine, went out of his mind; and, with it, all sense of grudging and everything like envy, which, however deeply

repressed and disapproved, had been in his heart hitherto, an involuntary weakness. All that was over now. That Cara loved him he scarcely ventured to believe; but she was free; she was not swept up like every other good thing by his elder brother. What an ease diffused itself through his heart! And with Cara, too, the sensation was that of ease; her bonds were broken. She might have stood faithful still as the Screen (for indeed that poor lady was in the *Vita Nuova*, and it was not kind of great Dante, great as he was!) but circumstances had broken her bonds. Cara had not been intimate with Agnes Burchell that she should be much disturbed by finding out her identity with Oswald's Agnes. And after the first shock she was confident that nothing amiss could have happened to her while Oswald was there. And her own pre-occupations made the whole matter but secondary in her mind. Was it selfish of her? But she could not help it. She had cast off more than one burden; her young frame was tingling with the excitement of the two disclosures she had made, one of which had brought her father to her, the other—well, the other at least had set her free; it had set her right with others, if

nothing more. It was Edward who went to the dining-room to conduct Mr. Burchell upstairs, feeling such a friendliness towards him as words could not express. Had not he been the occasion of it all? 'My mother begs that you will come upstairs,' he said, feeling an inclination to hug his visitor, though he was little captivating. Mr. Burchell had a feeling of disapproval of the house and all that were in it. It was the house Roger had given an account of, where he had dined on Sunday, and where the lady lived who was so intimate with Mr. Beresford. The Rector disapproved of all such intimacy. But he was anxious and rather unhappy about his daughter, and it was his duty to take Cara back out of this doubtful, perhaps polluted house. So he followed his conductor upstairs, looking about him with involuntary criticism. These kind of people had so many comforts that did not fall to the lot of their superiors in every moral sense. Large comfortable houses, many servants, the *Times* every day (he found it on the table in the dining-room), and many other luxuries. He could not help making this remark to himself; he could not afford such pleasures; and now his child, his daughter, not theirs who

perhaps deserved it, had gone away. Matters were not mended when Mrs. Meredith, with all her usual sweetness, but with a thrill of agitation still about her, came up to him holding out her hand.

'Cara tells me that you are anxious about your daughter, and that my son—knows her,' she said, faltering. It was so difficult to know what to say.

'So she tells me,' said the Rector. 'You will understand it is not from me; I know nothing of it. Agnes has said nothing; and perhaps,' he added, looking round with a little natural defiance, 'her absence may turn out to be quite simple; there may be nothing in it. She is not a good correspondent. But we are anxious, her mother and I.'

'I do not know where Oswald is. Oh! heaven knows, if my son has anything to do with it, I shall be grieved, grieved and ashamed to the heart! But no harm will happen to her in Oswald's company,' said Mrs. Meredith, raising her head in her turn with tearful pride. 'I know my boy.'

'It is what I would not say of any child of mine, or of myself, for that matter,' said the

Rector. 'Who can tell what a moment may bring forth? But if there should be anything in it, and you have any clue to your son's movements——'

'I have none. Thursday or Friday he said he would come back. Cara, if you can tell us anything——'

Cara told at once what she knew; how he had heard that Agnes was going somewhere, she did not remember where, and that he had made up his mind to go too, and explain himself. 'Limpet Bay; she is not there,' said Mr. Burchell. He took no interest in the rest of the story, which excited the others so much that half of them spoke together. Edward, however, had the *pas* as being most energetic. 'I will go at once to Limpet Bay,' he said, 'and find out if anything is known of them; that seems the best thing.' Mr. Burchell looked at him with a half-suspicion in his eyes. But this was how it was finally arranged. The Rector himself seemed to have greater confidence in wandering about town. He was going now to his sister's at Notting Hill, and then to the House. Then he would come back again to the Square, to see if any news had come.

'My son Roger will be in London in an hour or two,' he added, with a kind of vague trust in that. But he neither sanctioned nor objected to Edward's mission. He had no notion himself what to do. He had no faith in his own child, and even thought worse of Mrs. Meredith—if there could be a worse or a better about such a person—for thinking well of hers. When he went away at last in his heavy distress they were all relieved. He was to come back in a few hours to see if any news had been received. As for Edward, he was like a man transformed. He ran upstairs with airy energy, thrust what he wanted into a bag, tossed a heap of notebooks on the floor (where his mother found them, and picking them up carefully, put them away behind his bureau where he could not find them), and came down again swiftly and lightly, ready for anything. Then it was arranged that Cara and her father should walk with him to the 'House' to see if anything had been heard there. This new chapter of anxiety was a relief to all of them, strange as it may seem to say so. Even Mrs. Meredith was comforted, after all the personal excitement of the afternoon, to have

this outlet to her emotion. She was not afraid that anything very dreadful could have happened to Oswald, nor, though Mr. Burchell thought her confidence wicked, to anyone else, through her boy. She knew Oswald's faults, she said to herself—who better? but Agnes would get no harm from him. On the other hand, the fact that they had disappeared together was in itself active harm. The boy was safe enough, but the girl—that was a more difficult matter; and even a young man who decoyed away, or could be said to have decoyed away, not a poor milliner or housemaid, but a girl in his own rank—society would look but darkly, there could be no doubt, on such a man. It was evident that in any point of view to find Oswald was the chief thing to be thought of. In the meantime, however, they had been reckoning without their train. There was not one going to Limpet Bay till six o'clock, and a pause perforce had to be made. And people began to come in, to call in the midst of their agitation, the first being actually shown up into the drawing-room while they still stood together talking in their scarcely subsiding excitement. This was more than the others could bear.

Mrs. Meredith indeed met her visitors with her usual smiles, with hands stretched out, with all the air of soft and kind interest in them which bound her friends so close to her; the air of agitation about her only increased the kindness of her looks; but the three others were not so courageous. They all forsook her, stealing away one by one. Mr. Beresford went to his library, where he had so many things to think of. Cara and Edward, stealing away one after the other, met on the stairs. 'Will you come into the Square,' he said, 'till it is time for my train?' The Square was a spot where they had played together when they were children. It had been avoided by both of them without any reason given; now they went out and took refuge in it, where the little ladies and gentlemen of the Square were still playing. They wandered demurely under the flowery shrubs and those kind trees which do not despise London, their hearts beating softly yet loud, their young lives in a tender harmony. They seemed to be walking back into the chapter of their childhood and to see themselves playing hide and seek among the bushes. 'You used to look just like that,' Edward said, pointing to

a pretty child in a white sun-bonnet with her lap full of daisies, who looked up at them with serious blue eyes as they passed. Cara was not so very much older, and yet what a world of youthful experience lay between her and this child. Then naturally they began to talk of what had happened to their knowledge, and of what might have happened which they did not know.

'And you think he really loved her,' Edward said, his voice at this word taking a reverential tone. 'He must indeed—or else ——. But was he in earnest—he was always so full of levity? And where can they have gone?'

'He did not mean to have gone for more than the day. It must have been some accident. He would not have done anything again to get her scolded. *I* scolded him for it before.'

'You scolded him. I wish you would scold me, Cara,' said Edward, looking at her. 'You never talk to me as you used to talk to him. What bad feelings you used to rouse in my mind—you who are as good as an angel! hatred and malice, and all uncharitableness. I went very near to hating my brother. Poor Oswald, I shall stand by him now through thick and thin.'

'I am glad of that,' said Cara, thankfully ignoring what went before.

'That is your doing too, like the other; Cara —there seems so many things that I want to say to you.'

'Oh, we must not talk of anything to-day, but how to get this settled,' cried the girl, with a nervous shiver. 'What a trouble for your mother, to see all these people to-day. I could not stay to help her—it seemed impossible; but she—she could not be unkind to anyone,' said Cara, with generous fervour; though indeed Mrs. Meredith, unwittingly, had strewn a few thorns in Cara's pathway too.

'Yes,' said Edward; 'I don't think my mother is a humbug—at least, yes, she is, in the way of kindness. She can't bear that anyone should feel neglected—and yet she means it, too,' he added, doubtfully looking up at the window, at which some of her visitors showed, for the day was very warm. Her friends had flooded back upon her, notwithstanding her recent widowhood. It was not like going into society, they all said. Society, indeed, went to her instead. To desert her in her troubles was not a friend's part. The consequence of this doctrine

was that her receptions were almost as crowded as ever, and that all who considered themselves her intimates were more punctual than ever they had been.

'Ought we not to go?' said Cara at last, and they turned and came out through the dusty bushes once more. The Square was not lovely in itself, but it looked like a garden of Eden to the two, when they had been walking in the cool of the day, like Adam and Eve, thinking of each other, talking, with little breaks and relapses into thoughts which were dangerous, but very sweet, of other things. Now they came out again, side by side. As they crossed the road, Roger Burchell joined them. He had been sent for, and had hurried up, poor fellow, to do his duty, and look for his lost sister. It was not a happy errand to begin with, nor was it exactly happiness for him to see Cara, though the thought of doing so had lent wings to his feet. He looked at her with a face full of suppressed agitation, longing and yet suspicious. This was not the Meredith he was afraid of—this was the one with whom he was rather in sympathy, the unfortunate one, like himself. But there was something in the looks of the two which hurt Roger

and angered him, he could scarcely have told why.

'He addressed Edward rather roughly. 'If you are going after them, tell me,' he said, with a hoarse tone in his voice, 'or I will do it. There is no time to lose.'

'I am waiting only for the train,' said Edward. It was a valid excuse enough, and poor Roger felt that he might have waited hours for the train without being amused meantime in this heavenly fashion. The gate of the garden was at some little distance from the house, close to the thoroughfare which passed along the end of the Square. They could see along this line of road as they turned to go back.

'We must go for Mr. Beresford,' Edward was saying. 'He was to go with us first to the House.'

Here he stopped short, open-mouthed, and the others stopped too, by that curious instinct which makes one man share in the startled sensations of his companion, without knowing what they mean. They were both startled like Edward. A carriage had drawn up within a little distance, and two people were getting out of it. Cara's eye, following Edward's, reached

this little group. She ran forward, with a low cry. The new-comers, seeing nobody, occupied with themselves, advanced steadily. They came up to the corner of the Square. Just within that comparative stillness, they too started and stopped, he facing the others boldly, with smiles on his face, she drooping, blushing, trembling, with her hand on his arm.

'Oswald! for heaven's sake, who is this lady?' cried Edward, stepping in advance. The others waited with equal eagerness, though they knew very well who she was.

'Edward, my good fellow, you must make much of her,' said Oswald. He was really moved, and his gay voice faltered. 'You and Cara—We want you and Cara to make up our happiness. This is my wife.'

Though it was the public road, or, at least, the corner of the Square, Cara rushed forward and threw herself upon Agnes, who, red as a rose, with downcast face and eyes that could not bear the light, stood on her trial, as it were. Edward put out one hand to her and another to his brother, without saying a word. He came, unthinking, between Roger and his sister.

'You and Cara.' He and Cara; nothing to

say to the brother, who stood behind, red and lowering, looking on, noticed by no one, like a stranger. The two pairs fell together as by nature; Roger was the one who was left out. Is it not the very essence of all youthful story, even of all childish games, that someone should be left out? The little girl in the sun-bonnet in the Square garden could have produced half a dozen instances—that there is no fun without this; from puss in the corner upwards, the situation is invariable. But the left-out one does not see the fun. Roger stood, and changed into all manner of colours. He was not wanted. He and Agnes—he and Cara; for himself nobody, no companion, no notice, no share in it all. To take it sentimentally and sadly, and turn away, in all the dignity of the neglected, is one way; to be angry and resent is another. Roger, who felt the hot blood tingling down to his very finger-points, chose the latter. He made a step forward, pushing Edward aside, even thrusting aside Cara, and seized his sister roughly by the arm.

'What is the meaning of all this?' he said. 'Agnes, what do you want here? Where have you been? My father has come up to town in

trouble about you; my mother is ill of it at home. Where have you been? These people have nothing to do with you. You've got to give me an explanation of it—and you too, sir!' cried Roger, with natural inconsistency, turning fiercely upon Oswald. What! this fellow, who had appropriated Cara so calmly, was he to have Agnes too?

'Oh, Roger! don't quarrel—don't quarrel! I went home this morning. Mamma knows,' cried Agnes, flushed and tearful, clasping her hands.

'And I am ready to give you every explanation,' said Oswald. 'You have a right to it. We were married on Tuesday. It was no doing of hers. The fault is all mine. And your mother is satisfied. Come in with us, and you shall have every detail. And come, Roger, shake hands with me. There is no harm done after all.'

'Harm done!' cried the young man in his bitterness; 'harm done! Is it no harm that she has disgraced herself? I don't know what greater harm is in the world.'

'Oh, Roger, Roger!'

'This has gone far enough,' said Oswald;

'take care what you say. Agnes, my darling, take my arm, and come to my mother. He does not know what he is saying; and Ned, come along, you and Cara. There are a hundred things to tell you. I want you to hear everything to-day.'

They passed him, while he stood fuming with bitter rage, not on account of Agnes, though she was the excuse for it. She took all the guilt to herself, however, looking at him pitifully, appealing to him as her husband led her to his mother's door.

'Roger, oh Roger, dear, come with us!' she cried. She had spoken to no one but him.

But Roger paid no attention to Agnes. It was the other pair who had all his thoughts; he seemed to be supplanted over again, to have all the pangs of failure to bear over again. The idea of Oswald's success with Cara had become familiar to him, and there was a little consolation in the fact that Edward, like himself, was unhappy. But at this new change, the poor young fellow ground his teeth. It was more than he could bear. Rage and anguish were in his eyes. Even Cara's kind look at him, her little mute apology and deprecation of his wrath, increased it.

Why should he go with them? What did it matter to him? His sister? Oh, there were plenty of people to look after his sister, and why should he follow them, who cared so little for him? But, after a while, he did follow them. There is something in this kind of suffering which attracts the sufferer to the rack. He is in course of healing when he has the courage to turn his back upon it, and go firmly away.

The whole young party went into the dining-room, where the *Times* which Mr. Burchell had grudged to Mrs. Meredith was still on the table. A dining-room is an oppressive place for such a purpose. It looks like bad interviews with fathers, when there are admonitions to be given, or those fearful moments when a young offender is detained after the others have left the cheerful table, to be told of his faults. Agnes went into the house of her husband's mother, with her heart in her mouth, or, at least, in her throat, leaping wildly, ready to sink into the ground with shame and terror. How would Mrs. Meredith receive her? Her own mother had yielded only to the arguments which the poor girl despised the most, to the details of Oswald's income, and the settlements, about which he had already written to his

lawyer. This mollified her—not Agnes's weeping explanations; and the bride's heart was still sore from the pang of this forgiveness, which Oswald, not caring in the least for Mrs. Burchell, had been quite satisfied with. He did not care very much for anything except herself, she had already found out, and took all disapproval with the frankest levity of indifference, which made it burn all the more into the heart of Agnes. Perhaps it was necessary for her to have a burden of one kind or another. And his mother; how would his mother look upon her? Would she set her down, as it was so natural for mothers to do, as the guilty party, the chief offender? Agnes had felt that her own mother had done this. She had excused Oswald. 'No man would ever think of such a thing, if he had not got encouragement.' Even Sister Mary Jane had said so, in a modified and more generous way. Was it always the poor girl's, the poor wife's fault? Agnes shrank into a corner. She could not take any courage from Cara's caressings, who came and hung about her, full of admiration and interest.

'I was his confidante all the time,' said

Cara; 'but how was I to know that his Agnes was you?'

Agnes did not get much comfort out of this; she was not quite sure even that she liked him to have had a girl confidante. Though she was 'happy,' in the ordinary sense of the word, as applied to brides, happy in the love of her new husband, and in her own love for him, yet the troubles of the moment had seized hold upon her at their worst. She trembled for the opening of the door. She was almost at the limit of her powers of endurance. Her 'happiness' had cost her dear. She had got it at the sacrifice of all her tender prejudices, all her little weaknesses of sentiment. She took Roger's angry speech for true, and endorsed it. However happily it might all turn out, though everything should be better than she thought, still she would have disgraced herself. Nobody could be so much shocked at the whole business as she herself was. To everyone who censured her she was ready to say amen. It may be supposed, therefore, that the feelings with which she awaited Oswald's mother were agitating enough. If Mrs. Meredith received her unkindly, or coldly—and how was it possible that

a mother could receive otherwise than coldly such an unexpected bride? — it seemed to Agnes, in her discouragement and terror, that she must fall at her feet and die.

'Go and tell my mother, Ned,' said Oswald, who was himself rather breathless with suspense. 'Go, you and Cara—take Cara with you. She will be kinder if you go together.'

'Was she ever unkind?' said Cara, half indignant.

'Come all the same,' said Edward, taking her hand in the freedom of the moment. 'If I offer to make a sacrifice to her if she will forgive them?' he whispered, as they went upstairs together—'it will not be true—Cara, may I do it, not being true?'

'Does she want to be paid for her kindness?' said Cara, whispering back; but she smiled, notwithstanding, not knowing what he meant, yet knowing quite well what he meant. They went into the drawing-room thus, still for the moment hand in hand, which Mrs. Meredith perceiving, turned round from her guests with a little excitement. What had they come to tell her? She disengaged herself from the people whom she was talking to, and hurried

towards them, breathless—'Children, what is it?' the conjunction had already had its effect.

'Mother, Oswald and his wife are downstairs; come and speak to them—come and console her.'

'His wife! Good heavens! has it gone so far?—and is that all?' the mother said inconsistently in one breath.

Edward went up close to her, and whispered in her ear—'And I no longer think of going to India. If that pleases you, forgive them.'

'Traitor!' said Mrs. Meredith; 'that is not the reason;' and then, 'God bless you, my darling!' she said, with tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER XLV.

CONCLUSION.

It is not necessary to go into details, and tell how Mrs. Meredith forgave her son and received her new daughter. In any case, I don't believe she would have been capable of 'hurting Agnes's feelings' by a cold reception; but as it was, she was as tender to her as if she had been her own daughter, and Oswald was the stranger husband who had to be forgiven. A great deal of this was that superlative politeness which was part of her nature, and part of it was the result of Edward's communication. The cloud which had spoilt everything was definitely lifted from her life, and to be good to the trembling, timid bride, which was the first kind action within her reach, was Mrs. Meredith's way of thanksgiving for her happiness. It must be allowed it is not a bad way, as good as giving public thanks in church, or

perhaps better, though that is good too. When Agnes began a faltering confession of wrong doing, Mrs. Meredith kissed her and stopped her.

'My dear, we will think nothing more of that,' she said; 'we might have wished it otherwise; but no one is beyond the reach of accident, and this will end most happily, please God, for all of us.'

The result of the interview was that Agnes fell in love with her mother-in-law—not a very usual thing, if one puts one's faith in books, yet not unparalleled. They understood each other, or rather the elder woman understood the younger, and with her warm natural charity was able to comprehend and excuse everything. She looked with a little wonder and amusement at the awe with which Agnes still regarded her bridegroom. That there should be someone in the world who did not simply make allowance for Oswald, and love him in spite of his faults, but to whom his faults were as yet invisible, and himself worthy of deepest respect and admiration, was a thing which was very amusing to his mother. She could scarcely keep from smiling when she saw the serious

looks of veneration which his wife gave him. 'Hush, hush,' she said, when Edward, grown saucy, ventured to smile at his brother, and when she even herself felt tempted to say, 'How like Oswald!' Oswald was like everything that was fine and noble and generous to his bride.

'And if he did not think of himself quite so much, how good my poor boy is,' the mother said, with tears in her eyes; and in future, perhaps, he would not think so much of himself.

Anyhow, on the other side everybody was quite satisfied. Oswald, never ungenerous, made settlements upon his wife after they were married which filled the Burchell family with admiration. And they got a pretty little house, and made a kind of religion of furnishing it; and for every pretty thing they got, Agnes, compunctious, hurried down to the House and devised something for the orphans. Sister Mary Jane grew used to these visits, and, being a wise woman, restrained undue liberalities. She gave a great a deal of good advice to the young wife. 'If you take on another child for every bit of china,' she said, 'there will soon

be no room for the girls, and no money left in the purse.'

'Oh, how can I let money be spent for nothings, when I know how much need there is in the world!' cried Agnes. It was difficult to answer such arguments. As for Oswald, he never attempted to answer them. He gave her to understand that she was a mixture of a goose and an angel.

'Both have wings, you know,' he said, going away light-hearted to his pleasures, and understanding about as much of the more serious feelings in her mind as her baby did when she had one, which fortunately was in good time. He made the best of husbands, ever eager that she should spend more money on her dressmaker, entertain more, have all manner of pleasures. Louisa Burchell, who was the next sister, thought the little house in Mayfair was like heaven; and Mrs. Burchell kept a list of the important people to whose houses Agnes was asked, looking up her noble acquaintances in the peerage, and finding out the incomes of the rich ones, and the works of those who wrote or painted (though these last figured much less largely in her mind). And

Agnes was happy; to have a husband you love, and in due time a pretty baby; and a delightful little house in Mayfair, and a pair of ponies, and more dresses and bonnets than you wish for—could there be a happier lot? If a young woman in such beatific circumstances got confused sometimes in her mind, and wondered whether it might not be better to walk about at the head of a procession of school girls in a black cloak and poke-bonnet, and to work in stuffy schoolrooms, and to have no more recreation than could be got among the girls in S. Cecilia, what could that be but momentary aberration or even a kind of temporary insanity? Is not a wife better than a Sister? Oswald had no kind of doubt on the subject when he saw his beautiful young wife at the head of his table, and reflected with inward complacency upon the aspect she bore when first he saw her, though at that time he had thought the poke-bonnet half-divine. But Agnes was not so sure, had not such unhesitating convictions as her husband, and wondered. This perhaps, was the penalty she paid for her escapade. Oswald's light-heartedness was alien to her serious mood. He took his existence so

easily! and she knew that life was not so easy a matter, and would take an occasional panic as the fair landscape glided past her, the beautiful days and years flying away from her as fields and trees do on a journey, when you seem yourself to be stationary, and it is the country about that flies and travels on either side.

If she had known him longer, if she had known him better, would it have made any difference? In all probability not the slightest, and she did not ask herself that question; for, after all, Oswald was Oswald, and the only man in the whole world ——

As for the other personages mentioned in these pages, their affairs worked themselves out as was to be expected, with no very extraordinary results. Roger Burchell recovered of his wound because he could not help it, not with any will of his; and went out to India in due time, where he did very well and made steady progress, but neither then nor now became very remarkable. He married too in the due course of events, when he could afford it—as most men do, except perhaps in the very heart and centre of society, a sect so small that it does not affect the world's continuance, nor need necessarily

affect our peace of mind who look on. He forgot Cara and the chapter in his life which was dominated by her, far more completely than the romantic reader would believe possible, and was not at all sure after he had been some years married whether it was not he who had behaved badly to her; and, indeed, I think his wife had this impression, and never having seen this object of his early affections, was rather pleased to believe Cara a little flirt with whom her Roger had been involuntarily 'entangled,' but escaped in time. So stories are travestied and turned into myths with piquant change of circumstance all over the world.

Mr. Maxwell had a more unlikely fate. Bursting out of No. 6 in the Square, in the trouble of his mind, after that unlucky interference which had come to less than nothing, but which must, he felt sure, cost him his friends, he went with murderous energy through all his round of patients, and took it out of them with unregulated zeal, making his hypochondriacs really ill by way of variety, twisting the joints and cramping the sinews of the unhappy people in his hands as cruelly as Prospero. This way of avenging himself upon mankind, however, did not prevent him from

suffering tortures in his own person. Should he apologise—should he appeal to Cara to intercede for him. Should he go humbly to the feet of the injured one, and ask to be kicked and forgiven? He adopted another expedient more wonderful than any of these? Next day was the day of his weekly visit to the Hill. Lovelier lights and visions than those that revealed themselves through the openings of the trees on that sweetest day of June could scarcely be. The sky was as soft as a child's eyes—the air as its breath. The trees hung rich and close still in their early green, throwing their wealth of foliage all the more closely together to hide that the flowers were over, the may faded, the golden laburnum boughs all dropped to dust. Through the leafy arches came glimpses of the great plain all billowy with trees, shadowing far into the blue distance, and the great grey castle with its royal flag. Underneath on the hedgerows there was one flush of the wild rose lighting up the winding road as with a smile. To live on such a day was enough for pleasure. To move through it easily without fatigue, with trees waving over you, and the unfathomable blue shining, and the sun throwing magical gleams over the

landscape, hushed even the most restless soul to a semblance of goodness and happiness. Unless you happen to be toiling along a dusty road, in the blaze of the sunshine, in tight boots, or a dress too warm for the season, which circumstances I allow to be contrary both to happiness and goodness, I cannot understand how you could refuse to be good and happy on such a day.

But everything promoted these exemplary sensations about the Hill. Fatigue was not there, nor dust, nor undue heat. Old Miss Charity in her sun-bonnet, and less old but still not young Miss Cherry in her cool and soft grey gown, were on the lawn, surrounded by a world of roses—roses everywhere in standards, in dwarfs, on trellis-work, over arches, along the walls. The air was just touched by them to a delicate sweetness, to be elevated into beatitude when you approached your face to a particular flower. Mr. Maxwell arrived with his troubled soul, and the ladies made much of him. They compassionated him for his hot drive. They offered him tea; they gave him, on his refusal of the tea, claret cup with great bits of ice tinkling in it, and making a grateful noise.

They gave him a comfortable chair on the lawn, where he had his doctor's talk with old Miss Charity, and felt her pulse and admired its steady beat, not one more or less than it ought to be. 'Please God, if I live long enough, I'll pull you along to a hundred,' he said, with professional enthusiasm. 'But I shall not live long enough,' he added, in a despondent tone.

'How old are you now?' said Miss Charity. 'Fifty? phoo, nonsense. I am seventy-three. I want only seven-and-twenty of the hundred. You will be just over my present age when we've accomplished it. And what a thing to have lived for?' The old lady was more ready for the joke than he was—he shook his head.

'You can't think what foolish things I have been doing,' he said; 'never man made a greater fool of himself.'

'You have been asking someone to marry you, my poor man!'

'No, by Jove! I never thought of that,' he said, looking up quickly. Miss Cherry had walked discreetly out of hearing, as she always did while they had their medical talk. This was evidently a new idea to the doctor. 'No,'

he went on, 'trying to keep other people from marrying, that was all.'

'Still sillier; they will hate you for ever and ever,' Miss Charity said, in her ignorance, seated cool and smiling in her garden chair.

Meanwhile Miss Cherry strayed to one of the openings and looked wistfully across the country. She wanted to hear about 'the child.' A thousand questions were on her lips, but in her soft old-maidenly self-consciousness she did not like to take the doctor aside in her turn, and there were questions which she did not wish to ask in her aunt's presence. It may be imagined then what her surprise was when, startled by a voice at her elbow, she turned round and found the doctor by her side. 'The views are lovely to-day,' he said; but he was not thinking of the views, Miss Cherry could see. Had he something painful to tell her—had anything gone wrong? She began to ask a few faltering questions. 'Tell me about Cara,' she said. 'I am so hungering for news of the child.' Miss Cherry looked up pathetically in the doctor's face with wistful anxiety in her soft eyes—everything about her was soft, from her grey gown to her eyes. A mild con-

solatory woman, not charming like Mrs. Meredith, not clever like other people he knew, but a refreshment, like green lawns and green leaves and quietness to the heart. The doctor turned round to see that nobody was looking. The old lady, who had her suspicions of him, had gone in, and like a naughty old lady as she was, had gone upstairs to a bedroom window, where she stood behind the curtains, chuckling to herself, to watch the result. When Mr. Maxwell saw the coast was clear and nobody looking (as he thought), he turned round again to Miss Cherry, who stood anxiously waiting for the next word, and deliberately, without a word of preface, fired as it were point blank into her with a pistol at her heart—that is to say, he proposed. A greater shock never was administered by any human being to another. Right off on the spot, without wasting any words, he offered her himself and his brougham and his practice and all that he had. The old lady at the window—naughty old lady!—could make out the very moment when it was done, and saw Cherry's start and jump of amazement. 'Will she have him?' she asked herself. 'I could not put up with a man in my house.'

But it does not do to take a gentle old maiden like Miss Cherry so suddenly. In the very extremity of her surprise, she said no. How she trembled! 'Oh no, I could not, I could not, thank you, Mr. Maxwell! I am too old *now*. Long ago I might have thought of such a thing; but I could not, I could not. It is not possible. You must excuse me *now*.'

'Oh, no one will force you, Miss Cherry, against your inclination,' said the doctor, angry and discomfited. And without waiting to say good-day to his patient, he went off and threw himself into his brougham more uncomfortable than before.

Whether Miss Cherry ever regretted this I cannot tell—perhaps if she had not been so entirely taken by surprise—but 'Oh no, oh no,' she said to herself, 'I could not have done it. It would have been cheating Cara.' But what a shock it was on that June afternoon! As if the man had brought an electric battery with him, Miss Charity said, who was the only one of the three, however, to whom it was an amusement and no shock at all.

Such was the end of this middle-aged wooing, which was all over in a quarter of an hour.

The other of which we know, which had been going on so long, and which only artificial motives made into a wooing at all, had been broken off very abruptly by that interpellation of Dr. Maxwell's and all that followed. It was not till after the commotion caused by Oswald's return, and all the arrangements consequent upon his marriage, were over, that the two friends returned to this broken chapter again. The changes which had happened had not thrown them apart, however, and the naturalness with which, even in the suspense of this question between themselves, their intercourse went on, showed plainly either that warmer relationships were unlikely or that they were the most natural things in the world; but which? Each of them had been slightly piqued by the absence of enthusiasm on the part of the other, but even that pique produced no enthusiasm in themselves. They were exactly in the same state of feeling, their minds only too much alike. But a return to the question was inevitable one way or other, and Mr. Beresford took it in hand, not without a little tremor, one still summer evening at the usual hour, when

they were sitting in their usual places, their windows open, but the lamps lighted, and the soft dusk outside relieving with its shadowy background the soft illumination within.

'Do you remember,' he said, 'the talk we had one evening before all these agitations began? It was not decided. You would not say yes, or no.'

'Would I not say no? it was because it has too harsh a sound. Why should there be yes'es or no'es between you and me?'

'Ah, but it was needful. What do you say now? I can only repeat what I said then. You know all my heart. Speak to me, dear. Shall it be yes or no?'

She had nothing to do with blushing at her age—yet she blushed and was ashamed of it; but looked at him frankly, openly, all the same, holding out her hands. 'Dear,' she said, 'I will call you so too. No; why should we do this and disturb our life and trouble our children with new ideas. Listen, James Beresford. I would rather marry you than lose you; but there is no thought of losing you in any case.'

'None, my dear, none—none, whatever comes of it.'

'Then why should we trouble each other with new ideas and disturb our lives? We cannot be happier in our intercourse, you and I; we have all we want in each other. Let the children marry; it is natural. What a blessing of God it is that we have these dear proxies, James! And my boy is not going away,' she said, the tears coming to her eyes. 'And I love your girl as if she were my own—and we are the father and mother without any trouble. What could heart wish for more?'

And no more was said. The subject was closed at once and for ever. Such is the perversity of human nature, that when James Beresford went home that evening he felt just a little cast down, disgusted, lonely, and slighted as it were by fate. He had not really wished for the change; indeed, did not really wish for it now; but yet—On the other side of the wall, Mrs. Meredith was much more comfortable—for why? She had been permitted the woman's privilege of being the refuser, which banished all possibilities of pique, and made it impossible for her to

feel herself slighted. But by-and-bye they were both a great deal happier, and at their ease, which they had not been for weeks before.

And do I need to tell how the natural conclusion which their father and mother wisely and happily evaded arrived for Edward and Cara? Not quite immediately, however, for the young man gathered his note-books together again, and having given up India, entered upon his course of dinners, and betook himself (like most other people) to the bar. He was 'called' before the marriage took place; and when the marriage did take place the young people remained along with the old people in the two houses which were one. It would be hard to make an absolute appropriation of what belongs to No. 6 and what belongs to No. 8 in the Square. The thing which is most like a fixture is Mrs. Meredith, who sits smiling in the same chair as the years go on, hearing what everybody has to say. She is not expected to go to anyone; but everyone comes to her; and her chair is the only absolutely undisputed piece of property in the two houses. The young people are very happy and go honeymooning as once their elders

did; and sometimes Mr. Beresford will make a journey in the interests of science or art. But nothing has touched the double house, nor is likely to touch it, till death does those sworn companions part.

THE END.

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