THE CUCKOO IN THE NEST.

A NOVEL.

In Three Vols.

By

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CHAPTER XVII.

AND where was Gervase? His mother lay in the same condition all the next day. There was little hope that she would ever come out of it. The doctor said calmly that it was what he had looked for, for a long time. There had been "a stroke" before, though it was slight and had not been talked about; but Parsons knew very well what he was afraid of, and should have kept her mistress from excitement. Parsons, too, allowed that she knew it might come at any time. But Lord! a thing that may come at any time, you don't ever think it's going to come now, Parsons said; and who was she to control her lady as was the head of everything? It was allowed on all sides that

to control Lady Piercey would have been a difficult thing indeed, especially where anything about Gervase was concerned.

"Spoiled the boy from the beginning, that was what she always did," said Sir Giles, mumbling. "I'd have kept a stronger hand over him, Gerald; but what could I do, with his mother making it all up to him, as soon as my back was turned?"

Colonel Piercey heard a great deal about Gervase that he had never been intended to hear. Lady Piercey's fiction, which she had made up so elaborately about the young man of fashion, crumbled all to pieces, poor lady; while one after another made their confidences to him. The only one who said nothing was Margaret. She was overwhelmed with occupation; all the charge of the house, which Lady Piercey had kept in her own hands, falling suddenly upon her shoulders, and without any co-operation from the much-indulged old servants, who were all servile to their imperious mistress, but very insubordinate to any government but hers. It became a serious matter, however, as

the days passed by, and the old lady remained like a soul in prison, unable to move or to speak, yet staring with ever watchful eyes at the door, looking, they all felt, for some one who did not come. Where was Gervase? There was more telegraphing at Greyshott than there ever had been since such a thing was possible. Mr. Gregson replied to say that he had not found Gervase at the train, and had not seen him, news which brought everything to a standstill. Where, then, had he gone? They had no address to send to, no clue by which he might be traced out. He had disappeared altogether, nobody could tell where. Colonel Piercey's first impulse had been to leave the distracted family, thus thrown into the depths of domestic distress, but Sir Giles clung to him with piteous helplessness, imploring him not to go.

"After my boy Gervase, there's nobody but you," he cried, "and he's away, God knows where, and whom should I have to hold on by if you were to go too? There's Meg, to be sure; but she's got enough to do with my lady. Stay, Gerald, stay, for goodness'

sake. I've nobody, nobody, on my side of the house but you; and if anything were to happen," cried the poor old gentleman, breaking down, "who have I to give orders, or to see to things? I don't know what is to become of me if you won't stay."

"I'll stay, of course, Uncle Giles, if I can be of any use," said Colonel Piercey.

"God bless you, my lad!" cried Sir Giles, now ready to sob for satisfaction, as he had before been for trouble. "Now I can face things, if I've you to stand by me."

The household in general took heart when it was known he was to stay.

"Oh! Colonel Piercey, if you'd but look up Mr. Gervase for my lady?—she can't neither die nor get better till she sees her boy," said the weeping Parsons; and "Colonel Piercey, Sir," said Dunning, "Sir Giles do look to you so, as he never looked to any gentleman before. I'll get him to do whatever's right and good for him if so be as he knows you're here." Thus, both master and servants seized upon him. And yet what

could he do? He could not go out and search for Gervase whom he had never seen, knowing absolutely nothing of his cousin's haunts, nor of the people among whom he was likely to be. And he could not consult the servants on this point. There was but one person who could give him information, and she kept out of his way.

On the evening of the second day, however, Margaret came into the library after Sir Giles had been wheeled off to bed. It happened that Colonel Piercey was standing before the writing-table, examining that very photograph which he had discovered with such surprise, and which had made him break off so quickly in his story on the night when Lady Piercey was taken ill. She came suddenly up to him where he stood with the photograph, and laid her hand on his arm. He had not heard her step, and started, almost dropping it in his surprise. "Mrs. Osborne!" he exclaimed.

"You are looking at Gervase's picture? Cousin Gerald, help us if you can. I don't know how much

or how little she feels, but it is Gervase my aunt is lying looking for—Gervase, who doesn't know she is ill even if he had the thought. Was it him you saw with—with the woman? I have not liked to ask you, but I can't put it off any longer. Was it Gervase? Oh! for pity's sake, speak!"

"How should I know," he said, "if you don't know?"

"Know? I! What way have I of knowing? You saw him, or you seemed to think you did."

"It was only for a moment. I had never seen him before; I might be mistaken. It seemed to me that it was the same kind of face. But how can I speak on the glimpse of a moment? I might be quite wrong."

"You are very cautious," she cried at last, "oh, very cautious!—though it is a matter of life and death. Won't you help us, then, or can't you help us? If this is so, it might give a clue. There is a girl—who has disappeared also, I have just found out. Oh! Cousin Gerald, you know what he is?—you must have heard enough to know: not a madman, nor even

an imbecile, yet not like other people. He might be imposed upon—he might be carried away. There was something strange about him before he went. He said things which I could not understand. But they suspected nothing."

"Was it not your duty," said Gerald Piercey, almost sternly, "to tell them—if they suspected nothing, as you say?"

"You speak to me very strangely," she said with a forced smile; "as if I were in the wrong, anyhow. What could I tell them? That I was uneasy, and not satisfied? My aunt would have asked what did it matter if I were satisfied or not?—and Uncle Giles!" She stopped, and resumed in a different tone, "And the girl has gone up to London from the Seven Thorns—so far as I can make out, on the same day."

"What sort of a girl?"

Margaret described her as well as she was able.

"I cannot give you many details. I think she is pretty: brown hair and eyes, very neat and nice in her dress, though my aunt thinks it beyond her

station. I think, on the whole, a nice-looking girl—not tall."

"The description would answer most young women that one sees."

"It is possible—there is nothing remarkable. She looks clever and watchful, and a little defiant. But I did not mean you to go into the streets to look for Patty. I thought you might see whether my description agreed."

"Mrs. Osborne, perhaps you will tell me what you suppose to have happened, and what there is that I can do."

"If we are to be on such formal terms," said Margaret, colouring deeply, "yes, Colonel Piercey, I will tell you. I suppose, or rather, I fear, that Gervase may have gone away with Patty Hewitt. She is quite a respectable girl. She would not compromise herself; therefore——"

"You think he has married her?"

"I think most likely she must have married him—or intends to do it. But that takes time. They

could not have banns called, or other arrangements made——"

"They could have a special licence."

"Ah! but that costs money. They would not have money, either of them. I have been trying to make inquiries quietly. But time is passing, and his poor mother! It would be better to consent to anything," said Margaret, "than to have her die without seeing him; and perhaps if he were found, the pressure on the brain might relax. No, I don't know if that is possible; I am no doctor. I only want to satisfy her. She is his mother! Whatever he is, he is more to her than any one else in the world."

"She does not seem very kind to you, that you should think so much of that."

"Who said she was not kind to me? You take a great deal upon yourself, Colonel Piercey, to be a distant cousin!"

"I am the next-of-kin," he said. "I'd like to protect these poor old people—and it is my duty—from any plot there may be against them."

"Plot—against them?" She stared at him for a moment with eyes that dilated with astonishment. Then she shook her head.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "If you will not help, I must do what I can by myself. And you are free on your side to inquire, and I hope will do it, and take such steps as may seem to you good. The thing now is to find Gervase for his mother. At another moment," said Margaret, raising her head, "you will perhaps explain to me what you mean by this tone—towards me."

She turned her back upon him without another word, and walked away, leaving Colonel Piercey not very comfortable. He asked himself uneasily what right he had to suspect her?—what he suspected her of?—as he stood and watched her crossing the hall. It was a sign of the agitation in the house, that all the doors seemed to stand open, the centre of the family existence having shifted somehow from the principal rooms downstairs to some unseen room above, where the mistress of the house lay. What

did he suspect Meg Piercey of? What had he against her? When he asked himself this, it appeared that all he had against her was that she was a dependent, a widow, a middle-aged person—one of those wrecks which encumber the shores of life, which ought to have gone down, or to be broken up, not to strew the margins of existence with unnecessary and incapable things, making demands upon feeling and sympathy which might be much better expended elsewhere. Colonel Piercey was not a hard man by nature: he was, in fact, rather too open to the claims of charity, and had expended too much, not too little, upon widows and orphans in his day. But it had stirred up all the angry elements in his nature to see Meg Piercey in that condition which was not natural to her. She ought to have died long ago along with her husband, or she ought to have a position of her own: to see her here in that posture of dependence, in that black gown, with that child, living, as he said to himself harshly, upon charity, and accepting all the penalties, was more than he could bear. There is a

great deal to be said for the Suttee, though a humanitarian government has put an end to it. It is so much more dignified for a woman. To a man of fine feelings, it is a painful thing to see how a person whose natural *rôle* is that of a princess, a dispenser of help to others, should come down herself into the rank of the beggar, because of the death of, probably, a very inferior being to whom she was married. It degraded her altogether in the scale of being. A princess has noble qualities, large aims, and stands above the crowd—a dependant does quite the reverse. Scheming and plotting are the natural breath of the latter; and that a woman should let herself come down to that wilfully, rather than die and be done with it, which would be so much more natural and dignified! Colonel Piercey was aware that his thoughts were very fantastic, and yet this is how they were—he could not help himself. He was angry with Margaret. It was not the place she was born to; a sort of Abigail about the backstairs, existing by the caprice of a disagreeable old woman.

Oh, no! it was not a thing that a man could put up with. And, of course, she must have sunk to the level of her kind.

This was why he suspected her. The question remained, What did he suspect her of? And this was still more difficult to answer. Such a woman, of course, would live by sowing mischief in a family; by hurting in the most effectual way the superiors who kept her down, and were so little considerate of her. And their son was the way in which she could most effectively do this. Gerald Piercey had various thoughts rising in his mind about this young man who probably was not at all fit to hold the family property and succeed Sir Giles in its honours. There was one point of view from which Colonel Piercey could not forget that he himself was the next-of-kin —that which made him, in his own eyes, the champion of Gervase—his determined defender against every assault. Perhaps the very strength of this feeling might push him beyond what was right and just; but it would be in the way of supporting and

protecting his weak-minded cousin. That was a point upon which, naturally, he could have no doubt. If Meg Piercey was against him, it was Gerald Piercey's part to defend him. But the means were a little doubtful. He was not clear whether Meg was helping Gervase to marry unsuitably, to spite his parents, or whether her intention was to prevent this marriage, in order to deprive him of his happiness and the natural protection which the support of a clever wife might afford to the half-witted young man. Thus, he had a difficult part to play ; having first to find out what Margaret's scope and meaning was, and then to set himself to defeat it. He had been but three days in the house, and what a tangled web he was involved in !—to be the Providence of all these people, old and young, whom he knew so little, yet was so closely connected with ; and to defeat the evil genius, the enemy in the guise of a friend, whom he alone was clear-sighted enough to divine. But she puzzled him all the same. She had looks that were not those of a deceiver ; and when she had raised her head and told

him that at another moment she would demand an explanation of what his tone meant, something like a shade of alarm passed through the soldier's mind. He would not have been alarmed, you may be sure, if Margaret had threatened him with a champion, as in the older days. Bois-Guilbert was not afraid of Ivanhoe. But, when it is the woman herself who asks an explanation; and his objections have to be stated in full words, to her alone, facing him for herself, that is a different matter. It may well make a man look pale.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE next morning after this, Gerald Piercey found himself in the front of the Seven Thorns. He had not known what it was: whether a hamlet, or a farm, or what he actually found it to be, a roadside inn. The aspect of the place was more attractive than usual. It was lying full in the morning sunshine; a great country waggon, with its white covering, and fine, heavily-built, but well-groomed horses, standing before the door, concentrating the light in its great hood. One of the horses was white, which made it a still more shining object in the midst of the red-brown road. The old thorns were full in the sunshine, which softened their shabby antiquity, and made the gnarled roots and twisted branches picturesque. The long, low fabric of

the house was bathed in the same light, which pervaded the whole atmosphere with a purifying and embellishing touch. The west side, looking over the walled garden, which extended for some distance along the road, though in the shade, showed a row of open windows, at which white curtains fluttered, giving an air of inhabitation to that usually-closed-up portion of the place. The visitor felt, as he looked at it, that it was not a mere village public-house, that its decadence might have a story, and that it was possible that the daughter of such a house might not, after all, be a mere rustic coquette, or, perhaps, so bad a match for the half-witted Gervase. Colonel Piercey had never once thought of himself as the possible heir of Greyshott; he did not feel that he had any interest in keeping Gervase from marrying, and though it was intolerable that the heir of the Pierceys should marry a barmaid, his feelings softened as he looked at the old country inn, with its look of long-establishment. Probably there was a farm connected with it; perhaps there was a certain pride of family here, too, and the

daughter of the house was kept apart from the drinking and the wayside guests. Meg Piercey might have divined that the young woman was really the best match that Gervase could hope for, and this might be the cause of her opposition. (He forgot that he had supposed it likely that Meg might be bringing the match about for her own private ends, one hypothesis being just as likely as another.) With this idea he approached slowly, and took his seat upon the bench that stood under the window of the parlour. The roads between Greyshott and the Seven Thorns were dry and dusty, and his boots were white enough to warrant the idea that he was a pedestrian reposing himself, naturally, at the place of refreshment on the roadside.

The landlord came to the door with the waggoner, when Colonel Piercey had established himself there, and his aspect could not be said to be quite equal to that of his house. Hewitt had a red nose and a watery eye. His appearance did not inspire respect. He was holding the waggoner by the breast of his

smock, and holding forth, duly emphasising his discourse by the gesture of the other hand, in which he held a pipe.

"You just 'old by me," he was saying, "look'ee, Jack ; and I'll 'old by you, I will. The 'ay's a good crop ; nobody can't say nothing again that. But there's rain a-coming, and Providence, 'e knows what'll come of it all in the end. It ain't what's grow'd in the fields as is to be trusted to, but what's safe in the stacks ; and there's a deal o' difference between one and the other. Look'ee here ! you 'old by me, and I'll 'old by you. And I can't speak no fairer. I've calcilated all round, I 'ave—me and Patty, my girl, as is that good at figures; and if it's got in safe, all as I've got to say is, that this 'ere will be a dashed uncommon yeer."

"It's mostly the way," said the waggoner, "I'll allow, with them dry Junes. The weather can't 'old up not for ever."

"Nor won't," said old Hewitt, with assurance ; "it stands to reason. Ain't this a variable climate or

ain't it not? And a drop o' rain we 'aven't seen not for three weeks and more. Then we'll 'ave a wet July. You see yourself when I knocked the glass 'ow it went down. And that," he added, triumphantly, waving his pipe in the air, "is what settles the price of the 'ay."

"I shouldn't wonder if you was right, master," said the waggoner, getting under weigh.

Gerald Piercey sat and watched the big horses straining their great flanks to the work, setting the heavy waggon in motion, with pleasure in the sight which diverted him for a moment from his chief object of interest. Coming straight from India and the fine and slender-limbed creatures which are the patricians of their kind, the great, patient, phlegmatic English cart-horse filled him with admiration. The big feathered hoofs, the immense strain of those gigantic hind-quarters, the steady calm of the rustic, reflected with a greater and more dignified impassiveness in the face of his beast, was very attractive and interesting to him.

"Fine horses, these," he said, half to Hewitt at the door, half to the waggoner, who grinned with a slow shamefacedness, as if it were himself who was being praised.

"Ay, sir," said Hewitt, "and well took care of, as ever beasts was. Jack Mason there—though I say it as shouldn't—is awful good to his team."

"And why shouldn't you say it?" said Colonel Piercey. "It's clear enough."

"He's a relation, that young man is, and it's a country saying, sir, as you shouldn't speak up for your own. But I ain't one as pays much 'eed to that, for, says I, you knows them that belong to you better nor any one else does. There's my girl Patty, now; there ain't one like her betwixt Guildford and Portsmouth, and who knows it as well as me?"

"That's a very satisfactory state of things," said the visitor, "and, of course, you must know best. But I fear you won't be able to keep Miss Patty long to yourself if she's like that."

At this Patty's father began to laugh a slow, inward

laugh. "There's 'eaps o' fellows after 'er, like bees after a 'oney 'ive. But, Lord bless you! she don't think nothing o' them. She's not one as would take up with a country 'Odge. She's blood in her veins, has my girl. We've been at the Seven Thorns, off and on, for I don't know 'ow many 'undred years: more time," said Hewitt, waving his pipe vaguely towards Greyshott, "than them folks 'as been at the 'All."

"Ah, indeed! That's the Pierceys, I suppose?"

"And a proud set they be. But 'Ewitts was 'ere before 'em, only they won't acknowledge it. I've 'eard my sister Patience, 'as 'ad a terrible tongue of 'er own, tell Sir Giles so to his face. 'E was young then, and father couldn't keep 'im out o' this 'ouse. After Patience, to be sure; but he was a terrible cautious one, was Sir Giles, and it never come to nought." The landlord laughed with a sharp hee-hee-hee. "I reckon," he said, "it runs in the blood."

"What runs in the blood?"

"I don't know, sir," said the innkeeper, pausing suddenly, "if you've called for anything? I can't

trust neither to maid nor man to attend to the customers now Patty's away."

"If you have cider, I should like a bottle, and perhaps you'll help me to drink it," said Colonel Piercey. "I'm sorry to hear that Miss Patty's away."

"In London," said Hewitt; "but only for a bit. She 'as a 'ead, that chit 'as! Them rooms along there, end o' the 'ouse, 'asn't been lived in not for years and years. She says to me, she does, 'Father, let's clear 'em out, and maybe we'll find a lodger.' I was agin it at first. 'What'll you do with a lodger? There ain't but very little to be made o' that,' I says. 'They don't come down to the parlour to drink, that sort doesn't, and they're more trouble nor they're worth.' 'You leave it to me, father,' she says. And, if you'll believe it, she's found folks for them rooms already! New-married folks, she says, as will spend their money free. And coming in a week, for the rest of the summer or more. That's Patty's way!" cried the landlord, smiting his thigh. "Strike while it's 'ot, that's 'er way! Your good 'ealth, sir, and many of

'em. It ain't my brewing, that cider. I gets it from Devonshire, and I think, begging your pardon, sir, as it's 'eady stuff."

"But how," said Colonel Piercey, "will you manage with your visitors, when your daughter is away?"

"Oh, bless you, sir, she's a-coming with 'em, she says in her letter, if not before. Patty knows well I ain't the one for lodgers. I sits in my own parlour, and I don't mind a drop to drink friendly-like with e'er a man as is thirsty, or to see a set of 'orses put up in my stables, or that; but Richard 'Ewitt of the Seven Thorns ain't one to beck and bow afore folks as thinks themselves gentry, and maybe ain't not 'alf as good as 'er and me. No, sir; I wasn't made, nor was my father afore me made, for the likes of that."

"It is very good of you, I'm sure, Mr. Hewitt, to sit for half an hour with me, who may be nobody, as you say."

"Don't mention it, sir," said Hewitt, with a wave of the pipe which he still carried like a banner in his hand; "I 'ope I knows a gentleman when I sees one;

and as I said, I sits at my own door and I takes a friendly drop with any man as is thirsty. That ain't the same as bowing and scraping, and taking folks's orders, as is nothing to me."

"And Miss Patty, you say, is in London? London's a big word: is she east or west, or——"

"It's funny," said Hewitt, "the interest that's took in my Patty since she's been away. There's been Sally Ferrett, the nurse up at Greyshott, asking and asking, where is she, and when did she go, and when she's coming back? I caught her getting it all out of 'Lizabeth the girl. What day did she go, and what train, and so forth? 'Lizabeth's a gaby. She just says 'Yes, Miss,' and 'No, Miss,' to a wench like that, as is only a servant like herself. I give it 'em well, and I give Miss her answer. What's their concern up at Greyshott with where my Patty is?"

"That's true," said Colonel Piercey, "and what is my concern? You are quite right, Mr. Hewitt."

"Oh, yours, sir? that's different: you ask out o' pure idleness, you do, to make conversation; I under-

stand that. But between you and me I couldn't answer 'em, not if I wanted to. For my Patty is one as can take very good care of 'erself, and she don't give me no address. She'll be back with them young folks, or maybe, afore 'em, next week, and that's all as I want to know. I wants her then, for I'll not have nothing to do with 'em, and 'Lizabeth, she's a gaby, and not to be trusted. Lodgers in my opinion is more trouble than they're any good. So Patty will manage them herself, or they don't come here."

"The family at Greyshott takes an interest in your daughter, I presume, from what you say," said Colonel Piercey.

Upon this Hewitt laughed low and long, and winked over and over again with his watery eye. "There's one of 'em as does," he said. "Oh, there's one of 'em as does! If so be as you know the family, sir, you'll know the young gentleman. Don't you know Mr. Gervase?—eh, not the young 'un, sir; as is Sir Giles's heir? Oh, Lord, if you don't know him you don't know Greyshott Manor, nor what's going on there."

"I have never seen the young gentleman," said Gerald; "I believe he is not very often at home."

"I don't know about 'ome, but 'e's 'ere as often as 'e can be. 'E'd be 'ere mornin', noon, and night if I'd 'a put up with it; but I see 'im, what 'e was after, and I'll not 'ave my girl talked about, not for the best Piercey as ever trod in shoe-leather. And 'e ain't the best, oh, not by a long chalk 'e ain't. Sir Giles is dreadful pulled down with the rheumatics and that, but 'e was a man as was something like a man. Lord bless you, sir, this poor creature, 'e's a Softy, and 'e'll never be no more."

"What do you mean by a Softy?" said Gerald, quickly; then he added with a sensation of shame, "Never mind, I don't want you to tell me. Don't you think you should be a little more careful what you say, when a young man like this comes to your house?"

"What should I be careful for?" said Hewitt; "I ain't noways beholdin' to the Pierceys. They ain't my landlords, ain't the Pierceys, though they give them-

selves airs with their Lords o' the Manor, and all that. Hewitts of the Seven Thorns is as good as the Pierceys, and not beholdin' to them, not for the worth of a brass fardin—oh, no! And I wouldn't have the Softy about my house, a fool as opens 'is mouth and laughs in your face if you say a sensible word to 'im; not for me! Richard Hewitt's not a-going to think twice what he says for a fool like 'im. Softy's 'is name and Softy's 'is nature: ask any man in the village who the Softy is, and they'll soon tell you. Lord, it don't matter a bit what I say."

"Still, I suppose," said Colonel Piercey, feeling a little nettled in spite of himself, "it is, after all, the first family in the neighbourhood."

"First family be dashed," cried Hewitt; "I'm as good a family as any of 'em. And I don't care that, no, not that," he cried, snapping his fingers, "for the Pierceys, if they was kings and queens, which they ain't, nor no such big folks after all. Old Sir Giles, he's most gone off his head with rheumatics and things; and my lady, they do say, she 'ave 'ad a stroke, and

serve her right for her pride and her pryin'. And Mr. Gervase, he's a Softy, and that's all that's to be said. They ain't much for a first family when you knows all the rights and the wrongs of it," Hewitt said.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE poet's wish that we might see ourselves as others see us was, though he did not so intend it, a cruel wish. It might save us some ridicule to the outside world, but it would turn ourselves and our pretensions into such piteous ridicule to ourselves, that life would be furnished with new pangs. Colonel Piercey went back to Greyshott with a sense of this keen truth piercing through all appearances, which was half ludicrous and half painful, though it was not himself, but his relations, that had been exhibited to him in the light of an old rustic's observations. He had come upon this visit with a sense of the greatness of the head of his own family, which had, perhaps, a little self-esteem in it; for if the younger branches of the house were

what he knew them in his own person, and his father's, what ought not the head of the house, Sir Giles, the lineal descendant of so many Sir Gileses, and young Gervase, the heir of those long-unbroken honours, to be? He had expected, perhaps a little solemn stupidity, such as the younger is apt to associate with the elder branch. But he had also expected something of greatness—evidence that the house was of that reigning race which is cosmopolitan, and recognises its kind everywhere from English meads to Styrian mountains, and even among the chiefs of the East. It was ludicrous to see, through the eyes of a clown, how poor, after all, these pretences were. Yet he could not help it. Poor old Sir Giles, helpless and querulous, broken down by sickness, and, perhaps, disappointment and trouble; the poor old lady, not much at any time of the rural princess she might have been, lying speechless in that lingering agony of imprisoned consciousness; and the son, the heir, the future head of the house! Was not that a revelation to stir the blood in the veins of Gerald

Piercey, the next-of-kin? He was a man of many faults, but he was full both of pride and generosity. The humiliation for his race struck him more than any possible elevation for himself. Indeed, that possible elevation was far enough off, if he had ever thought of it. A half-witted rustic youth, taken hold of by a pert barmaid, with a numerous progeny to follow, worthy of both sides—was that what the Pierceys were to come to in the next generation? He had never thought, having so many other things to occupy him in his life, of that succession, though probably he began to think, his father had, who had so much insisted on this visit. But what a succession it would be now! He was walking along, turning these things over in his mind, going slowly, and not much observant (though this was not at all his habit) of what was about him, when he was sensible of a sudden touch, which was, indeed, only upon his hand, yet which felt as if it had been direct upon his heart, rousing all kinds of strange sensations there. It was a thing which is apt to touch

every one susceptible of feeling, with quick and unexpected sensations when it comes unawares. It was a little hand—very small, very soft, very warm, yet with a grasp in it which held fast, suddenly put into his hand. Colonel Piercey stopped, touched, as I have said, on his very heart, which, underneath all kinds of actual and conventional coverings, was soft and open to emotion. He looked down and saw a little figure at his foot, a little glowing face looking up at him. "May I tum and walk with you, Cousin Colonel?" a small voice said. "Sally, do away."

"Certainly you shall come and walk with me, Osy," said the Colonel. "What are you doing, little man, so far from home?"

"It's not far from home. I walks far—far—further than that. Sally, do away! I'm doing to walk home with a gemplemans. I'm a gemplemans myself, but Movver will send a woman wif me wherever I do. Sally, do away!"

"I'll take care of him," said Colonel Piercey, with a nod to the maid. "And so you think you're

too big for a nurse, Master Osy. How old are you?"

"Seven," said the boy; "at least I'm more than six-and-three-quarters, Cousin Colonel. Little Joey at the farm is only five, and he does miles, all by hisself Joey is better than me many ways," he added, thoughtfully; "he dets up on the big hay-cart, and he wides on the big horse, and his faver sits him up high! on his so'lder. But I only have a pony and sometimes I does with Jacob in the dog-cart, and sometimes——"

"Would you like to ride on my shoulder, Osy?"

Osy looked up to the high altitude of that shoulder with a look full of deliberation, weighing various things. "I s'ould like it," he said, "but I felled off once when Cousin Gervase put me up, and I promised Movver: but I tan't help it when he takes me by my arms behind me. Sometimes I'm fwightened myself. A gemplemans oughtn't to be fwightened, s'ould he, Cousin Colonel?"

"That depends," said Gerald. "I am a great

deal bigger than you, but sometimes I have been frightened, too."

Osy looked at the tall figure by his side with certain glimmerings in his eyes of contempt. That size! and afraid!—but he would not make any remark. One does not talk of the deficiencies of others when one is of truly gentle spirit. One passes them over. He apologised like a prince to Gerald for himself. "That would be," he said, "when it was a big, big giant. There's giants in India, I know, like Goliath. If I do to India when I'm a man, I'll be fwightened, too."

"But David wasn't, you know, Osy."

"That's what I was finking, Cousin Colonel, but he flinged the stone at him before he tummed up to him. Movver says it was quite fair, but——"

"I think it was quite fair. Don't you see, he had his armour on, and his shield, and all that; if he had had his wits about him, he might have put up his shield to ward off the stone. When you are little you must be very sharp."

Osy looked at his big cousin again, reflectively. "I don't fink I could kill you, Cousin Colonel, even if I was very sharp."

"I hope not, Osy, and I trust you will never want to, my little man."

"I would if we was fighting," said Osy, with spirit; "but I'll do on detting bigger and bigger till I'm a man: and you are a man now, and you tan't gwow no more."

"You bloodthirsty little beggar! You'll go on getting bigger and bigger while I shall grow an old man like Uncle Giles."

"I never," cried Osy, flushing very red, "would stwike an old gemplemans like Uncle Giles. Never! I wouldn't let nobody touch him. When Cousin Gervase runned away with his chair, I helped old Dunning to stop him. You might kill me, but I would fight for Uncle Giles!"

"It appears you are going to be a soldier, anyhow, Osy."

"My faver was a soldier," said Osy. "Movver's

got his sword hanging up in our room ; all the rest of the fings belongs to Uncle Giles, but the sword, it belongs to Movver and me."

The Colonel gave the little hand which was in his an involuntary pressure, and a little moisture came into the corner of his eye. "Do you remember your father," he said, "my little man?"

Osy shook his head. "I don't remember nobody but Movver," the child said.

What a curious thing it was! To hear of the dead father and his sword brought that wetness to Colonel Piercey's eye ; but the name of the mother, which filled all the child's firmament, dried the half-tear like magic. The poor fellow who had died went to the Colonel's heart. The lonely woman with the little boy, so much more usual an occasion of sentiment, did not touch him at all. He did not want to hear anything of "Movver": and, indeed, Osy was by no means a sentimental child, and had no inclination to enlarge on the theme. His mother was a matter of course to

him, as to most healthy little boys: to enlarge upon her love or her excellencies was not at all in his way.

"You walk very fast, Cousin Colonel," was the little fellow's next remark.

"Do I, my little shaver? What a beast I am, forgetting your small legs. Come, jump and get up on my shoulder, Osy."

Osy looked up with mingled pleasure and alarm. "I promised Movver: but if you holded me very fast——"

"Oh, I'll hold you. You mustn't be frightened, Osy."

"Me fwightened! But I felled down and hurted my side, and fwightened Movver. Huwah! huwah!" shouted the child. "I'm not fwightened a bit, Cousin Colonel! You holds me and I holds you, and you may canter, or gallop, or anyfing. I'll never be afwaid."

"Here goes, then," said the grave soldier. And with shouts and laughter the pair rushed on

Colonel Piercey enjoying the race as much as the child on his shoulder, who urged him with imaginary spurs, very dusty if not very dangerous, holding fast with one hand by the collar of his coat. He had not much experience of children, and the confidence and audacity of this little creature, his glee, his warm grip, in which there was a touch of terror, and his wild enjoyment at once of the movement and the danger, aroused a new sentiment in the heart of the mature man, who had known none of the emotions of paternity. Suddenly, however, a change came over his spirit: he reduced his pace, he ceased to laugh, he sank all at once—though with the child still shouting on his shoulder, endeavouring, with his little kicks upon his breast, to rouse him to further exertions—into the ordinary gravity of his aspect and demeanour. There had appeared suddenly out of the little gate of the beech avenue, a figure, which took all the fun out of Gerald Piercey, though he could not have told why.

"Movver, movver! look here: I'm up upon my

horse. But you needn't be fwightened, for he's not like Cousin Gervase. He's holded me fast, fast all the way."

"Oh! Osy," cried Margaret, holding her breath—for, indeed, it was a remarkable sight to see the unutterable gravity of Colonel Piercey endeavouring solemnly to take off his hat to her, with the child, flushed and delighted, upon his shoulder. There was something comic in the extreme seriousness which had suddenly fallen upon Osy's bearer. "You are making yourself a bore to Colonel Piercey," she said.

"Not at all; we have been enjoying ourselves very much. He is a delightful companion," said Gerald, but in a tone which suggested a severe despair. "Will you get down, Osy, or would you rather I should carry you home?"

"I would wather——" said the child, and then he paused. "I tan't see your face," he said, pettishly, "but you feels twite different, as if you was tired. I fink I'll get down."

Colonel Piercey's comment to himself was that the

child was frightened for his mother, but, naturally, he did not express this sentiment. He lifted Osy down and set him on the ground. "Where's the nurse now?" he said; "a long way behind. You see, Osy, it's good to have a basis to fall back upon when new operations are ordered by the ruling powers."

Could the man not refrain from a gibe at her, even to her child, Margaret thought, with wonder? But she was surprised to see that he stood still, as if with the intention of speaking to her.

"You are going out?" he said, in his solemn tones. "Is Lady Piercey better?"

"She is no better; but I must attempt, in some way, to get the news conveyed to Gervase. Her eyes turn constantly to the door. They are still quite living, though not so strong. She must see him, if it is possible. She *must* see him, if there is any way—her only child."

"But not, from all I hear, a child that does her much credit," he said.

"What does that matter? He is all she has," she

added hastily. "Don't let me detain you, Colonel Piercey. I must not be gone long; and I must try if anything can be done."

"You mean that I am detaining you," he said, turning with her. "And I have something to tell you, if I may walk with you. I have been talking to old Hewitt, of the Seven Thorns. He says he has no address to communicate with his daughter; but there is a newly-married couple coming to occupy his rooms, and that she is returning with them next week."

"A newly-married couple!" cried Margaret, aghast. "Can it be they? Can it be Patty? Is it possible?"

"I thought it might be so, if it was he and she whom I saw."

"Oh, his mother! his mother! And this was what she was most afraid of. Why, why did she let him go?"

"Yes, why did she let him go, if she were so much afraid of this, as you think? But, perhaps you are alarming yourself unnecessarily? Lady Piercey must

have known tolerably well at his age what her son was likely to do?"

"Yes, I am perhaps alarming myself unnecessarily. The chances are she will not live to see it. It is only she who would feel it much. Poor Aunt Piercey! Why should one wish her to live to hear this?" Margaret paused a little, wringing her hands, uncertain whether to turn back or to proceed. At last she said to herself, "Anyhow, she wants him—she wants him. If it is possible, she must see her boy;" and went on again quickly, scarcely noticing the dark figure at her side. But he did not choose to be overlooked.

"I should like," he said, "to have a few things explained. You say nobody would mind this marriage—if it is a marriage—except Lady Piercey?"

"I said nobody would mind it much. My uncle would get used to it, and he could be talked over: and Patty Hewitt is a clever girl. But Aunt Piercey——!"

"Why should she stand out?"

"If you do not understand," cried Margaret, "how can I tell you? His mother! and a woman that has

always hoped better things, and thought still, if he married well,—— You forget," she cried vehemently, "that poor Gervase was not to her what he was to us. He was her only child! A mother may see everything even more keenly than others; but you hope, you always hope——"

"I presume, then, you did not think so? You did not object to this marriage."

"What does it matter whether I objected or not? Of what consequence is my opinion? None of us can like it. A girl like Patty to be at the head of Greyshott! Oh! who could like that? But," said Margaret more calmly, "my poor aunt deceives herself; for what nice girl, unless she were forced, as girls are sometimes, would marry Gervase? Poor Gervase! It is not his fault. She deceives herself. But I don't think she will live to see it. I don't think she will live to hear of it. If she could only have him by her before she dies. Patty could not oppose herself to that. She could not prevent that."

"Is it supposed, then, that she would wish to do so?"

"Colonel Piercey," cried Margaret, "you have come among us at a dreadful moment, when all the secrets of the family are laid bare. Oh, don't ask any more questions! I have said things I did not intend to say."

"I hope that I am to be trusted," he said, with his severe tone; "and if I can help, I will. To whom are you going? Is it to this old Hewitt? for nothing, I think, is to be learned from him."

"I am going to Miss Hewitt, her aunt. It is in despair. For she has a hatred of all of us at Greyshott; but surely, surely, when they hear that his mother is dying——"

"She cannot hate me. I will go," Gerald Piercey said.

CHAPTER XX.

OLD Miss Hewitt sat in her parlour, if not like a fat spider watching for the fly, at least like a large cat seated demurely, with an eye upon her natural prey, though her aspect was more decorous and composed than words could tell. She had been made aware by her little servant a few minutes before that "a gentleman" was coming up to the door, and had instantaneously prepared to meet the visitor. A visitor was a very rare thing at Rose Cottage.

"You're sure it ain't the curate, a-coming begging?"

"Oh, no," cried the little maid, "a tall, grand gentleman, like a lord. I think I knows a pa'son when I sees 'un!" she added, with rustic contempt. Miss Hewitt settled herself in her large chair; she gave her cap that twist that every woman who wears

a cap supposes to put all aright. She drew to her a footstool for her feet, and then she said, "You may let him in, Jane." A smile of delight was upon her mouth; but she subdued even that in her sense of propriety, to heighten the effect. She had been waiting for this moment for thirty years. She had not known how it would come about, but she had always felt it must come about somehow. She had paid fifty pounds for it—and she had not grudged her money—and now it had come. She did not even know the shape it would take, or who it was who was coming to place the family of Piercey at her feet, that she might spurn them; but that this was what was about to happen, she felt absolutely sure. It could not be Sir Giles himself, which would have been the sweetest of all, for Sir Giles was too infirm to visit anybody; while she, whom he had scorned once, was hale and strong, and sure to see both of them out! Perhaps it was a solicitor, or something of the kind. What did she care? It was some one from the Pierceys coming to her, abject, with a petition—which she would not

grant—no, not if they besought her on their knees.

The room seemed in semi-darkness to Gerald, coming in from the brightness of the summer afternoon. The blind was drawn down to save the carpet, and the curtains hung heavily over the window for gentility's sake. Miss Hewitt sat with her back to the light, by the side of the fireplace, which was filled up by cut paper. There was no air in the room; and though Colonel Piercey was not a man of humorous perceptions, there occurred even to him the idea of a large cat with her tail curled round her, sitting demure, yet fierce, on the watch for some prey, of which she had scent or sight.

"My name is Piercey," said the Colonel. "I am a relation of the family at Greyshott, who, perhaps you may have heard, are in great trouble at this moment. I have come to you, Miss Hewitt—and I hope you will pardon me for disturbing you—to know whether, by any chance, you could furnish us with Gervase Piercey's address."

"Ah, you're from the Pierceys," said Miss Hewitt. "I thought as much—though there ain't that friendship between me and the Pierceys that should make them send to me in their trouble. And what relation may you be, if a person might ask?"

"I am a cousin; but that is of little importance. The chief thing is that Mr. Gervase Piercey is absent, and his address is not known. His mother is ill——"

"I heard of that," said the old lady, drawing a long breath as of satisfaction. "She's a hard one, too, she is. It would be something sharp that made her ill. I suppose as she heard——"

"She heard nothing. There was no mental cause for her illness, if that is what you mean. She had been sitting, talking just as usual——"

"Oh—h!" cried Miss Hewitt, with an air of disappointment; "then it wasn't from the shock? And what's their meaning, then, Mister Piercey—if you call yourself Piercey—in sending to me?"

"That is precisely what I can't tell you," said Gerald, with much candour. "I confess that it

seems absurd, but I supposed, perhaps, that you would know."

"And why should it seem absurd? I know a deal more about the Pierceys than you think for, or any fine gentleman that comes questioning of me, as if I were an old hag in the village. Oh! I know the way that you, as calls yourselves gentlemen, speak!"

"I hope," said Gerald, surprised, "that I don't speak in any unbecoming way, or fail in respect to any woman. It is very likely that you know much more than I do, and the question is one that is easily settled. Could you throw any light upon the question where Gervase Piercey is, and if so, will you tell me his address?"

She looked at him for a moment as if uncertain how to respond—whether to play with the victim any longer, or to make a pounce and end it. Then she said, quickly, "Did he send you himself?"

"Did who send me?"

"Giles—Sir Giles; don't you understand? Was

it him as thought of Patience Hewitt? That's what I want to know."

"Miss Hewitt, Lady Piercey is very ill——"

"Ah! he never was in love with her," cried the old lady; "never! He married her—he was drawn in to do it; but I know as he hated it when he did it. It never was for her, if it was he has sent you. Not for her, but for——"

She stopped and looked at him again, with a glare in her eyes, yet resolved, apparently, not to pounce but to play a little longer. "Ah! so my lady's ill, is she? She's an old woman, more like an old hag, I can tell you, than me. She was thirty-five, if she was a day, when she married Sir Giles, and high living and nothing to do has made her dreadful. He never could abear fat women, and it serves him right. Some people never lose their figure, whatever their age may be."

She sat very upright in her chair, with a smile of self-complacence, nodding her head. "Well," she said, "and what's wanted of me? Not to go and

nurse my lady, I suppose? They don't want me to do that?"

"They wish to know," said Colonel Piercey, restraining himself with an effort, "Mr. Gervase Piercey's address."

"Their son's address?" said Miss Hewitt. "He's the heir, you know. The village folks calls him the Softy, but there couldn't nothing be proved against him. He'll be Sir Gervase after his father, and nobody can't prevent that. And how is it as they don't know their own son's address? and for why should they send you to me? Me, a lady living quiet in her own house, meddling with none of them, how should I know their son's address?"

"I have told you I have not the slightest light to throw on this question. It appears that your niece is in London, and that she was seen, or it is supposed she was seen, with my cousin."

"And what then?" cried the old lady. "You think, perhaps, as that Softy led my Patty wrong. Ho, ho! ho, ho!" She laughed a low guttural laugh,

prolonging it till Colonel Piercey's exasperation was almost beyond bearing. "You think as he was the gay Lotharium and she was the young Lavinyar, eh? Oh, I've read plenty of books in my time, and I know how gentlemen talk of them sort of things. No, she ain't, Mister Piercey. My Patty is one that knows very well what she is about."

"So I have heard, also. I believe it is supposed that as he is such a fool, your niece may have married him, Miss Hewitt."

"And so she have, just!" cried the old lady, springing from her chair. She waved her arms in the air, and uttered a hoarse "Hooray!" "That is just what has happened, mister; exactly true, as if you'd been in all the plans from the first. You tell Sir Giles as there is a Patty Hewitt will be Lady Piercey, after all, and not the Queen herself couldn't prevent it. Just you tell him that from me; Patience, called for her aunt, and thought to be like me, though smaller—my brother being an ass and marrying a little woman. But that's just the gospel truth. She's Mrs. Gervase

Piercey, now, and she'll be Lady Piercey when the time comes. Oh!" cried Miss Hewitt, sinking back in her chair, exhausted, "but I'd like to be there when he hears. And I'd like to tell her, I should," she added, with a fierce glare in her eyes.

Gerald had risen when she did, and stood holding the back of his chair. Fortunately, he had great command of his temper, though the provocation was strong. He was silent while she settled herself again in her seat, and rearranged her cap-strings and the folds of her gown, though the flowers in her head-dress quivered with excitement and triumph. He said, "I fear you will never have that satisfaction. Lady Piercey is dying, and, happily, knows nothing about this. Perhaps your revenge might be more complete if you would summon her son to see her before she dies."

Miss Hewitt was too much occupied by what she had herself said to pay much attention to him. It was only after some minutes of murmuring and

smiling to herself, that she began to recall that he had made a reply. "What was you saying, Mr. Piercey—eh? If you was counting on succeeding you're struck all of a heap, and I don't wonder, for there's an end of you, my fine gentleman! There'll be a family and a large family, you take your oath of that. None of your marrying in-and-in cousins and things, but a fine, fresh, new stock. What was you saying? Dying is she, that woman? Well, we've all got to die. She's had her share above most, and taken other folks's bread out of their mouths, and she must take her share now. Nobody's a-going to die instead of her. That's a thing as you've got to do when your time comes for yourself."

"And, happily," said Gerald, "she knows nothing of all this. Perhaps if she were permitted to see her son——"

"Goodness gracious me!" cried Miss Hewitt, rousing up: "do you hate her like that? I think you must be the devil himself, to put that into a body's head. It's a disappointment to me, dreadful, that she should

die and not know; but to send him to tell her, and the woman at her last breath—Oh! Lord, what wickedness there is in this world! Man! what makes you hate her like that?"

"Will you allow her to see her son?" Colonel Piercey asked.

The old woman rose up again in her agitation. One of the old Puritan divines describes Satan as putting so big a stone into the sinner's hand to throw at his enemy, that the bounds of human guilt were over-passed and the almost murderer pitched it at his tempter instead. This suggestion was to Patience Hewitt, in the sense in which she understood it, that too-heavy stone. The desire for revenge had been very strong in her. She had waited and plotted all her life for the opportunity of returning to Sir Giles the reward of his desertion of her, and she had attained her object, and a furious delight was in it. But to seethe the kid in his mother's milk is a thing about which the most cruel have their prejudices. To bring the Softy back to shout

his news into the ear of the dying woman, that was a more fiendish detail than she had dreamed of. She rose up and sat down again, and clasped her hands and unclasped them, and turned over the terrible temptation in her mind. No doubt it would be the very crown of vengeance, to prove to Sir Giles' wife that she, whom she had supplanted, was the victor at the last. That was what she had hoped for all through. She had hoped that it was some rumour of what had happened that had been the cause of Lady Piercey's illness. A stroke! it was quite natural she should have a stroke when she heard; it was the vengeance of God long deferred for what she had done unpunished so many years ago. But between this, in which she felt a grim joy, and the other, there was a great gulf. To send for Gervase, in order that he, with his own hand, should give his mother her death-blow, the horrible thought made her head giddy and her heart beat. It was a temptation—the most dreadful of temptations. It seized upon her imagination even while it filled her with

horror. It answered every wild desire of poetic justice in the untutored mind: never had been any vengeance like that. It was a thing to be told, and shuddered at, and told again. "Oh! for goodness gracious sake, go along with you, go along with you," she cried, putting out her hands to push the Colonel away, "for I think you must be the very devil himself."

It was almost with the same words that Gerald Piercey answered Margaret, who met him eagerly as he returned. Sir Giles was out in the garden with Dunning and Osy, and there was no one to disturb the consultation of these two enemies or friends. "Have you heard anything of him?" cried Margaret. Colonel Piercey answered almost solemnly, "I have seen the devil; if he ever takes a woman's form."

"I have heard that she was a dreadful old woman."

"And I have made a dreadful suggestion to her, which she is turning over in her dreadful mind. She

hates poor old Lady Piercey with a virulence which ——perhaps you may understand it, knowing the circumstances ; I don't. She is terribly disappointed that it was not the news which was the cause of the illness. And I have suggested that if the bridegroom could be sent home, the old lady might still hear it before she dies."

"The news—the bridegroom ! Then it is so ? They are married ! "

"That's better, I suppose," said the Colonel, "than if it had been worse."

Margaret coloured high at this enigmatical speech. "To everybody but Aunt Piercey," she said. "My uncle will get used to the idea ; but his mother ! It is better he should not come than come to tell her that."

"If he comes we can surely keep him silent," Colonel Piercey said. "I thought that was the one thing to be attained at all risks."

"And so it was. And I thank you, Cousin Gerald, and we can but do our best."

Lady Piercey turned her eyes towards the door as Margaret went into the room. A dreadful weariness was in those living eyes, which had not closed, in anything that could be called sleep, since her seizure. She had lain there dead, but for that look, for three days, unable to move a finger. But always her eyes turned to the door whenever it opened, however softly. Sometimes the film of a doze came over them; but no one came in without meeting that look—the look of a soul in prison, with no sense but that one remaining to make existence a fact. How much she knew of what was passing around her, they could not tell; or of her own condition, or of what was before her. All she seemed to know was that Gervase did not come. Sometimes her eyes fell upon Margaret with a look which seemed one of angry appeal. And then they returned to watch the door, which opened, indeed, from time to time, but never to admit her son. Oh, dreadful eyes! Mrs. Osborne shrank from encountering them. It was she, she only of whom they asked that question—she whom

they seemed to blame. Where was Gervase? Why did he not come? Was he coming? Speech and hearing were alike gone. Her question was only in her eyes.

And thus the evening and the morning made the fourth day.

CHAPTER XXI.

PATTY'S ambitious schemes were crowned with complete success, and the poor Softy was made the happiest and most triumphant man in the world, on the day on which his mother was taken ill. Was it some mysterious impalpable movement in the air that conveyed to Lady Piercey's brain a troubled impression of what was taking place to her only son? But this is what no one can tell. As for Gervase, his triumph, his rapture, his sense of emancipation, could not be described. He was wild with pleasure and victory. The sharp-witted, clear-headed girl, who had carried out the whole plot, was at last overborne and subjugated by the passion she had roused, and for a time was afraid of Gervase. She had a panic lest his feeble head might give way altogether under such

excitement, and she be left in the hands of a madman. Luckily this wild fit did not last long, and Patty gradually brought the savage, which was latent in his undeveloped nature, into control. But she had got a fright, and was still a little afraid of him when the week was over, and her plans were laid for the triumphant return home. She had written to her aunt on the day of her marriage, proclaiming the proud fact, and signing her letter, not with her Christian name, but that of Mrs. Gervase Piercey, in her pride and triumph. Mrs. Gervase Piercey ! That she was now, let them rave as they pleased ! Nobody could undo what Aunt Patience's fifty pounds had done. Those whom God had joined together—or was it not rather Miss Hewitt, of Rose Cottage, and ambition and revenge? Patty, however, had no intentions appropriate to such motives in her mind. She was not revolted by the passion of Gervase, as another woman might have been. She felt it to be a compliment more or less ; his noise and uproariousness, so that he could scarcely walk along a street without shoutings and

loud laughter, did not in the least trouble her. She subdued him by degrees, bidding him look how people stared, and frightening him with the suggestion that the world in general might think him off his head, and carry him off from her, if he did not learn to suppress these vociferous evidences of his happiness : a suggestion which had a great effect upon Gervase, and made him follow her about meekly afterwards to all the sights which she thought it necessary in this wonderful holiday to see. She took him to the Zoological Gardens, which he enjoyed immensely, dragging her about from one cage to another, not letting her off a single particular. They saw the lions fed, they gave buns to the bears, they rode like a couple of children upon the camels and the elephant. Gervase drank deep of every pleasure which the resources of that Garden of Eden permitted. He had not been there since he was a child, and everything was delightful to him. The success was not so great when Patty took him to St Paul's and the Tower, which she considered to be fashionable resorts, where a bride

and her finery ought to be seen, and where Gervase walked about gaping, asking like a child at church when he could get out? Nor at the theatre, where Patty, instructed by the novels she had read, secured a box, and appeared in full costume, with that intoxicating proof that she was now a fine lady and member of the aristocracy, a low dress—and with an opera-glass wherewith to scan the faces and dresses of the other distinguished occupants of boxes. She was herself surprised at various things which she had not learnt from books—the unimpressive character of the ladies' dresses, and the manner in which they gazed down into what she believed to be the pit, a part of the house which she regarded with scorn. It was not a fashionable house, for to Patty, naturally, a theatre was a theatre, wherever situated; but it was disappointing not to see the flashing of diamonds which she had expected, nor to have other opera-glasses fixed upon herself as a new appearance in the world of fashion, which was what she looked for. And Gervase was very troublesome in the theatre.

He kept asking her what those people were doing on the stage, what all that talking was about, and when it would be time to go away. When the merchant of ices and other light refections came round, Gervase was delighted, and even Patty felt that an ice in her box at the theatre was great grandeur; but she was discouraged when she saw that it was not a common indulgence, and that Gervase, peeling and eating oranges, and flinging them about, attracted an attention which was not that sentiment of mingled admiration and envy which Patty hoped to excite. A few experiences of this kind opened her sharp eyes to many things, and reduced the rapture with which she had looked forward to her entry into town as Mrs. Gervase Piercey. But these disenchantments, and scraps of talk which her sharp ears picked up and her still sharper imagination assimilated, suggested to her another kind of operation next time, and left her full of anticipations and the conviction that it only wanted a little preparation, a little guidance, to ensure her perfect triumph.

This strange pair had what seemed to Patty boundless funds for their week in town. Twenty pounds over of Aunt Patience's gift after paying the expenses of the marriage, had seemed enough for the wildest desires; but when there was added to that twenty pounds more, his mother's last gift to Gervase, she felt that their wealth was fabulous; far, far too much to expend upon personal pleasure or sightseeing. She permitted herself to buy a dress or two, choosing those which were ready made, and of which she could see the effect at once, both on herself and the elegant young lady who sold them to her; and she put aside a ten-pound note carefully, in case of any energency. On the whole, however, it was a relief to both parties when they went home, though it took some trouble to convince Gervase that he could not go back to the Manor, leaving his wife at the Seven Thorns. He was not pleased to be told that he too must go and live at the Seven Thorns: "Why, that's what mother said—and draw the beer!" he cried; "but nothing shall make me draw the beer,"

cried Gervase. "Nobody asked you," Patty said, "you goose. We're going to live in the west rooms, a beautiful set of rooms that I put all ready, where there's a nice sofa for you to lie on, and nice windows to look out of and see everything that comes along the road—not like Greyshott, where you never see nothing—the carts and the carriages and the vans going to the fairs, and Punch and Judy, and I can't tell you all what." "Well," said Gervase, "you can stay there, and I'll come to see you every day; but I must go home." "What, leave me! and us but a week married!" cried Patty. She made him falter in his resolution, confused with the idea of an arrangement of affairs unfamiliar to him, and at last induced him to consent to go to the Seven Thorns with her on conditions, strenuously insisted upon, that he was not to be made to draw beer. But Gervase did not feel easy on this subject, even when he was taken by the new side-door into the separate suite of apartments which Patty had prepared with so much trouble. When old Hewitt

appeared he took care to entrench himself behind his wife.

"I'll have nothing to do with the beer or the customers, mind you," he cried nervously. Nobody, however, made any account of Gervase in that wonderful moment of Patty's return.

"What! it's you as is the new married couple? and you've gone and married *'im?*" cried Hewitt, with a tone of indescribable contempt.

"Yes, father! and I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head; I've married him, and I mean to take care of him," Patty cried, tossing her head.

Old Hewitt laughed a low, long laugh. His mental processes were slow, and the sight of the Softy with his daughter had startled him much; for notwithstanding all that had been said on this subject he had not believed in it seriously. Now, however, that it dawned upon him what had really happened, that his child, his daughter, was actually Mrs. Gervase Piercey, a slow sensation of pride and victory arose in his bosom too. His girl to be Lady Piercey in

her time, and drive in a grand carriage, and live in a grand house! The Hewitts were a fine old family, but they had never kept their carriage and pair. A one-horse shay had been the utmost length to which they had gone. Now Patty—Patty, the child! who had always done his accounts and kept his customers in order—Patty, his own girl, was destined to the glory of riding behind two horses and being called "my lady." The thought made him burst into a long, rumbling subterraneous laugh. Our Patty! it did not seem possible that it could be true.

"That reminds me," he said a moment after, turning suddenly grave. He called his daughter apart, beckoning with his finger.

Gervase by this time was lolling half out of the open window, delightedly counting the vehicles in sight. "Farmer Golightly's tax cart, and Jim Mason's big waggon, and the parson's pony chaise, and a fly up from the station," he cried: "it's livelier than London. Patty, Patty, come and look here." Gervase turned round, and saw his wife and her father

with grave faces consulting together, and relapsed into absolute quiet, effacing himself behind the fluttering curtains with the intention of stealing out of the room as soon as he could and getting away. His mother's threat about drawing the beer haunted him. Could not she, who could do most things, make that threat come true?

"Patty," said old Hewitt, "you've done it, and you can't undo it; but there'll be ever such a rumpus up *there*."

"Of course, I know that," she said calmly; "I'm ready for them. Let them try all they can, there's nothing they can do."

"Patty," said the old innkeeper again, "I've something to tell you as you ain't a-thinking of. About 'Er," he said, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder.

"What about her? I know she's my enemy; but you needn't be frightened, father. I've seen to everything, and there's nothing she can do."

"It ain't that as I want you to think of. It's more

dreadful than that. It's 'in the midst of life as we are in death,'" said Hewitt. "That sort of thing; and they've been a-'unting for '*im* far and wide."

"Lord, father, what do you mean?" Patty caught at a confused idea of Sir Giles' death, and her heart began to thump against her breast.

Hewitt pointed with his thumb, jerking it again and again over his shoulder. "She's—she's—dead," he said.

"Dead!" said Patty, with a shriek, "who's dead?"

Hewitt, less aware than she of Gervase's wandering and unimpressionable mind, shook his head at her jerking his thumb this time in front of him at the young man lolling out of the window. "Usht, can't ye? Why, 'Er, 'is mother," he said, under his breath.

A quick reflection passed through Patty's mind. "Then, I'm her," she said to herself, but then remembered that this was not the case, that Sir Giles' death alone could make her Lady Piercey. As this flashed upon her thoughts, a bitter regret came into Patty's mind—regret, keen as if she had loved her

that Lady Piercey was dead, that she should have been allowed to die. Oh, if she had but known! How quickly would she have brought Gervase back to see his mother! Her triumph, whenever it should come, would be shorn of one of its most poignant pleasures. Lady Piercey would not be there to see it! She could never now be made to come down from her place, made to give up all her privileges to the girl whom she despised. Patty felt so genuine a pang of disappointment that it brought the tears to her eyes. "I must tell him," she said quickly,—the tears were not without their use, too, and it is not always easy to call them up at will.

"I wouldn't to-night. Let 'im have 'is first night in peace," said the innkeeper, "and take 'is beer, and get the good of it like any other man."

"Go down, perhaps you think, to your men in the parlour, and smoke with them, and drink with them, and give you the chance to say as he's your son-in-law? and his mother lying dead all the time. No, father, not if I know it," cried Patty, and she

gave her head a very decided nod. "I know what I'm about," she added; "I know exactly what he's going to do. So, father, you may go, and you can tell 'Liza that we'll now have tea."

"I tell 'Liza! I'll do none of your dirty errands," said old Hewitt; but his indignation answered Patty's purpose, who was glad to get rid of him, in order that her own duty might be performed. She went forward to the window where Gervase was sitting, and linked her arm in his, not without some resistance on the part of the Softy, who was wholly occupied with his new pleasure.

"Let alone, I tell you, Pat! One white horse on the off side, that counts five for me; and a whole team of black 'uns for the other fellow. Where's all those black horses come from, I should like to know?"

"Gervase dear, don't you do it; don't make a game with the black horses. It's dreadful unlucky. They're for a funeral, come from town on purpose. And oh! Gervase dear, do listen to me! for whose funeral do you suppose?"

"Is it a riddle?" said Gervase, showing his teeth from ear to ear.

"Oh hush, hush, there's a good boy! It's not like you to make a joke of such dreadful things."

"Why can't you say then what it is, and have done with it?" Gervase said.

"That's just one of the sensible things you say when you please. Gervase—you remember your mother?"

"I remember my mother? I should think I remembered my mother. You know it's only a week to-day—or was it yesterday?"

"It was yesterday. You might remember the day you were married, I think, without asking me," said Patty, with spirit. "Well, then, you parted from her that day. She wasn't ill then, was she, dear?"

Upon which Gervase laughed. "Mother's always ill," he said. "She has such health you never know when she's well, or, at least, so she says. It's in her head, or her liver, or her big toe. No!" he cried, with another great laugh, "it's father as has the devil in his big toe."

"Gervase, do be serious for a moment. Your mother has been very ill, dreadful bad, and we never knew——"

"I told you," he said calmly, "she's always bad; and you can never tell from one day to another, trust herself, when she mayn't die."

"Oh, Gervase," cried Patty, holding his arm with both her hands: "you are fond of her a little bit, ain't you, dear? She's your mother, though she hasn't been very nice to me."

"Lord," cried Gervase, "how she will jump when she knows that I'm here, and on my own hook, and have got a wife of my own! Mind, it is you that have got to tell her, and not me."

"A wife that will always try to be a comfort to you," said Patty. "Oh, my poor dear boy! Gervase, your poor mother (remember that I'm here to take care of you whatever happens),—Gervase, your mother will never need to be told. She's dead and gone, poor lady, she's dead and gone!"

Gervase stared at her, and again opened his mouth

in a great laugh. "That's one of your dashed stories," he said.

"It isn't a story at all; it's quite true. She had a stroke that very day. Fancy, just the very day when we—— And we never heard a word. If we had heard I should have been the very first to bring you home."

"What good would that have done?" Gervase said sullenly; "we were better where we were."

"Not and her dying, and wanting her son."

Gervase was cowed and troubled by the news, which gave him a shock which he could not understand. It made him sullen and difficult to manage. "You're playing off one of your jokes upon me," he said.

"I playing a joke! I'd have found something better than a funeral to joke about. Gervase, we have just come back in time. The funeral's to-morrow, and oh! I'm so thankful we came home. I'm going to send for Sally Fletcher to make me up some nice deep mourning with crape, like a lady wears for her own mother."

"She was no mother of yours," said Gervase, with a frown.

"No ; nor she didn't behave like one : but being her son's wife and one that is to succeed her, I must get my mourning deep ; and you and me, we'll go. We'll walk next to Sir Giles, as chief mourners," she said.

Gervase gave a lowering look at her, and then he turned away to the open window, to count as he had been doing before, but in changing tones, the white horses and the brown.

CHAPTER XXII.

PATTY sat up half the night with Sally Fletcher, arranging as rapidly and efficiently as possible her new *mise en scène*. To work all night at mourning was by no means a novel performance for Miss Fletcher, the lame girl who was the village dressmaker; and she felt herself amply repaid by the news, as yet almost unknown to the neighbours, of the Softy's marriage and Patty's new pretensions. It is true that it had a little leaked out in the evening symposium in Hewitt's parlour; but what the men said when they came home from their dull, long booze was not received with that faith which ladies put in the utterances of the clubs. The wives of the village had always a conviction that the men had "heard wrong"—that it would turn out some-

thing quite different from the story told in the watches of the night, or dully recalled next day, confused by the fumes of last night's beer. But Sally Fletcher knew that her tale would meet with full credence, and that her cottage next morning would be crowded with inquirers; so that her night's work was not the matter of hardship it might have been supposed. She was comforted with cups of tea during the course of the night, and Patty spent at least half of it with her, helping on the work in a resplendent blue dressing-gown, which she had bought in London, trimmed with lace and ribbons, and dazzling to Sally's eyes. The dressmaker had brought with her the entire stock of crape which was to be had in "the shop," a material kept for emergencies, and not, it may be supposed, of the very freshest or finest—which Patty laid on with a liberal hand, covering with it the old black dress, which she decided would do in the urgency of the moment. It was still more difficult to plaster that panoply of mourning over the smart new cape, also

purchased in town: but this, too, was finished, and a large hatband, as deep as his hat, procured for Gervase, before the air began to thrill with the tolling, lugubrious and long drawn out, of the village bells, which announced that the procession was within sight.

It was a great funeral. All the important people of that side of the county—or their carriages—were there. An hour before the *cortège* arrived, Sir Giles' chair, an object of curiosity to all the village boys, was brought down to the gate of the churchyard, that he might follow his wife to the grave's side. And a great excitement had arisen in the village itself. Under any circumstances, Lady Piercey's funeral, the carriages and the flowers, and the mutes and the black horses, would have produced an impression ; but that impression was increased now by the excitement of a very different kind which mingled with it. Patty Hewitt, of the Seven Thorns, now Mrs. Gervase Piercey, would be there; and there was not a house, from the Rectory downwards, in which the question was not

discussed—what would happen? Would Patty receive the tacit recognition of being allowed to take her place along with her husband. Her husband! could he be anybody's husband, the Softy? Would the marriage stand? Would Sir Giles allow it? The fact that it was Sir Giles gave the eager spectators their only doubt—or hope. Had it been Lady Piercey, she would never have allowed it. She would have thrown back the pretender from the very church-door. She would have rejected Patty, thrust her out of the way, seized her son, and dragged him from the girl who had entrapped him. At the very church-door! Everybody, from the rector down to the sexton's wife, felt perfectly convinced of that.

But it would not be Lady Piercey she would have to deal with. Lady Piercey, though she filled so great a position in the ceremonial, would have nothing to say on the subject; and it was part of the irony of fate, felt by everybody, though none were sufficiently instructed to call it by that name, that she should be there, incapable of taking any share in what would

have moved her so deeply—triumphed over in her coffin by the adversary with whom, living, she would have made such short work. There was something tragic about this situation which made the bystanders hold their breath. And no one knew what Patty was about to do. That she would claim her share in the celebration, and, somehow, manage to take a part in it, no one doubted ; but how she was to accomplish this was the exciting uncertainty that filled all minds. It troubled the rector as he put on his surplice to meet the silent new-comer, approaching with even more pomp than was her wont the familiar doors of her parish church. There was not much more sentiment than is inseparable from that last solemnity in the minds of her neighbours towards Lady Piercey. She had not been without kindness of a practical kind. Doles had been made and presents given in the conventional way without any failure ; but nobody had loved the grim old lady. There was nothing, therefore, to take off the interest in the other more exciting crisis.

"Rattle her bones
Over the stones,
She's only a pauper, whom nobody owns."

Far from a pauper was the Lady Piercey of Greyshott; but the effect was the same. There are many equalising circumstances in death.

It was imposing to witness the black procession coming slowly along the sunshiny road. Old Miss Hewitt from Rose Cottage came out to view it, taking up a conspicuous position on the churchyard wall. So far from wearing decorous black in reverence of the funeral, Miss Hewitt was dressed in all that was most remarkable in her wardrobe in the way of colour. She wore a green dress; she had a large Paisley shawl of many colours—an article with which the present generation is virtually unacquainted—on her shoulders, and her bonnet was trimmed with gold lace and flowers. She had a conviction that Sir Giles would see her, and that he would perceive the difference between her still handsome face, and unbroken height and carriage, and the old ugly wife

whom he was burying—poor old Sir Giles, entirely broken down by weakness and the breach of all his habits and ways, as well as by the feeling, not very elevated perhaps, but grievous enough, of loss, in one who had managed everything for him, and taken all trouble from his shoulders! There might be some emotion deeper still in the poor old gentleman's mind; but these at least were there, enough to make his dull eyes, always moist with slow-coming tears, quite incapable of the vision or contrast in which that fierce old woman hoped.

The interest of the moment concentrated round the lych-gate, where a great deal was to take place. Already conspicuous among the crowd assembled there to meet the funeral were two figures, the chief of whom was veiled from head to foot in crape, and leant upon the arm of her husband heavily, as if overcome with grief. Patty had a deep crape veil, behind which was visible a white handkerchief often pressed to her eyes, and in the other hand, a large wreath. Gervase stood beside her, in black clothes

to be sure, and with a deep hatband covering his hat, but with no such monumental aspect of woe. His light and wandering eyes strayed over the scene, arresting themselves upon nothing, not even on the approaching procession. Sometimes Patty almost bent him down on the side on which she leant, by a new access of grief. Her shoulders heaved, her sobs were audible, when the head of the doleful procession arrived. She moved her husband forward to lay the wreath upon the coffin, and then lifting her great veil for a moment looked on with an air of agonising anxiety, while Sir Giles was lifted out of the carriage and placed in his chair, with little starts of anxious feeling as if he were being touched roughly by the attendants, and she could scarcely restrain herself from taking him out of their hands. It was a pity that poor old Sir Giles, entirely absorbed in his own sensations, did not observe this at all, any more than he observed the airs of Miss Hewitt equally intended for his notice. But when Sir Giles had been placed in his chair, Patty recover-

ing her energy in a moment, dragged her husband forward and dexterously slid and pushed him immediately behind his father's chair, coming sharply in contact as she did so with Colonel Piercey, who was about to take that place. "I beg your pardon, we are the chief mourners," she said sharply, and with decision. And then Patty relapsed all at once into her grief. She walked slowly forward half-leading, half-pushing Gervase, her shoulders heaving with sobs, a murmur of half-audible affliction coming in as a sort of half-refrain to the words read by the clergyman. The village crowding round, watched with bated breath. It was difficult for these spectators to refuse a murmur of applause. How beautifully she did it? What a mourner she made, far better than any one else there! As for that Mrs. Osborne, her veil was only gauze, and through it you could see that she was not crying at all! She walked by Colonel Piercey's side, but she did not lean upon him as if she required support. There was no heaving in her shoulders. The mind of the village

approved the demeanour of Patty with enthusiasm. It was something like! Even Miss Hewitt, flaunting her red and yellow bonnet on the churchyard wall, was impressed by the appearance of Patty, and acknowledged that it was deeply appropriate, and just exactly what she ought to have done.

But though Patty was thus overcome with grief, her vigilant eyes noted everything through the white handkerchief and the crape. When poor Sir Giles broke down and began to sob at the grave it was she who, with an energetic push and pressure, placed Gervase by his side.

"Speak to him," she whispered in his ear, with a voice which though so low was imperative as any order. She leaned herself over the other side of the chair, almost pushing Dunning out of the way, while still maintaining her pressure on Gervase's arm.

"Father," he said, putting his hand upon the old man's; he was not to say too much, she had instructed him! Only his name, or a kind word. Gervase, poor fellow, did not know how to say a

kind word, but his dull imagination had been stirred and the contagion of his father's feeble distress moved him. He began to sob, too, leaning heavily upon Sir Giles' chair. Not that he knew very well what was the cause. The great shining oaken chest that was being lowered down into that hole had no association for him. He had not seen his mother placed there. But the gloomy ceremonial affected Gervase in spite of himself. Happily it did not move him to laugh, which was on the cards, as Patty felt. It made him cry, which was everything that could be desired.

And Sir Giles did not push away his son's hand, which was what might have happened also. The old gentleman was in precisely the state of mind to feel that touch and the sound of the wavering voice. It was a return of the prodigal when the poor old father's heart was very forlorn, and the sensation of having some one still who belonged to him most welcome. To be sure there was Colonel Piercey—but he would go away, and was not in any sense a

son of the house. And Meg—but she was a dependant, perhaps pleased to think she would have nobody over her now. Gervase was his father's own, come back; equally feeble, not shaming his father by undue self-control. To hear his boy sob was sweet to the old man; it did him more good than Dunning's whispered adjurations not to fret, to "think of your own 'ealth," to "'old up, Sir Giles!" When he felt the hand of Gervase and heard his helpless son sob, a flash of force came to the old man.

"It's you and me now, Gervase, only you and me, my boy," he said loud out, interrupting the voice of the rector. It was a dreadful thing to do, and yet it had a great effect, the voice of nature breaking in, into the midst of all that ceremony and solemnity. Old Sir Giles' bare, bowed head, and the exclamation loud, broken with a sob, which everybody could hear, moved many people to tears. Even the rector paused a moment before he pronounced the final benediction, and the mourners began to disperse and turn away.

One other moment of intense anxiety followed for Patty. She had to keep her Softy up to the mark. All had gone well so far, but to keep him in the same humour for a long time together was well nigh an impossible achievement. When Sir Giles' chair was turned round, Patty almost pushed it herself in her anxiety to keep close, and it was no small exertion to keep Gervase steadily behind, yet not to hustle Dunning, who looked round at her fiercely. If there should happen to come into the Softy's mind the idea of rushing off with his father, which was his usual idea when he stood behind Sir Giles' chair! But some benevolent influence watched over Patty on that critical day. Gervase, occupied in watching the equipages, of which no man had ever seen so many at Greyshott, walked on quietly to the carriage door. He got in after Sir Giles as if that were quite natural forgetting the "manners" she had tried to teach him; but Patty minded nothing at that moment of fate. She scrambled in after him, her heart beating wildly, and no one venturing to oppose. Dunning,

indeed, who followed, looked unutterable things. He said: "Sir Giles, is it your meaning as this—this lady——?"

But Sir Giles said never a word. He kept patting his son's hand, saying, "Only you and me, my boy." He took no notice of the intruder into the carriage, and who else dared to speak? As for Patty's sentiments, they were altogether indescribable. They were complicated by personal sensations which were not agreeable. The carriage went slowly, the windows were closed on account of Sir Giles, though the day was warm. And she was placed on the front seat, beside Dunning, which was a position which gave her nausea, and made her head swim, as well as being highly inappropriate to her dignified position. But anything was to be borne in the circumstances, for the glory of being seen to drive "home" in the carriage with Sir Giles, and the chance of thus getting a surreptitious but undeniable entrance into the house. She said nothing, partly from policy, partly from discomfort, during that prolonged and

tedious drive. And Gervase behaved himself with incredible discretion. Gervase, too, was glad to be going "home." He was pleased after all that had passed to be sitting by his father again. And he did Sir Giles good even by his foolishness, the poor Softy. After keeping quite quiet for half of the way, suffering his father to pat his hand, and repeat that little formula of words, saying "Don't cry, father, don't cry," softly, from time to time, he suddenly burst forth: "I say! look at those fellows riding over the copses. You don't let them ride over our copses, do you, father?"

"Never mind, never mind, my boy," said Sir Giles. But he was roused to look up, and his sobbing ceased.

"I wish you'd stop the carriage and let me get at them. They shouldn't ride that way again, I promise you," Gervase cried.

"You can't interfere to-day, Mr. Gervase," Dunning presumed to say. "Not the day of my lady's funeral, Sir Giles. You can't have the carriage stopped to-day."

"Mind your own business, Dunning," said Sir Giles, sharply. "No, my boy, never mind, never mind. We must just put up with it for a day. It don't matter, it don't matter, Gervase, what happens now——"

"But that isn't my opinion at all," said Gervase; "it matters a deal, and they shall see it does. Job Woodley, isn't it, and young George? They think it won't be noticed, but I'll notice it. I'll take care they sha'n't put upon you, father, now that you have nobody but me."

"God bless you, Gervase, you only want to be roused; that's what your poor dear mother used always to say."

"And now you'll find him thoroughly roused, Sir Giles, and you can depend upon him that he will always look after your interests," Patty said.

The old gentleman looked at her with bewildered eyes, gazing heavily across the carriage, only half aware of what she was saying, or who she was. And then they all drove on to Greyshott in solemn silence.

They had come up by this time to the great gates, and entered the avenue. Patty's heart beat more and more with suspense and excitement. Everything now seemed to hang upon what took place in the next hour.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GERVASE went up the steps and into his father's house without waiting either for Sir Giles, whose disembarkation was a troublesome business, or his newly-made wife. For the moment he had forgotten all about Patty. She had to scramble out of the high old-fashioned chariot, which had been Sir Giles' state equipage for long, and which had been got out expressly for this high and solemn ceremony, nobody taking any notice or extending a finger to her—even the footman turning his back. Patty was too anxious and too determined on making her own entry to be much disturbed by this. To get her feet within the house was the great thing she had to consider; *but*—it need not be said that John Simpson, the footman, had his fate decided from that

day, if indeed Mrs. Gervase established, as she intended to do, her footing in her husband's home.

Gervase stood on the threshold, carelessly overlooking the group, the men about Sir Giles' chair putting him back into it, and Patty not very gracefully getting down the steps of the carriage. His tall hat, wound with the heavy band, was placed on the back of his head, his hands were in his pockets, his eyes wandering, catching one detail after another, understanding no special significance in the scene. The other carriages coming up behind, waiting till the first should move on, aroused the Softy. He had forgotten why they were there, as he had forgotten that he had any duty towards his wife, who, in her hurry, had twisted herself in her long veil and draperies, and whom no one attempted to help. Patty was not the kind of figure to attract sentimental sympathy, as does the neglected dependant of fiction, the young wife of low degree in presence of a proud and haughty family. She was briskness and energy itself, notwithstanding that complication with the long

veil, at which Gervase was just about to burst into a loud laugh when a sudden glance from her eyes paralysed him with his mouth open. As it took a long time to arrange Sir Giles, Patty had the situation before her and time to grasp it. She saw her opportunity at once. She passed the group of men about the chair, touching Dunning's arm sharply as she passed, bidding him to "take care, take care!" Then, stepping on, took the arm of Gervase, and stood with him on the threshold, like (she fondly hoped) the lady of the house receiving her guests. Dunning had nearly dropped his master's chair altogether at that insolent injunction and touch, and looked up at her with a countenance crimson with rage and enmity. But when Dunning saw the energetic figure in the doorway, holding Gervase's limp arm, and unconsciously pushing him to one side in so doing, placing herself in the centre, standing there like the mistress of the house, a cold shiver ran over him. "You could 'a knocked me down with a straw," he said afterwards confidentially to

Parsons, in the mutual review they made later of all the exciting incidents of the day.

But this was not all: the opportunity comes to those who are capable of seizing upon it. Patty stood there with a heart beating so loudly that it sounded like a drum in her own ears, but with so full a sense of the importance of every act and look, that her excited nerves, instead of mastering her, gave support and stimulation to her whole being. She might have known, she said to herself, that Gervase would have been of no use to her, a thing which she resented, being now in possession of him, though she had fully calculated upon it before. "Stand by your wife, can't you!" she whispered fiercely, as she took hold of his arm and thrust him towards the wall. He grinned at her, though he dared not laugh aloud.

"Lord, you did look ridiculous, Patty, with that long thing twisting round you."

"If you laugh, you fool," said Patty, between her closed teeth, "you'll be turned out of the house."

When she had warned him she turned, bland but

anxious, to the group below. "Oh, carry him gently, carry him gently!" she cried. When Sir Giles was set down on the level of the hall, she was the first to perceive his exhausted state. "I hope you have a cordial or something to give him, after all this fatigue?" she said. "You have nothing with you? Let the butler get it instantly—instantly!" She was quite right, and Dunning knew it, and made a sign that this unexpected order should be obeyed, with bitter anger in his heart. The old gentleman was very nearly fainting, after all the exertion and emotion. Patty had salts in her hand and eau de Cologne in her pocket ready for any emergency. She flew to him, while Dunning in his rage and pain called to the butler to make haste. And when the rest of the party followed, Patty was found in charge of Sir Giles, leaning over him, fanning him with her handkerchief impregnated with eau de Cologne, applying from time to time her salts to his nose. When the butler came hurrying back with the medicine, the first thing the surrounding spectators

were conscious of was her voice sharply addressing Dunning, "You ought to have had the drops ready; you ought to have carried them with you; you ought never to be without something to give in case of faintness—and after such a dreadful day."

The woman, the creature, the alehouse girl (these were the names by which Dunning overwhelmed her in his private discourses), was quite right! He ought to have carried his master's drops with him. He ought to have been ready for the emergency. Margaret, who had come in in the midst of this scene, after one glimpse of Mrs. Gervase standing in the doorway, which had filled her with consternation, stood by helplessly for the moment, not doing anything. Mrs. Osborne would not have ventured to interfere with Dunning at any period of her residence at Greyshott. His authority with the family had been supreme. They had grown to think that Sir Giles' life depended upon him; that he knew better than the very doctor. To see Dunning thus assailed took away her breath, as it did that of all the servants,

standing helplessly gaping at their master in his almost faint. And it was evident from Dunning's silence, and his hurried proceedings, that this audacious intruder was right—astounding discovery! Dunning did not say a word for himself. His hand trembled so, that Patty seized the bottle from him, and dropped the liquid herself with a steady hand. "Now, drink this," she said authoritatively, putting it to Sir Giles' lips, who obeyed her, though in his half-unconsciousness he had been feebly pushing Dunning away. This astonishing scene kept back all the other funeral guests who were alighting at the door, and among whom the most dreadful anticipations were beginning to breathe to the effect that it had been "too much" for Sir Giles. To see Margaret Osborne standing there helpless, doing nothing, gave force to their suppositions, for she must have been occupied with her uncle had there been anything to do for him, everybody thought. Patty's shorter figure, all black, was not distinguishable from below as she leant over Sir Giles' chair.

Gervase, who had been hanging in the doorway, reduced to complete silence by his wife's threats, pulled Margaret by her dress. "I say, Meg! she's one, ain't she? She's got 'em all down, even Dunning. Lord! just look at her going it!" the admiring husband said. He dared not laugh, but his wide-open mouth grinned from ear to ear. He did not know who the tall fellow was by Margaret's side, who stood looking on with such a solemn air, but he poked that dignitary with his elbow all the same. "Ain't she as good as a play?" Gervase said.

Colonel Piercey was in no very genial frame of mind. He was angry to see Mrs. Osborne superseded, and angry with her that she did not step forward and take the direction of everything. And when this fool, this Softy, as the country people called him, addressed himself with elbow and voice, his disgust was almost beyond bounds. It was not decorous of the next-of-kin: he turned away from the grinning idiot with a sharp exclamation, forgetting altogether that he was, more or less, the master of the house.

"Oh, hush, Gervase," said Mrs. Osborne. "Don't laugh: you will shock all the people. She is——very serviceable. She shows——great sense——Gervase, why is she here?"

He was on the point of laughter again, but was frightened this time by Margaret. "Why, here's just where she ought to be," he said, with a suppressed chuckle. "I told you, but you didn't understand. I almost told——mother."

Here the half-witted young man paused a little, with a sudden air of trouble. "Mother; what's all this about mother?" he said.

"Oh, Gervase! she wanted you so!"

"Well," he cried, "but how could I come when I didn't know? Ask her. We never heard a word. I remember now. We only came back last night. I thought after all we might find her all right when we came back. Is it—is it true, Meg?"

He spoke with a sort of timidity behind Patty's back, still pulling his cousin's dress, the grin disappearing from his face, but his hat still on the back

of his head, and his fatuous eyes wandering. His attention was only half arrested even by a question of such importance. It moved the surface of his consciousness, and no more ; his eye, even while he was speaking, was caught by the unruly action of the horses in one of the carriages far down the avenue, which put a movement of interest into his dull face.

"I cannot speak to you about it all here. Come in, and I will tell you everything," Margaret said.

He made a step after her, and then looked back ; but Patty was still busily engaged with Sir Giles, and her husband escaped, putting his cousin's tall figure between himself and her.

"I say, are all this lot of people coming here? What are they coming here for? Have I got to talk to all these people, Meg?"

He went after her into the library, where already some of the guests were, and where Margaret was immediately occupied, receiving the solemn leave-takings of the county gentry, who had driven so far for this ceremony, but who looked strangely at

Gervase, still with his hat on, and who, in presence of such a chief mourner, and of the illness of poor Sir Giles, were eager to get away. A vague story about the marriage had already flashed through the neighbourhood, but the gentlemen were more desirous even of keeping clear of any embarrassment that might arise from it, than of getting "the rights of the story" to carry back to their wives—though that also was a strong motive. Gervase gave a large grip of welcome to several who spoke to him, and laughed, and said it was a fine day, with an apparent indifference to the object of their visit, which chilled the blood of the kindly neighbours. And still more potent than any foolishness he might utter was the sign of the hat on his head, which produced the profoundest impression upon the small solemn assembly, though even Margaret, in the excitement of the crisis altogether, did not notice it for some time.

"We feel that the only kindness we can do you, dear Mrs. Osborne, is to leave you alone as quickly

as possible," said Lord Hartmore, who was a very dignified person, and generally took the lead—and he was followed by the other potentates, who withdrew almost hurriedly, avoiding Gervase as much as possible, as he stood swaying from one foot to another, with a half laugh of mingled vacuity and embarrassment. Gervase was rather disappointed that they should all go away. It was rarely that he had seen so many people gathered together under his father's roof. He tried to detain one or two of them who gave him a second grasp of the hand as they passed him.

"You're going very soon. Won't you stay and have something?" Gervase said.

Colonel Piercey was standing outside the door of the library as they began to come out, and Lord Hartmore gave him a very significant look, and a still more significant grasp of the hand.

"That," he said with emphasis, with a backward movement of his head to indicate the room he had just quitted, "is the saddest sight of all,"—and there

was a little pause of the gentlemen about the door, a group closed up the entrance to the room, all full of something to say, which none of them ventured to put into words; all relieving themselves with shaking of heads and meaning looks.

"Poor Sir Giles! I have the sincerest sympathy with him," said Lord Hartmore, "the partner of his life gone, and so little comfort in the poor son."

They grasped Gerald Piercey's hand, one by one, in a sort of chorus, grouping round the open door.

It was at this moment that Patty found herself free, Sir Giles having been wheeled away to his own rooms to escape the agitating encounter of so many strangers. She walked towards them with the heroic confidence of a Joan of Arc. Probably nothing but the habits of her previous life, her custom of facing unruly men in various stages of difficulty, dissatisfied customers, and those of too convivial a turn, drunkards, whom she had to master by sheer coolness

and strength of mind, could have armed her for such an extraordinary emergency. She knew most of the men by sight, but had hitherto looked at them from a distance as beings unapproachable, not likely ever to come within touch of herself or her life; and they all looked towards her, more or less severely,—some with surprise, some with concealed amusement, some with the sternest disapproval. So many men of might and dignity, personages in the county, not one among them sympathetic; and one small young woman, in a place the very external features of which were unknown to her, where every individual was an enemy, yet which she meant to take possession of and conquer by her bow and her spear, turning out every dissident! The gentlemen stood and stared, rather in astonishment than in curiosity, as she advanced alone, her long veil hanging behind her, her crape sweeping the carpet. They did not make way for her, which was scarcely so much from incivility as from surprise, but stood staring, blocking up the door of a

room which Patty saw must be the first stronghold to be taken, from the mere fact of the group that stood before it. She came up quite close to them without saying a word, holding her head high. And then she raised her high, rather sharp voice :—

"Will you please to make room for me to pass? I want to join my husband," she said.

And then there was a start as simultaneous as the stare had been. Patty's voice gave the gentlemen of the county a shock as if a cannon had been fired into the midst of them. It was a challenge and an accusation in one. To accuse men of their class of a breach of civility is worse than firing a gun among them. They separated quickly with a sense of shame. "I beg your pardon" came from at least two voices. It would be difficult to explain what they thought they could have done to resist the intruder: but they were horrified by the suggestion of interference —as if they had anything to do with it! so that in fact Patty entered triumphantly through a lane

formed by two lines of men dividing to make way for her. A princess could not have done more.

She walked in thus with flags flying, pale with the effort, which was advantageous to her appearance, and found herself in the great room, with its book-cases on the one hand and the tall portraits on the other. But Patty found here, against her expectations, a far more difficult scene before her. Two or three ladies had come to give Margaret Osborne the support of their presence, on what they called "this trying day," without in the least realising how trying it was to be. One of them, an old lady, sat in a great chair facing the door, with her eyes fixed upon it. Two others, younger, but scarcely less alarming, were talking to Mrs. Osborne, who in her own sole person had been supposed by Patty with natural enmity to be the chief of her adversaries. They stopped their conversation and stared at Patty, as with a sudden faltering, she came in. Gervase stood against the end window, fully outlined against the light, with his

hands in his pockets, and his hat on his head, swaying from one foot to another, his lower lip hanging a little and very moist, his wandering eyes turned towards the door. Patty entering alone under the eyes of these ladies, with a consciousness that much had passed since she had last looked at herself in a glass, and that veil and mantle might easily have got awry—and with the additional excitement of surprise in finding them there when she had looked at the worst only for the presence of Mrs. Osborne—might well have called forth a sympathetic movement in any bosom. And when it is added to this that Gervase, standing there against the light, had probably never in all his life looked so idiotic before, and that *he had his hat on his head*, last and most dreadful climax of all, it may be dimly imagined what were the sensations of his bride. But there are circumstances in which an unusual exaggeration of trouble brings support. Patty looked for a moment and then rushed upon her husband in horror. "Oh, Gervase! do you know you have got your hat on,

and ladies in the room?" she cried, with an almost shriek of dismay.

Gervase put up his hand to his head, took off the hat, and then carefully examined it, as if to find the reason of offence there. "Have I?" he said, with a laugh; "then I never knew it. You should stick by me if you mean me to behave. *I* don't think of such things."

"Then you ought," she cried, breathless, taking the hat from him with a wife's familiarity, "and you ought to beg pardon." She took him by the arm quickly and led him forward a step or two. "Ladies," she said, "I am sure me and my husband are very glad to see you. He meant no rudeness, I'm sure. He doesn't think about such little things. I am still," she added, "a sort of a stranger"—with an insinuating smile which, however, was very tremulous for Patty's nerves were strained to the utmost. She paused a moment for breath. "A bride has the feeling that the friends of the family know her husband better than she does; and it's such a sad

occasion to begin. But I'm sure I may say both for him and for me that we are pleased, and will always be pleased, to see old friends here."

The ladies sat and stared at her speechless. What reply could be made to a woman so manifestly within her rights?

CHAPTER XXIV.

PATTY felt, which was surely very natural, that the worst of her troubles were over after this scene; and when Mrs. Osborne went out with the ladies, going with them from sheer inability to know what to do—she threw herself into a great chair, which seemed to embrace and support her, with a sense at once of having earned and fully deserved the repose, and also of having been successful all along the line. She had encountered almost all who were likely to be her adversaries, and they had all given way before her. To be sure, there had not been much said to her: the gentlemen had stood aside to let her in, the ladies had stared and said nothing, only one of them had turned with a little compunction of civility to bow to her as she went away. The old

lady, whom Patty knew to be Lady Hartmore, had waddled out, saying: "Well, Meg, we shall say all we have to say another time," and had not so much as looked again at Patty. Meg Osborne, as Patty had begun to call her, had kept her eyes on the ground, and had accompanied her friends to the door without a word. But still it was Patty who had driven them away, not they who had interfered with Patty. When one of the armies in an engagement encamps upon the field of battle, that belligerent is generally admitted to have won the day. And here was Mrs. Gervase resting in that large deep chair, which was such an one as Patty Hewitt had never seen before, enjoying a moment of well-earned repose in her own house. Was it her own house? Her pulses were all throbbing with the excitement of conflict and the pride of victory; but she was aware that her triumph was not yet assured. Nevertheless, everything was in her favour. This grand house into which she had made her way, and which was even grander than Patty had supposed, was

certainly her husband's home, and she was his wife as legally, as irrevocably as if she had been married with the consent of all the parents in the world. Nothing could part her from her husband, neither force nor law, and though her heart still owned a thrill of alarm and insecurity, she became more at ease as she thought the matter over. Who dared turn her out of the house into which she had so bravely fought her way? Nobody but Sir Giles, who was not equal to the effort, who would not wish to do it, she felt sure. Patty had a conviction in her mind that she only required to be let alone and allowed access to him for a single day to get wholly the upper hand of Sir Giles. And who else had any right to interfere? Not Meg Osborne, who had herself no right to be at Greyshott, except as a humble companion and hanger-on. A niece! what was a niece in the house? Patty herself had a poor cousin who had been taken in at the Seven Thorns, as a sort of inferior servant, out of charity, as everybody said, and whose life Patty well knew had been

a very undesirable one. What was Meg Osborne more than Mary Thorne? She had no right to say a word. Neither had the tall gentleman, of whom she was, however, more frightened, whom she had already discovered to be Colonel Piercey, the nearest relation. How persons like Patty do make such discoveries is wonderful, a science which cannot be elucidated or formulated in mere words. She knew by instinct, and she knew also that he could not interfere. The servants were more in Patty's way, and her hatred of them was sharp and keen—but she had already managed to discredit Dunning, and she was not afraid of the servants. What could they do? What would they venture to do against the son's wife? All these thoughts were passing through her mind as she rested in the great chair. And yet that repose was not without thorns. Gervase, though he stood still and stared while the ladies withdrew, did not rest as she was doing. He walked to the window, to look out, and stood there fidgetting, and eager to take part in all the commotion outside.

"Lord!" he cried, "Hartmore's carriage is sent round to the stables, and my lord has got to wait, and Stubbins, the little parson, is offering his fly. Oh, I can't stay here, Patty, I must be in the fun. You can get on very well by yourself without me."

"What do you want with fun the day of your mother's funeral?" she said severely. "They'll all think a deal more of you if you stay quiet here."

Gervase's countenance fell at the suggestion of his mother's funeral. No doubt, had he been at home, had his dull mind acquainted itself with the preliminaries, he would have been more or less moved. But it was too great an effort of mind for him to connect the ceremony in the churchyard, the grave and the flowers, with Lady Piercey, whom he had left in her usual health, deciding everything in her usual peremptory way. He had a strong impression that she would presently appear on the scene as usual and settle everything; and a sort of alarm came over his face, and his spirit was overawed for a moment by the mention of her name. There succeeded

accordingly, for about a minute, silence in the room, which left Patty time to go over the question again. Who could interfere with her? Nobody! Not Meg Osborne, not Colonel Piercey, not a mere housekeeper or butler. Oh dear no! Nobody but Sir Giles himself! Patty settled herself more and more comfortably in her chair. The funeral had been at an unusually late hour, and it was now almost evening. She thought that after a little interval she would ring the bell for tea. If any one had need of refreshment after the labour of the day, it was she. And after that there were many things to think of, both small things and great things. What should she do about dinner, for instance? Meg Osborne, no doubt, had got a full wardrobe of mourning, day dress and evening dress (at her, Patty's, expense!), while Mrs. Gervase Piercey had only the gown which she had on, an old dress plastered with crape. Should she wear this for dinner? The thought of going down to dinner, sitting down with a footman behind her chair, and all the etiquette involved, was almost too much

for Patty, and took away her breath. Should she brush the skirt, and smarten up the neck and wear this? Or should she send down to the Seven Thorns for her black silk, and explain that she had not had time to get proper mourning? Gervase had begun to fidget again while she carried on this severe course of thought. She could hear him laughing to himself at the window, making occasional exclamations. "Oh, by Jove!" he called out at last. "There's lots more coming, one on the top of another. I'm going to see after them." She was so deep in her meditations, that he was gone before she could interfere. And thus she was left in the great silent library, a room such as she had never seen before, overawing her with the sight of the bookcases, the white marble faces looking down upon her of the busts that stood high up here and there, the full-length portraits that stared upon her from the other side. Many people, quite as little educated as Patty —or less so, for the sixth standard necessarily includes many things—had come and gone lightly

enough, and thought nothing of the books or the ancestors. I doubt much whether Margaret Osborne had half so much general information as Patty had; but, then, their habits of mind were very different. Mrs. Gervase, when she was left alone, could not help being a little overawed by all she saw. Her husband was not much to hold on by, but yet he "belonged there," and she did not. Patty had felt increasingly, ever since the day on which she married him, how very little her husband was to be depended upon. She had fully recognised that before the marriage, and had decided that she should not mind. But now it seemed a grievance to Patty that he could not defend her and advise her; that she had nobody but herself to look to; that quite possibly he might even abandon her at the most critical moment. "There is never any calculating," she said to herself bitterly, "what a fool may do;" in which sentiment Patty echoed, without knowing it, all the philosophies of the subject. Who could have thought he would have slid away from her, on her first entrance into

a house where she would have to fight her way step by step, for nothing at all—for the first novelty that caught his wandering eye?

Patty was tired, and she cried a little at this crisis, feeling that her fate was hard. To acquire a husband with so much trouble, and to find out at once how little help to her he was. He was very fond of her, she knew. Still, now he was used to her, and took her for granted as a part of the order of things, he could not keep his mind fixed even on his wife. He was only a Softy after all, nothing more! Patty roused herself briskly, however, from this line of thought, which was evidently not one to encourage, and rang the bell. It remained a long time unanswered; and then she rang again. This time the footman who had turned his back upon her at the carriage-door, came, looked in, said "Oh!" when he saw her sitting alone, and went away. Patty's fury was indescribable. Oh that dolt John Simpson, what a fate he was making for himself! While she waited, growing more and more angry, Mrs.

Osborne came in again, with hesitation. She was still in her outdoor dress, and looked disturbed and embarrassed.

"The servants——have told me——that you had rung the bell," she said, faltering considerably. "Is there——anything——I can order for you?"

Margaret was very little prepared for her *rôle*, and was as profoundly aware of her own want of power as Patty could be.

"Order for me!" said Patty. "I rang for tea, as a proper servant would have known; and I wish you to know, Mrs. Osborne—if you are Mrs. Osborne, as I suppose, for no one has had the decency to introduce you—that it is my place to give the orders, and not yours."

Margaret was so much taken by surprise that she had no weapon with which to defend herself. She said mildly:—

"I do not often give orders; but the housekeeper, who was my aunt's favourite maid, is much overcome. I will tell them—what you want."

"Thank you, I can tell them myself," said Patty, ringing another, a louder, and more violent peal. It brought up the butler himself in great haste, and it startled the still lingering visitors, who again thought nothing less than that Sir Giles must be taken ill. "Bring up tea directly," cried Mrs. Gervase. "This is the third time I have rung. I pass over it now, owing to the confusion of the house, but it had better not occur again."

The butler stared open-mouthed at the new-comer. Patty Hewitt, of the Seven Thorns! He knew her as well as he knew his own sister. Then he looked at Mrs. Osborne, who made him a slight sign—and then disappeared, to carry astonishment and dismay into the servants' hall.

"Mrs. Osborne give me a nod," said the angry dignitary, "as I had better do it. Lord! saucing me as have known her since she was *that* high, setting up for my lady, as grand as grand, and the family giving in to her!"

"The family!" said the cook, tossing her head;

"call Mrs. Osborne the family, that is no better nor you and me. Far worse! A companion as is nobody, eating dirt to make her bread."

"Oh, if my poor lady had been here!" said Parsons, "that creature would soon have been put to the door! She was too soft-hearted over Mr. Gervase, was my poor lady—but not to stand that. As for Miss Meg, she hasn't got the spirit of a mouse!"

"But what am I to do?" said Stevens, the butler. "Me, an old servant, ordered about and sauced like that! What am I to do, I ask you? Take up the tea—or what? Mrs. Osborne, she give me a nod—but Mrs. Osborne she's not like Sir Giles' daughter, and nobody has no authority. What am I to do?"

It was finally resolved in that anxious conclave that John should be sent up with the tea, much to John's mortification and alarm, who began to feel that, perhaps, it might have been better to be civil to Patty Hewitt. He went, but returned in a minute, flying along the passages, his face crimson, his eyes staring out of his head. "She says as I'm never to

show in her sight again!" he cried. "She says as how Mr. Stevens is to come hisself and do his duty: nor she didn't say *Mr.* Stevens either," cried John, with momentary satisfaction, "but Stevens, short; and wouldn't let me so much as put down the tray!"

"Robert can take it," said the butler; but he was bewildered and hesitated. Presently he followed with a sheepish air. "I'll just go and see what comes of it," he said.

Patty was sitting up very erect in her chair, a flame of battle on her cheeks. She allowed herself, however, to show a dignified relief when Stevens came in following his inferior, who carried the tray. It was not to be supposed that so great a man could bear that burden for himself: Patty recognised this fact with instant sympathy. She nodded her head with dignity.

"Stevens," she said, with the air of a duchess, "you will see that that man never comes into my sight again."

Stevens did not, indeed, make any reply, but a

sound of consternation burst from him, a suspiration of forced breath, which Patty accepted as assent. Margaret was standing at a little distance speechless, an image of confusion and embarrassment. She knew no more than the servants what to do. Gervase's wife—as there was no reason to doubt this woman was—how could Gervase's cousin oppose her? Margaret had no rights—no position in the household; but the wife of Gervase had certainly rights, however inopportune might be the moment at which she chose to assert them. Mrs. Osborne, however, started violently when she herself was addressed with engaging friendliness.

"Won't you come and have some tea? No? are you going? Then, will you please tell Gervase that tea is here, and I am waiting for him?" Patty said.

Margaret withdrew from the room as if a shot had been fired at her. Her confusion and helplessness were so great that they went beyond anything like resentment. She was almost overawed by the boldness of the intruder and the impossibility of the

situation. Gervase stood in the doorway, excited and pleased, shouting for the carriages, talking about the horses to whoever would talk with him. She was glad of some excuse for calling him, taking him by the arm. Certainly he would be better anywhere than there.

"Gervase," she said, "tell me, is that your wife who is in the library?"

"Eh? What do you say, Meg? Patty? Why, of course! What did you think she could be? Patty! look here, you come and tell Meg——"

"Hush, Gervase, she wants you to go to her. Tea is ready, and she is waiting for you. Now go, Gervase, go—do go!"

"She's come over Meg, too!" said Gervase to himself with a chuckle; and, fortunately, his amusement in that, and the impulse of his cousin's touch on his arm, and the new suggestion which, whatever it happened to be, was always powerful with him, made him obey the call which now came out shrilly over the other noises from the library door.

"Gervase! Gervase! I'm waiting for you for tea."

Margaret crossed the hall into the morning-room, with a grave face. The consternation which was in her whole aspect moved Colonel Piercey, who followed her, to a short laugh. "What is to be done?" he said.

"Oh, nothing, nothing that I know of! Of course she is Gervase's wife—she has a right to be here. I don't know what my poor uncle will say—but I told you before he would be talked over."

"She showed herself very ready, and with all her wits about her, at the door."

"Yes," said Margaret. "She has a great deal of sense, I have always heard. It may not be a bad thing after all."

"It frightens you, however," Colonel Piercey said.

"Not frightens but startles me—very much: and then, poor Aunt Piercey! Poor Aunt Piercey! her only child, and on her funeral day."

"She was not a wise mother, I should imagine."

"What does that matter?" cried Margaret. "And

who is wise? We do what we think is the best, and it turns out the worst. How can we tell? I am glad she is gone, at least, and did not see it," she cried with a few hot tears.

Colonel Piercey looked at her coldly, as he always did. It was on his lips to say, "She was not very good to you, that you should shed tears for her," but he refrained. He could not refrain, however, from saying—which was perhaps worse—"I am afraid it is a thing which will much affect you."

"Oh, me!" she cried, with a sort of proud disdain, and turned and left him without a word. Whatever happened he was always her hardest and coldest judge, suggesting meanness in her conduct and thoughts even to herself.

CHAPTER XXV.

NO house could be more agitated and disturbed than was Greyshott on the night of Lady Piercey's funeral. That event, indeed, was enough to throw a heavy cloud over the dwelling, where the imperious old lady had filled so large a place, that the mere emptiness, where her distinct and imposing figure was withdrawn, touched the imagination, even if it did not touch the heart. The impression, however, on such an occasion is generally one of subdued quiet and gloom—an arrest of life; whereas the great house was quivering with fears and suppositions, with the excitement of a struggle which nobody could see the end of, or divine how it should turn. The servants were in a ferment, some of them expecting dismissal; others agreed

that under new sway, such as seemed to threaten, Greyshott would not be a place for them. The scene in the housekeeper's room, where the heads of the female department sat together dismayed, and exchanged presentiments and resolutions, was tragic in its intensity of alarm and wrath. The cook had not given more than a passing thought to the dinner, which an eager kitchen-maid on her promotion had the charge of; and Parsons sat arranging her lists of linen with a proud but melancholy certainty that all would be found right, however hastily her reign might be brought to an end.

"I never thought as I should have to give them up to the likes of her," Parsons said, among her tears. "Oh, my lady, my poor lady! She's been took away from the evil to come."

"She'd never have let the likes of her step within our doors," said cook, indignant, "if it had only been poor Sir Giles, as is no better than a baby, that had been took, and my lady left to keep things straight."

"Oh, don't say that, cook, don't say that," cried Parsons, "for then *he'd* have been Sir Gervase, and *she* Lady Piercey, and my lady would have—bursted; that's what she would have done."

"Lord!" cried cook, "Lady Piercey! But the Colonel or somebody would have stopped that."

"There's nobody as could have stopped it," said Parsons, better informed. "They might say as he hadn't his wits, and couldn't manage his property, or that—but to stop him from being Sir Gervase, and her Lady Piercey, is what nobody can do; no, not the Queen, nor the Parliament: for he was born to that: Softy or not it don't make no difference."

"Lord!" said the cook again: and she took an opportunity shortly after of going into the kitchen and giving a look at the dinner, of which that ambitious, pushing kitchen-maid was making a *chef-d'œuvre*. The same information filtering through the house made several persons nervous. Simpson, the footman, for one, gave himself up for lost; and any other member of the household who had ever

entered familiarly at the Seven Thorns, or given a careless order for a pot of beer to Patty, now shook in his shoes. The general sentiments at first had been those of indignation and scorn; but a great change soon came over the household—a universal thrill of alarm, a sense of insecurity. No one ventured now to mention the name of Patty. *She*, they called her with awe—and in the case of some far-seeing persons, like that kitchen-maid, the intruder had already received her proper name of Mrs. Gervase, or even Lady Gervase, from those whose education was less complete.

The sensation of dismay which thus pervaded the house attained, perhaps, its climax in the rooms which Margaret Osborne shared with her boy, and where she had withdrawn after her brief intercourse with Patty. These rooms were little invaded by the rest of the household, the nurse who took care of Osy, doing everything that was needed for her mistress, and the little apartment making a sort of sanctuary for the mother and the child. She was

sure of quiet there if nowhere else ; and when she had closed the door she seemed for a moment to leave behind her all the agitations which convulsed and changed the course of life. The two rooms, opening into one another, in which Margaret's life had been spent for years, which were almost the only home that Osy had ever known, were still hers, though she could not tell for how short a time : the sword hanging over the mantelpiece, which Osy had described as the only thing which belonged to his mother and himself, hung there still, their symbol of individual possession. For years past, Margaret had felt herself safe when she closed that door. She held it, as it now appeared, on but a precarious footing ; but she had not thought so up to this time. She had felt that she had a right to her shelter, that her place was one which nobody could take from her ; not the right of inheritance, it is true, but of nature. It was the home of her fathers, though she was only Sir Giles' niece, and bore another name. She had been a dependant indeed, but not

as a stranger would be. It was the home of her childhood, and it was hers as long as the old rule continued—the natural state of affairs which she had not thought of as coming to an end. Even Lady Piercey's death had not appeared to her to make an end. Sir Giles would need her more: there would be still more occasion for her presence in the house when the imperious, but not unkind, mistress went away. The old lady had been sharp in speech, and careless of her feelings, but she had never forgotten that Meg Piercey had a right to her shelter as well as duties to discharge there. There had been, indeed, a scare about Gervase, but it was a proof of the slightness of reality in that scare that Margaret had scarcely thought of it as affecting herself. She had been eager to bring back Gervase to his mother, if by no other means, by the help of Patty, thus recognising her position; but after Lady Piercey's death, when the necessity was no longer pressing, Margaret had thought of it no more. And, certainly, of all days in the world, it was not upon the day of the funeral

that she had looked for any disturbance in he life.

But now in a moment—in the time that sufficed to open a door, to ring a bell, to give and order—Mrs. Osborne recognised that this life was over. It had seemed as if it must never come to an end, as all established and settled existence does ; and now in a moment it had come to an end. At many moments, when her patience was strained to the utmost, Margaret had come up here and composed herself, and felt herself safe within these walls. As long as she had this refuge she could bear anything, and there had been no likelihood that it would be taken from her. But now, whatever she might have to bear, it seemed certain that it was not here she could retire to reconcile herself to it. It seemed scarcely possible to believe that the old order of affairs was over ; and yet she felt convinced that it was over and could return no more. She did not as yet ask herself what she should do. She had never acted for herself, never inquired into the possibilities of life. Captain

Osborne's widow had come back to her home as the only natural thing to do. She had been brought up to do Lady Piercey's commands, to be the natural, superfluous, yet necessary, person who had no duty save to do duty for everybody ; and she had fallen back into that position as if it were the only one in life. Margaret did not enter into any questions with herself even now, much less come to any decision. It was enough for one day to have faced the startling, incomprehensible fact that her life was over, the only life—except that brief episode of her marriage—which she had ever known. Where was she to go with her little pension, her husband's sword, and her boy? But she could not tell, or even think, as yet, of any step to take. All that she was capable of was to feel that the present existence, the familiar life, was at an end.

Osy had been left in a secluded corner of the garden while the funeral took place, to be out of the way. It had not seemed necessary to his mother to envelop him in mourning, and take him with her through that

strange ceremonial, so mysterious to childish thoughts; and while she sat alone, the sound of his little voice and step became audible to her coming up the stairs. Osy, who was willing on ordinary occasions to spend the whole of his time out-of-doors, had been impatient to-day, touched by the prevailing agitation, though he did not know what it meant. He came in, stamping with his little feet, making up for the quiet which had been exacted from him for a few days past, and threw himself against Margaret's knee.

"Movver," he said, breathless, "there's a lady down in the libery."

"Yes, Osy, I know."

"Oh, movver knows," he said, turning to his attendant, "I told you movver alvays knows. Very queer fings," said Osy, reflectively, "have tummed to pass to-day."

"What things, Osy?"

"Fings about Aunt Piercey," said the little boy, counting upon his fingers; "somefing I don't understand. You said, movver, she had don to heaven,

but Parsons, she said you had all don to put her somewhere else, but I believe you best; and then there were all the carriages and the gemplemans, and the horse that runned away. But most strangest of all, the lady in the libery." He paused to think. "I fought she wasn't a lady at all, but a dressmaker or somefing."

"And then? you changed your mind?"

"No," said the little boy, doubtfully, "not me. But she looked out of the window, and then she called, 'Gervase! Gervase!'—she touldn't say, Gervase, Gervase, if she were one of the maids. I fink it's the lady Cousin Gervase went to London to marrwy. And I'm glad," Osy said, making another pause. He resumed, "I'm glad, because now I know that my big silver piece was a marrwage present, movver. He tooked it, but I dave it him all the same; and as it was a marrwage present, I don't mind scarcely at all. But that is not the funniest fing yet," said Osy, putting up his hand to his mother's face to secure her attention; "there's

somefing more, movver. She tummed to the window, and she said, 'Gervase, Gervase, who is that ickle boy?"

"Well, Osy, there was nothing very wonderful in that," said Margaret, trying to smile.

"Yes, movver, there was two fings wonderful." He held out the small dirty forefinger again, and tapped upon it with the forefinger of his other little fat hand. "First—there touldn't any lady tum to Greyshott and not know me. I'm not an ickle boy, I'm Osy; and another fing, she knows me already quite well; for she isn't a beau'ful lady from London, like that one that singed songs, you know. She is the woman at the Seven Thorns. Sally, tum here and tell movver. We knowed her quite well, bo Sally and me."

"It's quite true, ma'am, as Mr. Osy says, it's quite, quite——"

"That will do," said Margaret, "I want no information on the subject. Make haste, Sally, and get Master Osy's tea."

Osy stood looking up somewhat anxiously in his mother's face, leaning against her. He put one hand into hers, and put the other to her chin to make her look at him, with a way he had. "Movver, why don't you want in—in—formashun?" he said.

"Osy, my little boy, you know you mustn't talk before Sally of your Cousin Gervase or the family; you must tell me whatever happens, but not any of the servants. That lady is perhaps going to be the lady of the house, now. She is Mrs. Gervase, and she has a better right to be here than you or me. Perhaps we shall have to go away. You must be a very good, very thoughtful little boy; and polite, like a gentleman, to every one."

"I am never not a gemplemans, movver," said the child, with an air of offended dignity; then he suddenly grew red, and cried out, "Oh, I fordot! Cousin Colonel met me in the hall, and he said would I tell you to tum, please, and speak to him in the rose-garden, because he touldn't tum upstairs. Will you do and speak to Cousin Colonel in the garden,

movver? He said, wouldn't I tum with him to his house?"

"Osy! but you wouldn't go with any one, would you, away from your mother?"

"Oh, not for always," cried the child, "but for a day, two days, to ride upon his s'oulder. He's not like Cousin Gervase. He holds fast—fast; and I likes him. Movver, run into the rose-garden; for I fordot, and he is there waiting, and he will fink I've broke my word. And I doesn't want you now," said Osy, waving his hand, "for I'm doin' to have my tea."

Thus dismissed, Margaret rose slowly and with reluctance. She did not run to the rose-garden as her son had bidden her. A cloud had come over her face. It was quite reasonable that Colonel Piercey should ask to speak with her in her changed position of affairs. It would be quite reasonable, indeed, that he should offer her advice, or even help. He was her nearest relation, and though he had not been either just or kind to herself, he had fallen under the charm

of her little boy. It might be that, distasteful as it was, for Osy's sake she would have to accept, even to seek, Gerald Piercey's advice. Probably it was true kindness on his part to offer it in the first place, to put himself at her disposal. For herself there could be no such question; somehow, so far as she was concerned, she could struggle and live or die: what would it matter? But Osy must grow up, must be educated, must become a man. Margaret had been of opinion that she knew something already of the bitterness of dependence; it seemed to her now, however, that she had not tasted it until this day.

CHAPTER XXVI.

COLONEL PIERCEY had been walking up and down somewhat impatiently for some time, at the corner of the rose-garden where Osy had left him. The child had not then seen the lady at the window who asked who was that little boy; and this incident and the account of it, which Osy had hastened to give to his mother, had naturally occupied some time. He was not much accustomed to wait, and did not like it. And when he saw Margaret come slowly along, some half-hour after he had sent, what he felt was a very respectful message to her, asking her to allow him a few minutes' conversation, the curious opposition and sense of inevitable hostility which he felt towards his cousin, was sharpened into a keen feeling of resentment. She had held him at bay all along,

never treated him with confidence or friendliness; and if she chose to affect fine-lady airs of coyness and pride *now!* It was quite unconsciously to himself, and he was by nature a man full of generosity, who would have been more astonished than words could say, had he been charged with presuming upon adverse circumstances; and yet he was far more angry with Margaret in her dependent position than he would have been with any woman more happily situated. He felt that she, as women he believed generally did, was disposed to stand upon the superiority of being at so great a disadvantage, and to claim consideration from the very fact that she got it from no one. Why should she bear the spurns of all the unworthy, and mount upon that pedestal of patient merit to him? It was not that he felt it natural to treat her badly because other people did, but because the fact that other people did, gave her the opportunity of assuming that it would be the same with him. He would have liked to take her by the shoulders and shake out of her

that aspect of injury, without knowing that he dared not have entertained that fierce intention towards any one who was not injured. Finally, he watched her coming towards him slowly, showing her reluctance in every step, with an impatience and disinclination to put up with it, which was almost stronger than any feeling of personal opposition he had ever felt in his life. She said, before she had quite come up to him: "I am sorry I have kept you waiting. Osy has only given me your message now."

It was on his lips to say: "You are not sorry to have kept me waiting!" but he subdued that impulse. A man like Colonel Piercey cannot give a woman the lie direct, unless in very serious circumstances indeed. He replied stiffly: "I fear I have taken a great liberty in asking you to meet me here at all."

Margaret answered only with a faint smile and wave of her hand, which seemed to Colonel Piercey to say as plainly as words; "Everybody offers me indignity: why not you, too?" which, perhaps, was

not very far from the fact; though she was a great deal too proud to have ever said, or even implied, anything of the kind. He answered his own supposition hotly, by saying: "I know no other place where we should be safe from interruption, and I thought it my duty to——speak to you about the new condition of affairs."

"Yes?" said Margaret. "I am afraid I have very little light to throw on the position; but I shall be glad to hear what you have to say."

All that he said in the meantime was, with some resentment: "You don't seem so much startled by what has happened as I should have supposed."

"I was much startled to see Patty—I mean the person whom we must now call Mrs. Gervase—at the funeral. But of course, after that, one was prepared for all the rest. I don't know that I had much reason to be startled even at that. From the moment we found that she was absent while he was absent, I ought to have, and indeed I did, divine what must have occurred. However sure one is of such a thing,

it is startling, all the same, when one comes to see it actually accomplished ; but I ought not to say more than that."

"You take it with much philosophy," Colonel Piercey said.

"Do you think so? I should be glad to think I was so strong-minded ; for there is probably no one to whom it will make so much difference as to me."

"That is why I felt that I must speak to you. Can nothing be done to prevent this ? "

"To prevent what ? " she said, with some surprise.

"The reign of this woman over Uncle Giles' house, in Aunt Piercey's place ! It is too intolerable ; it is enough to make the old lady rise from her grave."

"Poor old Aunt Piercey ! She has been taken away from the evil to come. I am glad that she is dead, and has not had this to bear."

"I suppose women have tears at their will," cried Colonel Piercey, bursting forth in an impatience which he could restrain no longer. "She was not

so kind to you that you should feel so tenderly for her."

"How do you know she was not kind to me? She was natural, at all events," cried Margaret. "It has all been quite natural up to this time; I went away and I came back, and whatever happened to me, I was at home. But you, Colonel Piercey, you are not natural. I have no right to accept contumely at your hands. You came here with a suspicion of Heaven knows what in your mind; you thought I had some design: what was the design which you suspected me of having against the happiness of this household? I warned you that you should have some time or other to explain what you meant—to me."

Colonel Piercey stood confronting her among the roses which formed so inappropriate a background, and did not know what reply to make. He had not expected that assault. Answer to a man for whatever you have said or seemed to say, and whatever may lie behind, that is simple enough; but to explain

your injurious thoughts to a woman, who does not even soften the situation by saying that she has no one to protect her—that is a different matter. He grew red, and then grew grey. He had no more notion what to answer to her than he had what it was, actually and as a matter of fact, that he had suspected. He had not suspected anything. He had felt that a woman like this could never have accepted the position of dependence, unless—— That such a person must be a dangerous and hostile force—that she had wrongs to redress, a position to make—how could he tell? It had been instinctive, he had never known what he thought.

"Cousin Meg——" he said, hesitating.

"From the moment," she said indignantly, "in which you set me up as a schemer and designing person in the home that sheltered me, these terms of relationship have been worse than out of place."

Poor Colonel Piercey! He was as far from being a coward as a man could be. If he did not write

V.C. after his name, it was, perhaps, because the opportunity had not come to him of acquiring that distinction ; he was the kind of man of which V.C.'s are made. But now, no expedient, save that of utter cowardice, occurred to him ; for the first time in his life he ran away.

"I am very sorry you will not accord me these terms," he said, meekly ; "I don't understand what you accuse me of. *I* think you a schemer and designing person ! how could I ? If you will excuse me, there is no sense in such a suggestion. Unless I had been a fool—and I hope, at least, that you don't consider me a fool—how could I have thought anything of the kind ? You must think me either mad or an idiot," he went on, gaining a little courage. "I came here with no suspicions. I have been angry," he added, turning his head away, "to see my cousin, Meg Piercey, at everybody's beck and call. and to see how careless they were of you, and how exacting, and how—— "

"All this," said Margaret, with surprise, "should

have made you look upon me with compassion instead of something like insult."

"Oh, compassion," he cried, "to you! I should have thought that the worst insult of all. You are not a person to be pitied. However I may have offended, I have always felt that——"

The end of this statement was part of the process of running away. Indeed, he was very much frightened, and felt the falseness of his position extremely. He had not a word to say for himself. To upbraid her—at a moment when her home, her last shelter, was probably about to be taken from her, and herself thrown upon the world with her helpless child—he, perhaps, being the only person who had any right to help her—was the most impossible thing in the world. And though his opinion had no time or occasion to have changed, it had always been an opinion founded upon nothing. A more curious state of mind could scarcely be. He was dislodged from his position at the point of Margaret's sword, so to speak. And he had never had any ground for that position, or

right to have assumed it ; and yet he was still there in mind, though in word and profession he had run away. Margaret did not understand this complicated state of mind. She was half amused by the dismay in his face, by his too swift and complete change of front. The *amende* which he had made was as complete as any apology and confession could be, though it was an apology by implication, rather than a direct denial of blame. "How could I?" is different from "I did not." But she did not dwell upon this.

"Of course," she said, "I have no right not to accept what you say, though it is, perhaps, strangely expressed. And I scarcely know what there is I can explain to you. My aunt feared this that has taken place, before I did : she naturally thought less of her son's deficiencies. She was so imprudent, as I thought it, as to warn the girl of things she would do to prevent it. I believe there was really nothing that could have been done to prevent it. And then she was equally imprudent in letting him go to town, and thus giving him the opportunity. She thought she could

secure him by putting him in the hands of the clergyman, who never saw him at all. I feared very much how it would be, and poor Gervase was several times on the point of betraying himself. Perhaps, if I had sought his confidence—— But his mother would not have paid any attention to what I could say. And I don't know what could have been done to prevent it."

"Why, he is next to an idiot!"

"Oh no," cried Margaret, half offended. "Gervase is not an idiot. He has gleams of understanding, quite—almost, as clear as any one. He knows what he wants, and though you may think his mind has no steadiness, you will find he always comes back to his point. He has a kind of cleverness, even, at times. Oh no; Aunt Piercey examined into all that. They could not make him out incapable of managing his own affairs. To be sure, he has not had any to manage up to this time. And now that he has this sharp Patty behind him," said Margaret, with a half smile——

"Then you think nothing can be done?"

"What could be done? You could not do anything in Uncle Giles' lifetime to turn his only child out of his inheritance."

"It is you," said Colonel Piercey, "who are imputing intentions now. I had no such idea. I think my business as next-of-kin is to defend the poor fellow. But the woman; that is a different thing."

"The woman is his wife. I don't want to assume any unnatural impartiality. But, after all, is he likely ever to have had a better wife? I believe she will be an excellent wife to Gervase. One of his own class, I hope, would not have married him."

"Why do you say, 'I hope?' Is that not worse than anything that could be said?"

"Perhaps," said Margaret. "Poor Gervase is not an idiot, but neither is he just like other people. And a girl might have been driven into it, and then might have found——" She added, with a little shiver, "It is the best thing that could have happened for him to marry Patty. I hate it, of course. How could I do otherwise? But as far as he himself is concerned——"

"You are a great philosopher, Cousin Meg."

"Do you think so?" Half resentful as she was, and not more than half satisfied with Colonel Piercey's explanations, he was yet the only person in the world to whom she could speak with freedom; and it was a relief to her. "She will look after Uncle Giles' comfort, and he will get to like her," she continued. "She will rule the household with a rod of iron." Margaret laughed, though her face settled down the next moment into a settled gravity. "They will have no society, but they will not want it. She will keep them amused. Perhaps it is the best thing that could have happened," she said.

"And you? and the boy?" He stopped and looked at her standing among the roses, which were very luxuriant in the last climax of maturity, full blown, shedding their leaves, just about to topple over from that height of life into the beginning of decay. Margaret had no trace of decay about her, but she, too, was in the full height of life, the fulfilment of promise, standing at the *mezzo di cammin*, and full of all

capabilities. She did not look up at him, but answered with a half-smile,—

"I—and the boy? We are not destitute. Perhaps it will be better for us both to set out together, and live our own life."

"You are not destitute? I hope you will pardon me. After what you think my conduct has been, you may say I have no right——"

Margaret smiled in spite of herself.

"But you say that your conduct has been—not what I thought."

"Yes, yes, that is so: I have not been such a fool. Cousin Meg, we were great friends in the old days."

"Not such very great friends—no more than girls and boys are when they are not specially attached to each other."

He thought that she intended to give him a little prick with one of those thorns which the matured rose still keeps upon its stalk; and he felt the prick, which, being still more mature than she, he ought not to have done.

"I think it was a little more than that," he said, in a slight tone of pique; "but anyhow—we are cousins."

"Very distant cousins."

"Distant cousins," he cried, impatiently, "are near when there are no nearer between. We are of the same blood, at least. You want to push me away, to make me feel I have nothing to do with it; but that can't be so long as you are Meg Piercey——"

"Margaret Osborne at your service," she said, gravely. "Forgive me, Cousin Gerald. It is true, we have had enough of this tilting. I don't doubt for a moment that you would give me a helping hand if you could; that you wish me well, and especially," she added, lifting her eyes with a half reproach, half gratitude in them, "the boy—as you call him."

"What could I call him but the boy?" said Colonel Piercey, with a sort of exasperation. "Yes, I don't deny it, it was of him I wanted to speak. He is a delightful boy—he is full of faculty and capacity, and one could make anything of him. Let me say

quite sincerely what I think. You are not destitute ; but you are not rich enough to give him the best of everything in the way of education, as—as—don't slay me with a flash of lightning—as I could. Now I have said it ! If you would trust him to me ! "

She had looked, indeed, for a moment as if her eyes could give forth lightning enough to have slain any man standing defenceless before her ; but then these eyes softened with hot tears. She kept looking at the man, explaining himself with such difficulty, putting forth his offer of kindness as if it were some dreadful proposition, with a gradual melting of the lines in her face. When he threw a hasty glance at her at the end of his speech, she seemed to him a woman made of fire, shedding light about her in an astonishing transfiguration such as he had never seen before.

" This," she said, in a low voice, " is the most terrible demonstration of my poverty and helplessness that has ever been made to me—and the most awful suggestion, as of suicide and destruction."

"Meg!"

"Don't, don't interrupt me! It is: I have never known how little good I was before. I don't know now if it will kill me, or sting me to life; but all the same," she cried, her lip quivering, "you are kind, and I thank you with all my heart! and I will promise you this: If I find, as you think, that, whatever I may do, I cannot give my Osy the education he ought to have, I will send and remind you of your offer. I hope you will have children of your own by that time, and perhaps you will have forgotten it."

"I shall not forget it; and I am very unlikely to have children of my own."

"Anyhow, I will trust you," she said, "and I thank you with all my heart, though you are my enemy. And that is a bargain," she said, holding out her hand.

Her enemy! Was he her enemy? And yet it seemed something else beside

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHILE these scenes were going on, Mr. and Mrs. Gervase Piercey were very differently employed upstairs. When Patty had finished her tea, and when she had made the survey of the library, concerning which her conclusion was that these horrid bookcases must be cleared away, and that a full-length portrait of herself in the white satin which had not, yet ought to have been, her wedding-dress, would do a great deal for the cheerfulness of the room, she took her husband's arm, and desired him to conduct her over the house. When Patty saw the drawing-room, which was very large, cold, and light in colour, with chairs and chandeliers in brown holland, she changed her mind about the library. She had not been aware of the existence of this drawing-room.

"This is where we shall sit, of course," she said.

"Father can't abide it," said Gervase.

"Oh, your father is a very nice old gentleman. He will have to put up with it," said the new lady of the house.

In imagination she saw herself seated there, receiving the county, and the spirit of Patty was uplifted. She felt, for the first time, without any admixture of disappointment, that here was her sphere. When she was taken upstairs, however, to Gervase's room, she regarded it by no means with the same satisfaction. It was a large room, but sparsely furnished, in no respect like the luxurious bower she had imagined for herself.

"Take off my bonnet here!" she said: "no, indeed I sha'n't. Why, there is not even a drapery to the toilet table. I have not come to Greyshott, I hope, to have less comfort than I had at home. There must be spare rooms. Take me to the best of the spare rooms."

"There's the prince's room," said Gervase, "but

nobody sleeps there since some fellow of a prince—I can't tell you what prince—— And I haven't got the keys; it's Parsons that has got the keys."

"You can call Parsons, I suppose. Ring the bell," said Patty, seizing the opportunity to look at herself in the glass, though she surveyed the room with contempt.

"Lord!" cried Gervase. "Parsons, mother's own woman——." Then he threw himself down in his favourite chair with his hands in his pockets. "You can do it yourself. I'm not going to catch a scolding for you."

"A scolding!" said Patty; "and who is going to scold you, you silly fellow, except me? I should like to see them try—Mrs. Parsons or Sir Giles, or any one. You can just say, 'Speak to my wife.'"

"There's mother, that you daren't set up your face to. I say," said Gervase; "Patty, what's all this about mother? Mother's—dead? She'll never have a word to say about anything any more?"

"Dear mother!" said Patty. "You must always say dear mother, Gervase, now: I'm sure I should have loved her—but, you see, Providence never gave me the opportunity. No, she'll never have a word to say: it's me that will have everything to say.—Oh, you have answered the bell at last! Send Mrs. Parsons here."

"Mrs. Parsons, ma'am—my lady?" the frightened little under-housemaid, who had been made to answer, said.

Patty gave her a gracious smile, feeling that at last she had found some one who understood what her claims were.

"What's your name?" she said.

"Ellen."

"Well, Ellen, I like your looks, and I've no doubt we shall get on; but you needn't call me my lady, not now,—for the present I am only Mrs. Gervase. Now, go and send Parsons here."

"Oh, my lady, Mrs. Parsons! she's in my old lady's room. I daren't disturb her, not for anything

in the world ; it would be as much as my place was worth."

"I see you are only a little fool after all," said Patty, with a frown. "Your place is just worth this much—whether you please me or not. Mrs. Parsons has as much power as—as that table. Goodness," cried Patty, "what a state this house has been in, to be sure, when one servant is afraid of another ! but I shall soon put an end to that. Call Parsons ! let her come at once."

The little housemaid came back while Patty still stood before the glass straightening the edge of her bonnet and arranging her veil.

"If you please, my lady, Mrs. Parsons is doing out my old lady's drawers—and she has her head bent down, and I can't make her hear."

"I'll make her hear," cried Patty, with an impulse which belonged rather to her previous condition than to her present dignity; and she rushed along the corridor like a whirlwind, with her draperies flying. It was, doubtless, instinct or inspiration that directed

her to the right door, while Gervase followed on her steps to see the fun, with a grin upon his face. He remembered only now and then, when something recalled it to him, that his mother was gone. He was not thinking of her now; nevertheless, when Patty burst into that room, he stood in the doorway dumb, the grin dying out from his face, and gave a scared look round as if looking for the familiar presence he had so often encountered there.

"You perhaps have not heard, Mrs. Parsons," said Patty, with her sharp, decisive voice, "that I sent for you?"

Parsons had her head bent over the drawers. She said, without turning round, "That gaby, Ellen, said something about somebody wanting me": and then began to count,—"Eight, nine, ten. Three dozen here and three dozen in the walnut wardrobe," said Parsons; "that makes it just right."

Patty's curiosity overcame her resentment. She came forward and looked over Parsons' shoulder. "Six dozen silk stockings," she cried; "is that

what you are counting? What a number for an old lady! and fine, too, and in good condition," she said, putting her hand over the woman's shoulder and bringing forth a handful. They were mingled white and black, and Patty looked upon them with covetous eyes.

"Who are you as takes such a liberty?" cried Parsons, springing to her feet. She found herself confronted by Patty's very alert, firm figure and resolute countenance. Patty drew Lady Piercey's silk stockings through her hands, looking at the size of them. She held them up by the toes to mark her sense of their enormous dimensions.

"I could put both my feet into one of them," she said, reflectively, "so that they are no use to me. Oh, you are Parsons! Open the door, please, at once, of the best rooms. I want to settle down."

The woman looked at the intruder with a mixture of defiance and fear. She turned to Gervase, appealing against the stranger. Many a time had Parsons put the Softy out of his mother's room,

bidding him be off and not aggravate my lady. But my lady was gone, and Gervase was the master, to do what he would ; or, what was worse, it was Patty who was the mistress. Patty of the ale-house ! Parsons looked at Gervase with an agonised appeal. "They're your mother's things," she said; "Mr. Gervase, will you see them knock about your mother's things ?"

Patty's eyes were in the drawer remarking everything, and those eyes sparkled and shone. What treasures were there ! Not only silk stockings too big for her, but linen, and lace, and embroidered handkerchiefs, and silks, such as Patty had never seen before. She went to the drawers and closed them one after another.

"I see there are some nice things here," she said. "We can't have them turned over like this by a servant. Some servants expect their mistress's things as their perquisites, but we can't allow that in this house. Lock them up, lock them up at once, and I'll take the keys."

"The keys—my keys!" cried Parsons almost beside herself.

"The late Lady Piercey's keys. I'll take them, please, all of them. There's a time for everything; and to go over my mother-in-law's things the very day of her funeral is indecent—that is what it is, indecent; I can find no other word."

"I'll never give up my keys!" cried Parsons, "that my dear lady trusted me with—never, never!" And then she burst into tears, and flung them down on the floor at Gervase's feet. "Take them all, then! all!" she cried; "I'll not keep one of them! Oh, my dear old lady, what a good thing she has not lived to see this day! But it never would have happened had she been here. You never, never would have dared to lift up your little impudent face. —Oh, Mr. Gervase! oh, Mr. Gervase, save me from her! She'll tear me to pieces!" Parsons cried. No doubt Patty's look was fierce. The woman seized hold upon Gervase and swung herself out by him, keeping his limp person between her and his wife.

"Don't let her!" she cried, "don't let her! in your own mother's room."

"Mrs. Parsons," said Patty, over Gervase's body as it were, "do you think I would soil my fingers by touching you? You thought you would rob the poor lady that's dead, and that nobody would notice; but you did not know that *I* was here. Instead of rummaging Lady Piercey's drawers, you had better empty your own, and get ready for leaving. Have all your accounts ready and your keys ready; you shall leave this house by twelve to-morrow," Patty cried.

"Mr. Gervase, Mr. Gervase!" cried the unfortunate woman.

"I say, don't you go and touch me, Parsons. I don't mind your talking, but you sha'n't go and finger me as if I was clothes from the wash," said Gervase. He laughed at his own joke with enjoyment. "As if I was a basket of clothes from the wash," he said.

"Shut the door upon her, Gervase. I don't condescend to bandy words.—At twelve to-morrow," Patty said.

Parsons went downstairs mad with fury, and was told the tale of the tea, and how John Simpson had got his dismissal, and was never to appear before that upstart more. "We had better all give warning afore she comes to the rest of us," said cook. But it was a good place, with many perquisites, and as she spoke she exchanged with the butler a look of some anxiety. Perhaps they did not wish to present their accounts at a moment's notice. Perhaps they only thought regretfully of their good place. Parsons had carried things with a high hand over the younger servants for years. She had not always even respected the susceptibilities of cook. She had been her mistress's favourite and companion, doing, they all thought, very much what she liked with the internal economy of the house. No one had ventured to contradict, or even oppose, Lady Piercey's factotum. It was not in human nature not to be pleased, more or less, that she had found some one to repay to her in a certain degree the little tyrannies of the past. "What

would Mr. Dunning say?" was what everybody asked.

The house was, however, in great agitation as the hour of dinner approached, and the drama of the family was about to be exposed to the searching observation of that keen audience which waits at table, and which had all its faculties sharpened for this, its chief moment of spectatorship. To have this mode and period of watching the crisis of life in other human creatures, must be a great *dédommagement* for any ills that may pertain to domestic service in these days. It is as good as a play, nay, better, seeing that there is no simulation in the history that is worked out under our servants' eyes. It was exciting to think, even, how many places should be laid at table: whether Patty, whose new dignity had not been formally announced to any one, and, who, for anything they knew, might shrink from appearing in the midst of the family, unsupported—might not withdraw from the ordeal of the common meal, or be too much overcome with grief to come downstairs. Patty's mind

was greatly exercised on the same subject. She had chosen from among the unoccupied rooms those which pleased her best, which were not, however, the prince's rooms, but a suite adjoining which took her fancy, the size and the fittings of which, however, suggested innumerable new ideas to a mind open and eager to receive every indication of what was suitable to her new state. For one thing, they were lined with prodigious wardrobes: *miles*, Patty said to herself with awe, of old dark, gleaming, mahogany doors, behind which were pegs and shelves innumerable, to contain the dresses of the inhabitant. Patty could count hers—and only two, or at most, three of these were fit for the use of Mrs. Gervase Piercey—on one hand; and the long range of empty space at once depressed and excited her—a vacancy that must be filled. In like manner, the large dressing-table had drawers for jewellery, of which Patty had none. And in this great space, where her little figure was visible in glimpses in two or three tall mirrors, there was such evident need of a maid, that her alert spirit was

overawed by the necessity. Then she had nothing that was needful for the toilet: no shoes, not even a fresh handkerchief to dry those tears, which were ready to come at the mention of her dear mother-in-law's name. The temptation to return to that dear mother-in-law's room, and equip herself with those articles which lay there in such abundance, and which certainly, it would harm no one to make use of, was very strong. But Patty was half-afraid, half-conscious, that on this evening, at least, it would be unwise so to compromise herself. It was not an evening, she reflected, for full dress, and her mourning would be an excuse for everything. What a wise inspiration that had been, to cover her old dress with crape! Patty undid a hook or two, and folded in the corners of her bodice at the neck. It showed the whiteness of that throat, and gave an indication that she knew what was required in polite society. And she drew on again with some difficulty, over hands which were not quite so presentable, the black gloves, which had not borne the strain of the morning, the

heat, and the affliction, so well as might have been desired. Before doing this, however, she had written, by a sudden inspiration, a note to Sally Fletcher, requesting her to come to Greyshott at once with Mrs. Gervase Piercey's "things," and to remain as her maid till further orders. And then she took her husband's arm, and went solemnly downstairs.

Colonel Piercey was lingering in the hall, much at a loss what to do. Margaret had not yet appeared. The butler stood at the door of the dining-room, with Robert, not John Simpson, at his side. Patty knew that it was correct and proper for the party to assemble first in the drawing-room, but she waived that ceremony for to-night. She came downstairs very audibly, describing to Gervase what she intended to do.

"I can't bear the gloomy library," she said. "I don't mean to sit in it. We must have the real drawing-room made fit to live in. But all that will want a little time, and, of course, your dear papa

must be consulted. I would not for the world interfere with his little ways."

"Where's father? ain't he coming to dinner?" said Gervase, breaking into this speech, which the audience for which it was intended had already heard, noted, and inwardly digested.

"No, Mr. Gervase. Mr. Dunning thinks as Sir Giles 'as 'ad enough excitement for to-day."

"Well," said Patty, "I don't think much of Dunning after his neglect, but he's right in that. I should have said so myself had it been referred to me. Early to bed and kept quite quiet—that is the only thing for your poor dear papa. Are we waiting for any one?" she said, looking round with majesty. *J'ai failli attendre.* Patty had never heard these words, but they were written on her face.

There was silence in the hall. Colonel Piercey had turned round from the engraving which he had been examining with quite unnecessary minuteness; but as he did not know either of the strange couple who by a sudden transformation had become his hosts, it was

not possible that he could give any explanations; and the butler, who had not the training of a master of the ceremonies, and who had begun to shake in his shoes before that personage who, in her day, had drawn beer for him at the Seven Thorns—who had dismissed the great Parsons, and accused the greater Dunning of neglect—remained dumb, shifting from one foot to another, looking helplessly in front of him. He ventured at last to say, with trepidation, that "Mrs. Osborne, if you please, is just coming downstairs."

"Oh, Mrs. Osborne!" said Patty, and swept into the room. She stood looking for a moment at the expanse of the table laid with five places—one of them unnecessary. "I suppose I had better take my own proper place at once without ceremony," she said with an airy gesture, half to Colonel Piercey, half to the butler. "And, Gervase, as your father isn't here, you had better sit in his place. We must make another arrangement when Sir Giles is able to come to table. Oh, Margaret Osborne! Is that where she

sits? And here she is! I don't say anything, for we are a little unpunctual ourselves to-night. But I must warn you all that I am generally exact to the minute, and I never wait for anybody," Patty said.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IT may easily be supposed that there was not much conversation at the table thus surrounded. Colonel Piercey and Margaret Osborne sat opposite to each other, but concealed from each other by the huge bouquet of flowers which occupied the central place; and neither of them, in the shock and strangeness of the occasion, found a word to say. They were both paralysed, so to speak, by the unimaginable circumstances in which they found themselves, overwhelmed with an amazement which grew as the meal went on. Gervase, in his father's seat, ate voraciously, and laughed a good deal, but said little. Patty was mistress of the occasion. One glance of keen observation had shown her that Mrs. Osborne's dress was not even open at the throat; it was not

covered with crape. It was the simplest of black gowns, with no special sign of "deep" mourning, such as on the evening of a funeral ought to have been indispensable. If Patty had ever entertained any doubt of herself it now vanished. It was she who was fulfilling all the duties necessary. The others were but outsiders. She had secured triumphantly her proper seat and sphere.

"It is unfortunate for us, Gervase," she said, "to come home on such a sad day; and to think we knew nothing of all the dreadful things that were going on till we learned it all with a shock when we arrived! It is true, we were moving about on our wedding-tour: but still, if the house hadn't been filled with those as—that—didn't wish us well, we might have been called back; and you, dear, might have had the mournful satisfaction——"

"You always said, Patty," said Gervase, "that you would stay a week away."

"And to think of my poor dear mother-in-law looking for us, holding out her poor arms to us—and

us knowing nothing," said Patty, drying her eyes—"as if there were no telegraphs nor railways! Which makes it very sad for us to come home now; but I hope your dear father, Gervase, if he's rightly watched and done for, won't be any the worse. Oh, I hope not! it would be too sad. That Dunning, who has been thought so much of, does not seem to me at all fit for his place. To think of him to-day, such an agitating day, with nothing to give his master! I shall take the liberty of superintending Mr. Dunning in future," Patty said.

Gerald Piercey and Margaret Osborne ate what was set before them humbly, without raising their eyes. They were ridiculously silenced and reduced to subjection: even if they could have encouraged each other with a glance it would have been something, but they had not even that alleviation. What to say! They were ignored as completely as if they had been two naughty children. Gervase, more naughty still, but in favour, took advantage by behaving himself as badly as possible. He made signs to the butler to pour

him out wine with a liberal hand, and gobbled his food in great mouthfuls. "I say, Meg," he whispered, putting his hand before his mouth, "don't tell! she can't see me!" while his wife's monologue ran on; and then he interrupted it with one of those boisterous laughs by which the Softy was known.

"What is it?" Patty cried sharply from the head of the table.

"Meg knows—Meg and me knows," cried Gervase from the other end.

"I must request," said Patty, "Margaret Osborne, that you will not make my husband forget, with your jokes, what day it is. You mayn't think it, perhaps, for my poor dear mother-in-law was not very kind to me—but I feel it to be a very solemn day. And you may be very witty and very clever, though you don't show it to me—but I won't have laughing and nonsense at my table on poor dear Lady Piercey's funeral day."

What was Margaret to do? She could not defend herself from so grotesque an accusation. She looked

up with some quick words on her lips, but did not say them. It was intolerable, but it was at the same time ludicrous; a ridiculous jest, and yet the most horribly, absurdly serious catastrophe in the world.

"The laughing seems all on your husband's side," said Colonel Piercey, unable to refrain.

"Oh!" said Patty, fixing upon him a broad stare: and then she, too, permitted herself a little laugh. "It's the strangest thing," she said, "and I can't help seeing it's ridiculous—though laughing is not in my mind, however it may be in other people's, on such a day—here's a gentleman sitting at my table, and everybody knows him but me."

"I don't know him," cried Gervase, "not from Adam: unless it's Gerald Piercey, the soldier fellow that mother was so full of before I went off to get married: though nobody knew I was going to get married," he said, with a chuckle, "except little Osy, that gave me—— I say, where's little Osy, Meg?"

"I hope," said Patty severely, "that children are

not in the habit of being brought down here after dinner as they are in some places. It's such bad style, and, I'm thankful to say, it's going out of fashion. It's a thing as I could not put up with here."

"Send some one upstairs," said Margaret, in a low voice to the footman who was standing by her, "to say that Master Osy is not to come down."

"What are you saying to the servant? I don't want to be disagreeable," said Patty, "but I object to a servant being sent away from his business. Oh, if the child comes usually, let him come, but it must be for the last time."

"If I may go myself," said Margaret, half rising, "that will be the most expeditious way."

"Not before you have finished your dinner," cried Patty; "oh, don't, pray. I should be quite distressed if you didn't have your dinner. And you had no tea. I know some ladies have trays sent upstairs. But I can't tolerate such a habit as having trays upstairs: so for goodness' sake, Margaret Osborne, sit still and finish your dinner here."

Colonel Piercey moved his chair a little; he managed to look beyond the bouquet at Margaret, sitting flushed and indignant, yet incapable of completing the absurdity of the situation by a scene at table before the servants. Colonel Piercey had run through all the gamut of astonishment, anger, and confusion; he had arrived at pure amusement now. The momentary interchange of glances made the situation possible, and it was immediately and unexpectedly ameliorated by the melodramatic appearance of Dunning behind in the half-darkness at the door.

"Mr. Gervase, if you please, Sir Giles is calling for you," the man said.

Patty sprang up from her seat. "Sir Giles? the dear old gentleman! Oh, I foresaw this! He is ill, he is ill! Come, Gervase!" she cried.

"Not a bit," said Gervase; "it's only Dunning's way. He likes to stop you in the middle of your dinner. There's nothing the matter with the governor, Dunning, eh?"

"There's just this, that he's a-calling for Mr. Gervase, and not no other person," Dunning said, with slow precision.

"Well, I'm Mrs. Gervase; I'm the same as Mr. Gervase. Come, come, don't let's lose a moment! Moments are precious!" cried Patty, rushing to her husband and snatching him out of his chair, "in his state of health and at his age."

Margaret and the Colonel were left alone, but the fear of the servants was upon them. They did not venture to say anything to each other. They were helped solemnly to the dish which had begun to go round, and for a moment sat in silence like two mutes, with the inexorable bouquet between them. Then Colonel Piercey said, in very bad French, "This is worse than I feared. What are we to do?"

"I shall go to my room to Osy before she comes back."

"I have no Osy to go to," he said with a short laugh. "What a strange scene! stranger than any in a book. I am glad to have seen it once in a way."

"Not glad, I hope," said Margaret. "Sorry for Uncle Giles and all the rest. But she is not so bad as that. No, no, she is not. You don't see—she wants to assert all her rights, to show you and me how strong she is, and how she scorns us. On ordinary occasions she is not like this."

"You are either absurdly charitable in your thoughts, or else you want to throw dust in my eyes, Cousin Meg."

"Nothing of the kind; I do neither. It is quite true. She is not bad in character at all. She will be kind to Uncle Giles, and probably improve his condition. We have all had a blind confidence in Dunning, and perhaps he doesn't deserve it. She wants to get Uncle Giles into her own hands, and she will do so. But he will not suffer; I am sure of it."

"Poor old gentleman! It is hard to be old, to be handed from one to another. And will he accept it?" Colonel Piercey said.

"She will be very nice and kind, and she is young and pretty."

"Oh, not—not that!"

"You are prejudiced, Cousin Gerald. She is pretty when you see her in her proper aspect, and there can be no doubt she is young. Her voice is nice and soft. It is almost like a lady's voice. Hush! I think I hear her coming back!" Margaret rose hurriedly. "Please say to Mrs. Piercey, Robert, that I am tired, and have gone to my room."

"Let me come too," said Gerald Piercey, following her into the hall. "I shall go away to-morrow, of course—and you, what are you going to do?"

"I cannot go to-morrow. I shall have to wait—until I am turned out, or till I can go."

"I wish you would come with me to my father's, where you would be most welcome: and he is a nearer relative than I am."

"Thank you; you go too far," said Margaret. "To think me a scheming woman only this morning, and at night to offer me a new home, where I might scheme and plot at my leisure? No, I will do that no more: I will go to nobody. We are not destitute."

"Meg! will you remember that you have nobody nearer to you than my father and me?"

"But I have," she said, "on my mother's side, and on my husband's side. We shall find relations wherever we go."

He answered by an impatient exclamation. "There is one thing, at least, on which we made a bargain a few hours since," he said.

The lamp in the hall did not give a good light. It was one of the things which Patty changed in the first week of her residence at Greyshott. It threw a very faint illumination on Margaret Osborne's face. And she did not say anything to make her meaning clear. She did nothing but hold out her hand.

Patty, meanwhile, had made her way, pushing her husband before her, to Sir Giles' door. She pushed him inside with an earnest whisper. "Go in, and talk to him nicely. Be very nice to him, as nice as ever you can be. Mind, I'm listening to you, and presently I'll come in, too."

The room was closely shut up, though it was a warm night, and scarcely dark as yet, and Sir Giles sat in his chair with a tray upon the table beside him. But he had pushed away his soup. His large old face was excited and feverish, his hands performing a kind of tattoo upon his chair. "Are you there, my boy? are you there, Gervase?" he said. "Come in, come in and talk to me a little. I'm left all alone. I have nobody with me but servants. Where's—where's all the family? Your poor mother's gone, I know, and we'll never see her any more. But where's everybody? Where's—where's everybody?" the old gentleman said with his unsteady voice.

"I'm here, father, all right," Gervase said.

"Sir Giles, sir, he's fretting for company, and his game, and all that; but he ain't fit for it, Mr. Gervase, he ain't fit for it. He have gone through a deal to-day."

"I'll play your game, father. I'm here all right," Gervase repeated. "Come, get out the table, you old humbug, and we'll throw the men and the dice

about. I'm ready, father; I'm always ready," he said.

"No, no," said Sir Giles, pushing the table away; "I don't want any game. I'm a sad, lonely old man, and I want somebody to talk to. Gervase, sit down there and talk to me. Where have you been all this long time, and your mother, your poor mother, wanting you? What have you been doing? You can go, Dunning; I don't want you now. I want to talk to my boy. Gervase, what have you been doing, and why didn't you come home?"

"I've been—getting married, father," said Gervase, grinning from ear to ear. "I would have told you, but she wouldn't let me tell you. She thought you might have put a stop to it. A fellow wants to be married, father, when he's my age."

"And who has married you?" said the father going on beating with his tremulous fingers as though keeping time to some music. "Who has married you, my poor boy? It can't be any great match, but we couldn't expect any great match. I saw—

a young woman: I thought she was—that I had somehow seen her before."

"Well, she's—why, she's just married to me, father. She's awful proud of her new name. She signed her letter—for I saw it—Mrs. Gervase Piercey, as if she hadn't got any other name."

"She shouldn't do that, though," said the old man, "she's Mrs. Piercey, being the son's wife, the next heir. If Gerald had a wife, now, she'd be Mrs. Gerald, but not yours. I'm afraid she can't know much about it. Gervase, your poor mother was struck very suddenly. She always feared you were going to do something like that, and she had somebody in her mind, but she was never able to tell me who it was. Gervase, I hope it is somebody decent you have married, now your poor mother isn't here."

"Oh, yes, father; awfully decent," said Gervase, with his great laugh. "She would have given it to any one that wasn't civil. She was one that kept you on and kept you off, and as clever as Old Boots himself, and up to——"

Patty had listened to this discussion till her patience was quite worn out. She had waited for a favourable moment to introduce herself, but she could not stand and hear this description, so far beneath her merits as she felt it to be. She came in with a little rush of her skirts, not disagreeable to the old man, who looked up vaguely expectant, to see her sweep round the corner of the large screen that shielded him from the draught. "I must come and tell you myself who I am, Sir Giles," she said. "I'm Patience; and though, perhaps, I shouldn't say it, I'm one that will take care of *that*, and take care of the house, and see that you are not put upon by your servants, nor made to wait for anything, but have whatever you wish. And I'll be a very good daughter to you, if you'll let me, Sir Giles," she said.

The old gentleman had passed a miserable week. First his wife's illness, so dreadful and beyond all human commiseration, and then her death, and the gloom of the house, and the excitement of the funeral,

and the neglect of everything that made life bearable to him. It is true, that his soup and his wine and whatever food was allowed to him were supplied regularly, and no actual breach of his comforts had occurred. But his room had been darkened, and his backgammon had been stopped, and there had been no cheerful faces round him. Even little Osy's company had been taken away. The child had been stated to be "too much" for him. Parsons and Dunning had held him in their hands and administered him, and they were both determined that he should do and say nothing that was not appropriate to his bereaved condition. The old man was not insensible to his wife's death. It brought into his mind that sense of utter desolation, that chill sensation of an approaching end, which is, alas! not more palatable in many cases to an old man than to a young one. And Parsons and Dunning both thought it the most appropriate thing for him to sit alone and think of his latter end. But Sir Giles was not of that opinion. His old life was strong in him,

though it was hampered with so many troubles. He wanted, rather, to forget that death was waiting for him, too, round the next corner. Who could tell how far off that next corner might be? He wanted to forget, not to be shut up helplessly with that thought alone. And Mrs. Osborne, with all the prejudices and bonds of the household upon her, had not had courage to break through the lines which had been formed around her uncle. She had believed, as it was the law of the family to believe, that Sir Giles' faithful attendant knew best. And thus it was, that when the young woman who was Gervase's wife came boldly in—a young person who was not afraid of Dunning, a stranger bringing a little novelty, a little stir of something unaccustomed into his life—he looked up with a kind of light in his dull eye, and relief in his mind. "Oh! you are Patience, are you?" he said. "Patience! it is a queer sort of a name, and I think I remember to have heard it before."

Oh, poor Miss Hewitt, in her red and yellow

bonnet! If she had but known that this faint deposit of recollection was all that remained in her old lover's mind!

"But I should like you to call me Patty, Sir Giles." She went down on her knees at his feet, while the old gentleman looked on in wonder, not knowing what was going to happen. "You have not got that bandage quite straight," she said, "and I'm sure you're not so comfortable as you ought to be. I can put it on better than that. Look you here, Gervase, hold the candle, and in a minute I'll settle it all right."

Sir Giles was so much taken by surprise that he made no opposition; and he was amused and pleased by her silent movements, her soft touch and manipulation. The novelty pleased him, and the young head bent over his suffering foot, the pretty hair, the pleasant shape, were all much more gratifying than Dunning. He thought he was relieved, whether he was really so or not. And he was contented, and the spell of the gloom was broken. "But I'm not

to be settled so easy as my foot," he said. "How dared you to take and marry my boy here, Mrs. Patty, or whatever your name is, without saying a word to me?"

Mrs. Gervase Piercey, or Mrs. Piercey, as she henceforward called herself, walked that night into the great state-room in Greyshott—where Sally Fletcher awaited her, trembling, bringing Patty Hewitt's small wardrobe roughly packed in one small box—with the air of a conqueror, victorious along all the line.

CHAPTER XXIX.

COLONEL PIERCEY left Greyshott the next morning after these incidents. There was no reason why he should stay. Even old Sir Giles had changed his note when his kinsman took leave of him. Mental trouble does not keep its hold long on a mind which has grown weak with bodily disease and much nursing, that prevailing invalidism and necessity for taking care of one's self which absorbs every thought; and though the old gentleman was still ready enough to mourn for the loss of his life-long companion, yet he was easily soothed and diverted by the needs of that older companion still, himself. Besides, now that the funeral was over, there was no alarming prospect before him, no terror

of being compelled to act for himself. He took leave of the Colonel not uncheerfully. "Going?" he said, when Gerald appeared in his room to say good-bye. "I'm glad you could stay so long; but it's been a sad visit. Another time, now there's young people in the house, they'll make it more cheerful for you, eh? Don't be long of coming again."

Colonel Piercey, somewhat stiffly—which was his nature, for he had not the understanding of human weakness which brings indulgence, and he could not forget that a few days before the old man had begged him with tears to stay—answered that he was glad to leave his uncle so much better and more satisfied about his son.

"Oh," said Sir Giles, "about satisfied I don't know, I don't know; I can't tell you at this moment, Gerald. She speaks fair, but then she's on her promotion, don't you see? Anyhow, she's young, and perhaps she'll learn; and she's nice-looking—and speaks not so badly for a girl without

education ; not so badly, does she, Gerald ? We'll do ; oh, I think we'll do. She'll look after Gervase, and keep him off me. And that's a great thing, don't you see ? Though when I think what his mother would have said—Lord bless me, I tremble when I think what his mother would have said. She never would have borne it. She would have turned the house upside down and made everybody miserable ; which makes me feel that being as it had to be, it's perhaps better—better, Gerald, though it's a hard thing to say, that his mother went first, went without knowing. You will say she suspected ; and I believe she did suspect ; she was a penetrating woman ; but suspecting's not so bad as knowing ; and I'm—I'm almost glad, poor soul, that she's gone. She would never have put up with it. And now this one may make something of Gervase—who knows ? It is a kind of anxiety off my mind. Time for your train ?" the old gentleman added cheerfully. "Well, thank you for your visit, my

boy; I've enjoyed it—and come again, come soon again."

Sir Giles was as much delighted to be free of his visitor as he had been to welcome him to Greyshott. And it was evident that he was conforming his mind to the new state of affairs. Gerald had meant to appeal to his kindness for Margaret, but he had not patience or self-command enough to say anything. He had no thought of the anxieties that dwelt in the old man's mind—the dreariness of his conclusion that it was better his old wife was gone; the forlorn endurance of a state of affairs which he had no power to prevent. A little more sympathy might have made Sir Giles' endurance take a tragic aspect, the last refuge of a sanguine and simple spirit trying to be content with the hope that something might still be made of his only child. But Gerald Piercey only thought with mingled contempt and pity of the facile mind, and the drivel of old age, things entirely beyond his sympathy or thoughts.

He had an interview of a more interesting kind with Margaret before he went away. "I wish you could leave as easily as I do," he said.

"So do I—but that would be impossible in any case. I have Osy to think of. I must not allow myself to be carried away by any sudden impulse—even if it were for nothing else, for my poor old uncle's sake. He is fond of Osy. It might chill his poor old clouded life still more to miss the child."

"Oh, Uncle Giles! I think you may make your mind easy on that point. It's age, I suppose, and illness. One thing is just as good as another to him."

"I am not quite of your opinion," she said.

"I think you are never quite of any one's opinion except your own," he retorted, quickly.

"Well, that's best for me, don't you think?" she replied, with something of the same flash of spirit, "seeing that I have, as people say, nobody to think of but myself."

"And the boy? Meg, you have promised me that you will think of what I said about the boy. He should want for nothing. He should have all the advantages education could give, if you would trust him to me—or to my father, if that would give you more confidence."

"It is not confidence that is wanting," she said.

"Then, what is it? It cannot be that you think I speak without warrant. My father will write to you. I will pledge myself to you—as if he were my very own. His future should be my care; his education, his outset in the world.——"

Margaret stood looking at him for some time in silence, a faint smile about her lips, which began to quiver, the colour forsaking her cheeks. What she said was so perfectly irrelevant, so idiotic, to the straightforward mind of the man who was offering her the most unquestionable advantage, and asking nothing but a direct answer—yes, or no—that he could almost have struck her in his

impatience. He did metaphorically, with the severity of that flash in his eyes.

"And how there looked him in the face
An angel, beautiful and bright;
And how he knew it was a fiend,
That miserable knight."

—This was what Margaret said.

"What do you mean?" he cried; "is it I that am the fiend, offering the best I can think of?"

"Oh, the angel," said Margaret; "and is it my own heart that is the fiend, that makes the other picture? Oh, God help me! I don't know. My child is my life. But there are things better than life, and that might be given up. Yet, he is my duty, too, and not yours, Gerald. Prosperity and comfort, and your great warm-hearted, honourable kindness; or poverty and nature, and a poor mother—and love? Which would be the best for him? We cannot see a step before us; and the issues are of life and death."

"It is better not to exaggerate," he said, with

an almost angry impatience. "There need be no cutting off. You should, of course, see the child when you liked, for his holidays and that sort of thing. There's no question of life or death, but of a man's career for the boy, under men's influence, or——I know, I know! You would teach him everything that is good, and put the best principles into him, and sacrifice yourself, and all that. In short, you would make a perfect woman of him, had Osy been a girl; but, as he is a boy——!"

"Don't you think you're a little sharp, Gerald," she cried, "bidding me cut out my heart and give it you, and showing me all the advantages!" She laughed, with her lips quivering, holding her hands clasped, fiercely determined, whatever she did, not to cry, which is a woman's weakness.

"Meg, you are a sensible woman: not a girl, to know no better."

This was his honest thought: a girl, young and tender, is to be spared, though her youth has the elasticity of a flower, and springs up again to-morrow;

but the woman who has passed that chapter, whose first susceptibilities are over, is a different matter. He was honestly bewildered when Margaret left him hurriedly with a choked "Thank you. Good-bye. I shall write"; and thus broke off the conversation, leaving him there astonished in the hall, with his coat over his arm, and his travelling bag in his hand: for this was how they had held their last consultation, the library and dining-room being both full of Patty, whose presence seemed to occupy the whole house, and who now came forth, with all the airs of the mistress of the house, to take leave of her guest.

"Well, Colonel Piercey, so you are going? I hope it is not because of the circumstances, though, of course, with a death and a marriage both in the house, it isn't very suitable for strangers, is it? But I'm not one that would ever wish to be rude to my husband's friends. I'm told you were going, anyhow, and I hope that's the case. And I'm sure

you must feel I'm very thoughtful," said Patty, with a little laugh, "never to disturb you in your tender good-byes! Oh, I can sympathise with that sort of thing! I told Gervase, 'Don't disturb those poor things; there isn't a place where they can have a word quiet before they part.' But I hope you'll soon come and fetch her, Colonel Piercey. You and her, you are not like Gervase and me: you haven't any time to lose."

"I have not the honour of understanding you, Mrs. Piercey," said the Colonel, very stiffly. "I must leave with you my farewells to my cousin Gervase."

"Oh, you needn't; he's here, he's coming—he wouldn't be so wanting as not to see you off himself, though you're only a third or fourth cousin, I hear. But as for not understanding me, Colonel Piercey, I hope you understand Meg Osborne, which is more to the purpose, and that you've named the day. Marriage is catching, I've always heard, and you ain't going to treat a relation badly, I hope,

in my house. I'm sure, after all the philandering and talking in corners, and—— "

"I wish you good-day, Mrs. Piercey," the Colonel said. He jumped into the dog-cart with an energy which even the quiet fat horse of Greyshott training could scarcely withstand, and, seizing the reins from the groom's hands, drove that comfortable animal down the avenue at a pace to which it was entirely unaccustomed. To describe the ferment of mind into which he was thrown by Patty's last words would be impossible. He heard the loud, vacant laugh of Gervase, and a cry of "Hi! Hallo! Where are you off to?" sounding after him, but took no notice. He was a man of considerable temper, as has not been concealed, and there could be no doubt that it would have afforded him considerable satisfaction to take Patty by the arms and shake her, had that been a possible way of expressing his sentiments. He was furious, first, he said to himself, at the insult to Meg; but it is doubtful whether this really was so much the cause of his

indignation as he believed. The causes were complicated, but chiefly had reference to himself, who was more interesting to him at present than Meg or any one else in the world. That he should be accused of philandering and talking in corners, or of treating a woman "badly," even by the most vulgar voice in the world, had something so exasperatingly inappropriate and unlikely in it that he said to himself it was laughable. Laughable, and nothing else! Yet he did not laugh; he felt himself possessed by the most furious gravity instead —ready to kill anybody who should so much as smile. Philandering—and with a middle-aged woman! This, no doubt, gave it a double sting. It had never occurred to Colonel Piercey, though he was forty, to think of himself as on an elderly level, or to imagine any connection of his name with that of any woman who was not young and fair, and in the first chapter of life. I have always been of opinion that men and women about the same age, when that age has passed the boundaries

of youth, are each other's natural enemies rather than friends. They have fully learned that they are on opposite sides. There is a natural hostility between them. If some chance has not made them friends, and inclined to forget or pardon the difference of their sides, they are instinctively in opposition. To marry each other is the last thing that would occur to them. Of course, I am considering natural tendencies only, and not those of the fortune-hunter of either sex, or persons in quest of an establishment. The man of forty seeks a young bride; the woman of that age, or near it, finds devotion in a young man. (I don't say seeks it—for all women feel this question of age to be fantastically important.) Gerald Piercey had reached the Greyshott station, and flung himself and his bags and wraps into a carriage, before he had begun to get over the sting of the suggestion that he had been philandering (Heavens, what a word!), and that not with a girl—an imputation which he might have smiled at and pardoned—but with a widow, a mother, a middle-

aged woman! Indignity could not go further. The little barmaid, the wretched little tavern flirt who had seized possession of the home of the Pierceys, had caught him full in the centre of his shield.

It was not till long after, when that heat had died away, that he recurred to what he had at first tried to persuade himself was the occasion of his wrath—the insult to Meg. Poor Meg! whose growing old he had himself so deeply and absurdly resented, as if it had been her own fault—how would she fare, left in the power of that little demon? She could not go off at a moment's notice, as he could. She would have to wait, he remembered with a horrified realisation, perhaps for her quarter-day, for the payment of her pension, before she would be able to budge at all. And, then, where would she go?—a woman who had been accustomed to Greyshott, which, though it was not very luxurious or refined, was still, in its way, a great house. Where would she go, with her hundred or two hundred, or some such nominal sum,

a year? And, perhaps, not money enough in the meantime even to pay her journey, even to carry her away! She was a hot-headed, self-willed, argumentative woman; determined in her own opinions, caring not a straw for other people's; refusing, in the most unaccountable way, an advantageous suggestion—a proposal that would have left her free, without encumbrance, to get as much comfort as possible for herself out of her very small income; an entirely impracticable, unmanageable woman! but yet—to think of that little barmaid flouting her, insulting her, was too much for the Colonel. His wrath rose again, not so hot, but full of indignation—a creature not worthy to tie her shoe! He seemed to see her standing there, against the dark panelling of the wall, in her black dress. And, somehow, it occurred to him all at once that the slim, tall figure did not present the usual signs which distinguish middle age. How old was Meg Piercey, after all? A dozen years ago, when he had been at Greyshott last, she was a girl in her

teens. Twelve years do not make a girl of nineteen middle-aged. She had married at four or five-and-twenty—not earlier; and Osy was seven or thereabouts. Gerald found himself unconsciously calculating like an old woman. If she had married at twenty-four, and if Osy were seven, that did not make her more than two-and-thirty at the outside. At thirty-two one is not middle-aged; the Colonel did not feel himself so at forty. To be sure, a woman is different; but even for a woman, though it may not be so romantic as eighteen, it is not a great age—thirty-two. And to be turned out of her home; and to be left with next to nothing to live on; and to be insulted by that vulgar little village girl; and to be set down, even by a man, a relation, one bound to make the best of her, as almost an old woman—at thirty-two! Poor Meg Piercey! Poor Margaret Osborne! The home of her childhood gone, and the protection of her married life gone. And her child! What was the difficulty about her child? Something more, perhaps, when

one came to think of it, than merely being left without encumbrance, freed from responsibility! When one came to think of it, and to think how other women were, with their children about them, perhaps, after all, it meant more than that. Poor Meg! poor Meg!

CHAPTER XXX.

MRS. OSBORNE realised very fully all the weight of the trouble which had fallen upon her, but it is to be doubted whether she would have liked that compassionate apostrophe to "poor Meg!" any more than other things which had fallen from Gerald Piercey's lips; or, indeed, whether she felt herself so much to be pitied as he did. Nobody knows like ourselves how hard and how heavy our troubles are; and yet, at the same time, our own case is generally less miserable to us than it is to the benevolent onlooker. The moment it becomes our own case it somehow becomes natural, and finds alleviations, or, if not alleviations, circumstances which prove it to be no such extraordinary thing. We change our position according to our lot, and

even in the self-consciousness of crime become immediately aware of a whole world of people who are as badly off, or perhaps worse, than we are, without the same explanations of their conduct which exist in our case. Margaret, seeing what had befallen her, and what was about to befall her, instinctively changed her own point of view, and felt, along with the necessity, a new rising of life and courage. The long consideration of what she was to do, though perhaps a painful and discouraging deliberation, yet roused all her faculties and occupied her mind. At thirty-two (since we have arrived through Gerald Piercey's calculations at something like her exact age), the thought of a new beginning can never be wholly painful. None of the possibilities of life are exhausted; the world is still before us where to choose. Nevertheless it was a confusing and not encouraging subject of thought. Margaret's education, such as it was, had been completed before any new views about the education of women were prevalent; indeed, it

would not have mattered much whether these ideas had been prevalent or not, for certainly it never would have entered into the minds of Sir Giles or Lady Piercey to send their niece to Girton, or even to any humbler place preparatory to Girton. They gave Margaret as little education as was indispensable, entertained reluctantly a governess for her for some years, and had her taught to play the piano a little, and to draw a little, and to have an awkward, not speaking acquaintance with the French verbs, which was all they knew or thought of as needful. What could she do with that amount of knowledge, even now, when she had supplemented it with a great deal of reading, and much thinking of her own? Nothing. No school would have her as a teacher, no sensible parent would trust her, all unaware of the technique of teaching as she was, with the education of their children. And what was there else that a woman, a lady, with all her wits about her, and the use of all her faculties, could do? That was the

dreadful question. Margaret did not fall back with indignation on the thought that its chief difficulty arose from the fact that she was a woman; for she knew enough of life to be aware that a man of her own class in the same position, trained to nothing in particular, would be almost as badly off. There were "appointments" to be had, she knew, for men certainly, for women too, occasionally, but she was perfectly vague about them, what they were. And the idea of going out to an office daily, which was her sole conception, and on the whole a just one, of what an "appointment" might mean, filled Margaret with a bewildering sense of inappropriateness and impossibility. It would not be she who could fill any such place. It would be something different from herself, a shadow or outward appearance of her, impossible for herself to realise. Impossible—impossible! She knew nothing but how to read, to think, to discharge the duties of a mother to her child, to live as English ladies live, concerned with small domestic offices, keeping

life more or less in harmony, giving orders to the servants, and smoothing over the tempests and troubles which arose from the imperfect execution of these orders—and looking after the poor. To do all these things is to be a not unimportant servant to the commonwealth. Life would go far more roughly, with less advantage on both sides, were it not for functionaries of this kind: but then their services are generally to be had for nothing, and are not worth money; besides—which makes the matter more difficult still—these services lose a great part of their real value when they are done, not for love but for money, in which case the house lady of nature changes her place altogether and goes over to another and far less pleasing kind.

These thoughts had passed through Margaret's mind vaguely, and without any pressure of an immediate emergency, many times already in the course of her speculations as to the future for Osy and for herself. She had often said to herself

that she could not remain at Greyshott for ever; that the time must come when she would have to decide upon something; that the old couple who were her protectors could not live for ever; and that the house of Gervase, poor Gervase, however it might turn out, would probably be no home for her. She had gone over all those suggestions of what she could do to increase her small income, and to educate her child, with a ceaseless interest, but yet without any sharpness or urgency, as of a thing that might happen at any moment. And there was always a vague ground of probability behind—that either one or other of the old people, who were so fond of Osy, might leave him something to make his first steps easier, that they would not go out of the world without making some provision even for herself, who had served them like their own child, and knew no home but under their wing. There would be that, whatever it was, to make everything more possible. She had not calculated on it, and yet she had felt assured

that some such thing would be. But now all those prospects had come to an end in a moment. Lady Piercey had left no will at all, and Sir Giles was no longer a free agent, or would not be so any longer. The prospect was cut off before her eyes, all that shadowy margin gone, nothing left but the bare certainty. Two hundred a year! There are very different ways of looking at two hundred pounds a year. It is not very long since the papers were full of letters demonstrating the impossibility of supporting life with honesty and gentility on seven hundred a year. The calculations looked so very convincing, that one rubbed one's bewildered eyes if one had been accustomed to believe (as I confess I had) that there was a great deal of pleasant spending for two young people in seven hundred a year. On the other hand, I have just read a novel, and a very clever novel, in which it is considered quite justifiable for a young man to marry and take upon him the charge of his wife's mother and sister on a hundred and fifty

pounds a year. Clearly there is a very great difference between these estimates, and I think it very likely that the author of the latter is more practically instructed as to what she is speaking of than the gentleman who made the other calculations. Who shall decide upon the fact that lies between these two statements? I can only say that Margaret Osborne's conclusion was, not to waste her time in efforts to get work which she probably could not do well, and which would be quite inappropriate to her, but to try what could be done upon her two hundred pounds a year. Ah! how many, many millions of people would be thankful to have two hundred a year! How many honest, good, well-conditioned families, "buirdly chiels and clever hizzies," have been brought up on the half of it! But yet there are differences which cannot be ignored. The working man has many advantages over the gentleman, with his host of artificial wants—but, alas! we cannot go back easily to the rule of nature.

Margaret was not so utterly unprovided for as her cousin Gerald had remorsefully imagined. She was not destitute, as she said. She had laid a little money aside for this always-threatening emergency; and she had spoken to Sarah, Osy's maid, who, though reluctantly and on a very distant and far-off possibility, had declared it possible that she might undertake to do the work of a small house. "But, oh! I wouldn't, ma'am," Sarah had said, "not if I was you; you would miss Greyshott and the nice big rooms, and nothing to do but ring the bell." Margaret had laughed at this conception of life, and laughed now as she recalled it. But no doubt it was true. She was not very apt at ringing of bells, nor did she require much personal service—still it would not be without a regret, a sense of the difference—but that was of too little real importance to be thought of now.

Indeed, all these thoughts were as nothing to the other which Gerald Piercey, in his desire to help her, had flung into her mind like an arrow of fire.

To carry Osy away to that cottage, to deprive him of all those "advantages" which, even at his age, a child can understand—Osy would know very well what that sacrifice meant when he had no pony to ride on, no great rooms to run about in, no obsequious court of flatterers ready to carry him on their shoulders, to give him drives and rides on nobler animals, to bring him dainties, and all kinds of indulgences. Osy had been the favourite of the house, as well as of old Sir Giles and my lady. He had been as free of the housekeeper's room as of the library. There was nobody who had not bowed down before him and sought to please him. The child, though he was only a child, would understand what it was to relinquish all these, to have a small cottage, a little garden, nothing outside of them, and only a mother within. At seven years old to have this brought home to him, was early, very early He would not understand how it was. If he heard, even at that early age, that he might have had another pony, another household to

conquer by his pretty ways, and all the usual indulgences and pleasant things, but for his mother, would Osy's childish affection bear that test? Would he like her better than his pony? And, oh! still deeper, more penetrating question, was she better than the pony, better than the larger upbringing, the position of one who is born to command, the freedom of life, the influence of men, the "every advantage" of which Gerald Piercey had spoken? Would she, a woman not very cheerful, and who must in future be very full of cares and calculations how to make both ends meet, would she be better for him than all that? She? What question could be more penetrating? "It would be better for the child." Would it be better for him? Sometimes it comes about that in the very midst of the happiness of life, with every sail full, and the sun shining, and the horizon clear, there comes a sudden catastrophe, and some young woman whose life has been that of the group of children at her knee, has suddenly to stop and

stand by with dumb anguish, and see one and another taken away from her by kind friends, kindest friends! benefactors only to be blessed and praised! while all around her other friends congratulate her, bid her feel that she must not stand in the way of the children, of their real advantage! Is it to their real advantage? Is it better to be the children of kindness or the children of love? to be brought up in your own home or in another's? Oh, poor little mother; often you have to smile out of your broken heart and bear it! Margaret Osborne had but one thing in the world; but she would have done like the others, and smiled and endured even to be severed from that only possession, had she been sure. Who can be sure? She said to herself that love, and his own home, and the ties of nature were best. And then Gerald Piercey's words came back and stung her like fiery serpents: "A man's career, under men's influence, or——" Or what? A poor woman's influence, a woman who was herself a failure,

whom nobody cared much for under the sun. Which—which would be the best for Osy? This is the kind of argument that tears the heart in two. It is full of anguish while it is going on: and after the decision is made, it lays up poignant and dreadful recollections. If I had not done that, but the other—if I had not sent away my child into the careless hands of strangers; or, on the other hand, if I had not been so confident of myself; if I could but have seen how much better for him would have been the man's influence, the man's career!

This was the war that Margaret was waging with herself while she had to meet the immediate troubles of the day. It was inconceivable how soon the great house was filled with Patty's presence, how soon it became hers, from roof to basement, how she pervaded it in all the rooms at once, so to speak, so that nothing was out of her sharp sight for more than two minutes. Mrs. Osborne had retired upstairs with her heart full when she left Colonel

Piercey in the hall: but in the restlessness of a disturbed mind she came down again about an hour afterwards, partly to put a stop, for a time, to that endless argument, partly to write a letter which she had promised, to inform Lady Hartmore of what had happened, and partly, perhaps, out of that curiosity and painful inclination to hasten a catastrophe which comes to the mind in the storms of existence. It is true that she had made up her mind to leave Greyshott, but she could not do so as Gerald, a visitor, did, nor was she sure how she could best arrange her retirement with dignity and composure. She felt that there must be no semblance of a quarrel, nor would she make matters worse for Gervase's wife by allowing it to appear to the county that her first act had been to drive Gervase's cousin out of the house. She had decided to wait a little, to endure the new *régime* until she could quietly detach herself without any shock to her old uncle or commotion in the house. Yet it cannot be denied that Margaret's nerves were very

much disturbed, and that she was conscious of Patty's entrance while she sat writing her letter and felt her heart jump when that active, bustling little step became again and again audible. Margaret was seated with her back to the door, but the sound of this step, returning and returning, betrayed to her very clearly the impatience with which her presence was regarded. And her letter did not make much progress. She foresaw the coming attack, and she did not forestall it as she might have done by going away. At last a voice as sharp as the step broke the listening silence of the room.

"Margaret Osborne! how long are you going to be writing that letter? The housemaids are waiting, and I must have this room thoroughly done out. It wants it, I am sure! Oh, take your time! but if you will let me know about when you are likely to be done——"

"I can finish my letter upstairs, if it is necessary," Margaret said, turning round.

"Well, I think generally that is the best way. The library's generally supposed to be the gentlemen's room in a house. I mean to have the drawing-room put in order, and to use that, as it ought to be used. But not just this week, and poor mother so lately buried. I don't know what your feelings may be, but I can't sit in a dingy place like this," Patty said. "Oh, take your time," she added, with fine irony; "but if you could tell me within half an hour or so when you are likely to have done——"

"I will finish my letter in my own room."

"If I was you," said Patty, "I'd write them all there in future. New folks make new ways. I am very particular about my house. I like everything kept in its proper place—and every person," she added significantly. "The servants can't serve two masters. That is in the Bible, you know, so it must be true."

"I do not think," said Margaret, with a faint smile, "that you will be troubled by their devotion to me."

"No; I suppose you have let yourself be put

upon," said Patty; "because, though you think yourself one of the family, you ain't exactly one of the family, and, of course, they see that. It's not good for a houseful of servants to have a sort of a lady, neither one thing nor another, neither a mistress nor a servant, in the house. It teaches them to be disrespectful to their betters, because they know you can't do anything to them. I would rather pension poor relations off than have them about the house putting everything out."

"It will not be necessary in my case," cried Margaret, with a sudden flame of anger and shame enveloping her all over. "I had fully intended to leave Greyshott, but wished to avoid any appearance of——any shock to my uncle."

"Oh, take your time!" cried Patty, with a toss of her head; and she called to the housemaids, who appeared timorous and undecided at the door. "Come here, and I'll show how I wish you to settle all this in future," she said. "Oh, Mrs. Osborne's going! You needn't mind for her."

CHAPTER XXXI.

IT was not worth while to be angry. She had known, of course, all along, how it must be. There had been no thought in her mind of resistance, of remaining in Greyshott as Patty's companion, of appealing to her uncle against the new mistress of the house. It had not been a very happy home for Margaret at any time; though, while Lady Piercey lived, it was a sure one, as well as habitual,—the only place that seemed natural to her, and to which she belonged. Perhaps, she said to herself, as she went hurriedly upstairs, with that sense of the intolerable which a little insult brings almost more keenly than a great sorrow, it was better that the knot should thus be cut for her by an alert and decisive hand,

and no uncertainty left on the subject. She went into her room quickly, with a "wind in her going," a sweep of her skirts, an action and movement about her which was unlike her usual composure. Sarah was alone in her room, not seated quietly at work as was her wont, but standing at the window looking out upon some scene below. There was a corner of the stable yard visible from one window of Margaret's rooms, which were far from being the best rooms in the house.

"Where is Master Osy?" Mrs. Osborne said.

"He is with Sir Giles, ma'am. I—I was just taking a glance from the window before I began my work——"

"Sarah," said Margaret, "we shall have to begin our packing immediately. We are going away." How difficult it was not to say a little more—not to relieve the burden of her indignation with a word or two! for, indeed, there was nobody whom she could speak to except this round-faced girl, who looked up half frightened, half sympathetic, into her face.

"Oh, ma'am, to leave Greyshott! Where are you a-going to?" Sarah said; and her open mouth and eyes repeated with dismay the same question, fixed upon Margaret's face.

"Shall you be so sorry to leave Greyshott?" said Mrs. Osborne.

Sarah hung her head. She took her handkerchief from her pocket, and twisted it into a knot; finally the quick-coming tears rolled over her round cheeks. "Oh, ma'am!" she cried, and could say no more. A nurserymaid's tears do not seem a very tragic addition to any trouble; and yet they came upon Margaret with all the force of a new misfortune.

"What is it, Sarah? Is it leaving Jim? is that why you cry?"

"Oh, we was to be married at Christmas," the girl cried, in a passion of tears.

"Then you meant to leave me, Sarah? Why didn't you tell me so? Well, of course, I should not hinder your marriage, my good girl; but

Christmas is six months off, and you will stay with Master Osy, won't you, till that time comes?"

Sarah became inarticulate with crying, but shook her head, though she could not speak.

"No!—do you mean no? I thought you were fond of us," said poor Margaret, quite broken down by this unexpected desertion. It was of no importance, no importance! she said to herself quickly; but, nevertheless, it gave her a sting.

"Oh, don't ask me, ma'am, don't ask me! So I am, fond: there never was a nicer lady. But how do I know as Jim—— they changes so, they changes so, does men!" Sarah cried, among her tears.

"Well, well; you will pack for me, at least," said Margaret, with a faint laugh, "if that is how we are to part, Sarah,—but you must begin at once; no more looking out of the window, for a little while, at least. But Jim is a good fellow. He will be faithful—till Christmas." She laughed again: was it as the usual alternative to crying?

or was it because there are junctures of utter forlornness and solitude to which a laugh responds better than any crying? not less sadly, one may be sure.

Sarah dried her streaming eyes, but continued to shake her head. "It's out o' sight out of mind with most of 'em," she said. "I'll have to go and get the boxes, ma'am, and I don't know who there is to fetch 'em up, unless I might call Jim —and the others, they don't like to see a groom a-coming into the house."

"Then let the others do it, Sarah."

"Oh, Mrs. Osborne! they won't go agin the—— the new lady, as they calls her. Oh, they calls her just Patty and nasty names among themselves, but if you asks them to do a thing, they says, 'We wasn't hired to work for the likes of you and your Missus, Sal.' Not a better word from one o' them men," cried Sarah, "not one of 'em! They're as frightened of her already as if she was the devil, and she isn't far short. I'll call him,

ma'am, when they're at their dinners: and, perhaps, you'd give him a word, just a word, to say as how you think he's a lucky fellow to have got me, and that kind of thing—as a true friend."

"Is that the office of a true friend?" said Margaret. It is a great thing in this life, which has so many hard passages, when you are able to be amused. Sarah's petition and the words which she kindly put into her mistress's mouth, did Margaret more good than a great deal of philosophy. She went away after a time to look for her boy and to tell her uncle of the decision she had come to. They were out, as usual, in the avenue, Sir Giles being wheeled along by a very glum Dunning, and Osy babbling and making his little excursions round and about the old gentleman's chair.

"When I am a man," Osy was saying, "I s'all be far, far away from here. I s'all be a soldier leading my tompany. I s'an't do what nobody tells me—not you, Uncle Giles, nor Movver, nobody but the Queen."

"And I sha'n't be here at all, Osy," said the old man. "When you come back a great Captain like your cousin Gerald, there will be no old Uncle Giles to tell you what you said when you were a little boy."

"Why?" said the child, coming up close to the chair. "Will they put you down in the black hole with Aunt Piercey, Uncle Giles?"

"Master Osy, don't you speak of no such drefful things," said Dunning.

"But Parsons said, 'She have don to heaven,'" said the child. "I like Parsons' way the best, for heaven's a beau'ful place. I'd like to go and see you there, Uncle Giles. You wouldn't want Dunning, you'd have an angel to dwive you about."

"Oh, my little man!" said Sir Giles. "I don't think I am worthy of an angel. I'm more frightened for the angel than for the black hole, Osy. I don't think I want any better angel than you are, my nice little boy. I hope God will let me go on

a little just quietly with Dunning, and you to talk to your old uncle. Tell me a little more about what you will do when you are a man. That amuses me most."

"Uncle Giles, Cousin Gervase doesn't do very much though he's a man. He's only don and dot marrwed. I'm glad he's dot marrwed. I dave him my big silver penny for a marrwage present. If he hadn't been marrwed he would have tooked it, and a gemplemans s'ouldn't never do that. So I'm glad. Are you glad, Uncle Giles?"

"Never mind, never mind, my boy. Are you sure you'll go to India, Osy, and fight all the Queen's battles? She doesn't know what a great, grand champion she's going to have, like Goliath," said the old man with his rumbling laugh.

"Goliaf," said Osy, gravely, "wasn't a nice soldier. He was more big nor anybody and he bragged of it. It's grander to be the littlest and win. I am not very big, Uncle Giles, not at pwesent."

"No, Osy. That's true, my dear," said the old gentleman.

"But I'll twy!" cried the boy. "I'm not fwightened of big men. They're generwally," he added, half apologetically and with a struggle over the word, "nice, to little boys. Cousin Colonel, he is wather like Goliaf. He dave me a wide upon his s'oulder: but when he sawed Movver tomin, he—— Are big men ever fwightened of ladies, Uncle Giles?"

"Sometimes, Osy," said Sir Giles, with a delighted laugh.

"Then it was that!" cried Osy. "I touldn't understand. Oh, wait, Uncle Giles; just wait till I tatch that butterfly. I'll tatch him; I'll tatch him in a moment! I'm a great one," the child sang, running off—"for tatching butterflies, for tatching——Movver, movver, you sended it away."

"What did the little shaver mean by giving a wedding present?" said Sir Giles. "Where's my money, Dunning? have I got any money? If he

gave my boy a wedding present, it was the—the only one. They'll come in now, perhaps, when it gets known; but I'll not forget Osy for that, I'll not forget Osy for that. Did you ever see a child like him, Dunning? I never saw a child like him, except our first one that we lost," said the old man with a sob. "Did I ever tell you of our first that we lost? Just such a child; just such a child! And my poor Gervase was the dearest little thing when he was a baby, before——. Children are very different from men—very different, very different, Dunning. You never know how the most promising is to grow up. Sometimes they're a——a great disappointment. They're always a disappointment, I should say from what I've seen, comparing the little thing with the big man, as Osy says. But, please God, we'll make a man of that boy, whatever happens. Ah, Meg! is it you? I was just saying we must make a man of Osy—we must make a man of him—whatever happens."

"I hope he will turn out a good man, Uncle Giles."

"Oh, we shall make a man of him, Meg! not but what, as I was saying, they're always disappointments more or less. Your poor aunt would never let me say that, when she was breaking her poor heart for our first boy that we lost. I used to say he might have grown up to rend our hearts—but she would never hear me, never let me speak. It broke her heart, that baby's going, Meg." This had happened a quarter of a century before, but the old gentleman spoke as if it had been yesterday. "You may think she did not show it, and looked as if she had forgotten; but she never forgot. I saw it in her eyes when she saw Gerald Piercey first. She gave me a look as if to say, this might be him coming home, a distinguished man. For he was a delightful child—he might have grown to be anything, that boy!"

"Dear Uncle Giles! You must try to look to the future—to think that there may be perhaps

other children to love." Margaret laid her hand tenderly upon the old man's shoulder, which was heaving with those harmless sobs—which meant so little, and yet were so pitiful to the beholder. "I wanted to speak to you—about Osy, Uncle Giles."

"Yes, yes," said the old man, cheering up. "Did you hear that he gave my poor Gervase a wedding present? that little chap! and the only one—the only one! I'll never forget that, Meg, if I should live to be a hundred. And, please God, we'll pay it back to him, and make a man of him, Meg."

"It was precisely of that, Uncle, I wanted to speak." But how was she to speak? What was she to say to this old man so full of affection and of generous purpose? Margaret went on patting the old gentleman on the shoulder unconsciously, soothing him as if he had been a child. "Dear Uncle Giles, you know that now Gervase is married, they—he will want to live, perhaps, rather a different way."

"What different way?" said Sir Giles, aroused and holding up his head.

"I mean, they are young people, you know, and will want to, perhaps—see more company, have visitors, enjoy their life."

Sir Giles gave her an anxious, deprecating look.

"Do you think then, Meg, that—that she will do? that she will know how to manage? that she will be able to keep Gervase up to the mark?"

"I think," said Margaret, pausing to find the best words, "I think—that she is really clever, and very, very quick, and will adapt herself and learn, and—yes—I believe she will keep him up to the mark."

"God bless you for saying so, my dear! that is what I began to hope. We could not have expected him to make a great match, Meg."

"No, Uncle."

"His poor mother, you know, always had hopes. She thought some nice girl might have taken a

fancy to him. But it was not to be expected, Meg."

"No, Uncle. I don't think it was to be expected."

"In that case," said Sir Giles—he was so much aroused and interested that there was a certain clearness in his thoughts—"in that case, it is perhaps the best thing that could have happened after all."

"Dear Uncle, yes, perhaps. But to give them every chance, to make them feel quite at ease and unhampered, I think they should be left to themselves."

"I will not interfere with them," he cried; "I will not meddle between them. Once I have accepted a thing, Meg, I accept it fully. You might know me enough for that."

"I never doubted you, Uncle; but there is more: I think, dear Uncle Giles, I must go away."

"You—go away!" he said, looking up at her, his loose lips beginning to quiver; "you—go away!

Why, Meg, you can be of more use here than ever. You can show her how to—how to—why, bless us, we all know, after all, that though she's Mrs. Piercey, she was only, only—well, nobody, Meg! you know—don't bother me with names. She is nobody. She can't know how to—to behave herself even. I looked to you to——Dunning, be off with you: look after Master Osy. I know it's wrong to speak before servants, Meg, but Dunning's not exactly a servant, he knows everything; he has heard everything discussed."

"Too much, I fear," said Margaret half to herself. "Dear Uncle, perhaps you have not considered that mine has always been rather a doubtful position. I am your niece, and you have always been like my father, but Gervase's wife thinks me only a dependant. One can't wonder at it—neither mistress nor servant. She thinks a little as the servants do. I am only here as a dependant. She will not take a hint from me. She will be better without me here. For one thing, she would

think I was watching her, and making unkind remarks, however innocent I might be. It is best, indeed it is best, dear Uncle, that I should go."

"Go! away from Greyshott, Meg!—why, why! Greyshott—you have always been at Greyshott."

"Yes, Uncle Giles, thanks to you; dear Uncle Giles, when I was an orphan, and had no one, you have done everything for me: but now the best thing I can do for you is to go away. Oh, I know it, and am sure of it: everything will go better without me. You may imagine I don't like to think that, but it is true."

There was an interval, during which the old man was quite broken down, and Dunning, rushing to his master's side, shot reproachful speeches, as well as glances, at Mrs. Osborne. "It appears," said Dunning, "that I'm never believed to know nothink, not even my own dooty to my master; but those as comes to him with disagreeable stories and complaints, and that just at this critical moment in the middle of his trouble, poor gentleman, knows

less than me. Come, Sir Giles. Compose yourself, Sir Giles. I'll have to give you some of your drops, and you know as you don't like 'em, if you don't take things more easy, Sir Giles."

"I'm better," said the old gentleman, feebly: "better, better. But, Meg, you've got no money—how are you to live without money, Meg?"

"I have my pension, uncle."

"A pension! what is a pension? It isn't enough for anything. Even your poor aunt always allowed that."

"It is enough to live on, Uncle—for Osy and me."

"Osy, too," he cried—"Osy, that I was just saying we must make a man of! You are very, very hard upon me, Meg. I never thought you would be hard upon me." But already Sir Giles was wearied of his emotions, and was calming down.

"I hope there will be other children to make up to you, Uncle Giles."

"What!" cried the old man, "is there a prospect of that? Are there thoughts of that already, Meg? Now, that is news, that is news! Now you make up for everything. Whew!" Sir Giles uttered a feeble whistle, and then he gave a feeble cheer. "Hurrah—then there may be an heir to the old house still. Hurrah! Hurrah?"

"Shall I say it for you, Uncle Giles?" said Osy. "Stand out of the way, Movver, and let Uncle Giles and me do it. Hurrah!" cried the little fellow, waving his hat upon Sir Giles' stick. "Now, Uncle Giles, hip, hip, as the men do—hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THIS was about Osy's last performance in the house which was the only home he had ever known. He did not know what he was cheering for, but only that it was delightful to make a noise, and that his old uncle's tremulous bass, soon lost in an access of sobs and laughter, was very funny. Osy would willingly have gone on for half an hour with this novel amusement; but it must be allowed that when he found the great boxes standing about in the room that had been his nursery, and began to watch the mysteries of the packing, his healthy little soul was disturbed by no trouble of parting, but jumped forward to the intoxicating thought of a journey and a new place with eager satisfaction and wonder. Every-

thing was good to Osy, whether it was doing exactly the same thing to-day as he had done every day since he was born, or playing with something that he had never done or known before. He was much more perplexed to be kept upstairs after dinner, and not allowed to go down to the library, than he was by the removal from everything he had ever known. And when next morning he was driven away in the big carriage to the railway station, he was as ready to cheer for the delight of the outset as he had been, without knowing why, for Uncle Giles' mysterious burst of self-gratulation. All things were joyful to the little new soul setting out upon the world.

Patty, however, was by no means delighted with Margaret's prompt withdrawal. She felt herself forestalled, which was painful, and the power of the initiative taken from her. She had intended to play for a little, as the cat plays with the mouse, with this fine lady, who had once been so far above Patty Hewitt, and to whom, in her schoolgirl days,

she had been expected to curtsey as to the Queen. Patty's heart had swelled with the thought of bringing down pride (a moral process, as everybody knows), and teaching the woman who had no money, and therefore no right to set herself up above others, her proper place; and it vexed her that this fine *rôle* should be taken from her.

"Oh, you are going, are you?" she said. "I hope it isn't on my account. When I married Gervase I knew all that there was to put up with, and more than has turned out. I knew I shouldn't have my house to myself, like most new married ladies, and I had made up my mind to all that. I wouldn't have turned you out, not for the worl —however you might have been in my way."

"I am afraid I have a strong objection," said Margaret, "to be in anybody's way."

"Ah, that's your pride," said Patty, "which I must say I wonder at in a person of your age, and that knows she has nothing to keep it up on. You've got a pension, haven't you, that's enough

to live on? It's a fine thing having money out of all our pockets to spend as you please; but I never heard that a pension was much to trust to, and if you were to marry again you would lose it all. And your boy to bring up, too. My father-in-law has a tremendous idea of your boy. I think it's good for him, in one way, that you are taking him away; for it's ridiculous to bring up a poor child like that, who hasn't a penny, to think that he's as good as the heir, and treated by everybody as if he was really a gentleman's son, you know, with a good fortune at his back."

Margaret smothered with difficulty the indignation that rose to her lips, but she said quietly, "You must disabuse your mind of any such idea. Osy never could be my uncle's heir. The heir of Greyshott after Gervase—and, of course, Gervase's children—is not Osy, but Gerald Piercey, our cousin who has just gone away."

Though this was precious information to Patty, she received it with a toss of her head.

"I hope," she said, "I know a little about the family I've married into; but I can tell you something more, and that is, that it'll never be your fine Colonel's, for all so grand as he thinks himself; for it's all in father-in-law's power, and rather than let him have it he'll leave it all away. I wouldn't see a penny go to that man that gives himself such airs, not if I were to make the will myself to take it away."

"I hope," said Margaret, with an effort, "that there will be natural heirs, and that there need be no question on that point."

"Oh, you will stand up for him, of course!" cried Patty; "but I'd like you to know, if you're making up the match on that score, that it'll never come to pass. Me and Gervase is both against him, and father-in-law won't go against us both, not when he gets used to me. I'd rather see it all go to an 'ospital than to that man. I can't bear that man, looking down upon those that are better than himself, as if he was on stilts!" Patty grew red

and hot in her indignation. Then she shook out her dress airily, as if shaking away the subject and the objectionable person. "Oh yes," she said, "natural heirs!" with a conscious giggle. "It's you that has gone and put that in father-in-law's old head. But I told him it was early days. Dear old man. It's a pity he is silly. I don't think he ever can have been much in his head, any more than——. Do you?"

"My uncle is in very bad health. He is ill, and his nerves are much affected. But he has always been a man quite—quite able to manage his own affairs. A man," cried Margaret, faltering a little with indignation and distress, "of very good sense and energy, not at all like—not at all——"

"Well, well," said Patty, "time shows everything, you know, and he's quite safe with me and Gervase; at all events, whatever comes after, his only son comes first, don't he? And me and Gervase will see that the dear old man isn't made a cat's-paw of, but kept quite square."

It was with a sensation half of disappointment, yet more than half of satisfaction, that Patty found herself next morning alone in what she called so confidently her own house. Alone, for Sir Giles, of course, was in his own room, and was much better there, she felt, and Gervase, so long as he was kept in good humour, was not very troublesome. To be sure, it cost a good deal of exertion on her part to keep him in good humour. He felt, as so many a wooer of his simple mind has done, the want of the employment of courtship, which had so long amused and occupied him. He could no longer go to the Seven Thorns in the evening, a resource which was entirely cut off from his vacant life, from the fact of having Patty always with him, without the exercise of any endeavour on his own part. The excitement of keeping free of his mother's scrutiny; the still greater excitement of fishing furtively for Patty's attention, making her see that he was there, persuading her by all the simple wiles of which he was master to grant

him an interview; the alarm of getting home, with all the devices which had to be practised in order to get in safely, without being called to account and made to say where he had been—and inspected, to see what he had been doing: all this took a great deal of the salt out of poor Gervase's life. He did not know, now that he had settled down again at home, and all the annoying sensations of the crises were over, what to do with himself in the evenings. Patty and he alone were rather less lively than it had used to be when Sir Giles and Lady Piercey sat in their great chairs, and the game of backgammon was going on, and Meg about, and the child rampaging in all the corners. Even to have so many more people in the room gave it to him an air of additional animation. Patty told him it was the library that looked so dull. "Such a room for you all to sit in," she said, "so gloomy and dark, with these horrid old pictures, and miles of books. Wait till I have the drawing-room in order." But it didn't

amuse Gervase to watch all the alterations Mrs. Patty was making, nor how she was having the white and gold of the great drawing-room furbished up. The first night they sat in that huge room, with all the lamps lit, and the two figures lost among all the gilding and the damask, and reflected over and over again, till they were tired of seeing themselves in the big mirrors, Gervase felt more lonely than ever. Never had Patty found so hard a task before her,—not when she had to attend to all the customers alone, and keep their accounts separate in her head, and to chalk up as much as was safe to the score of one toper, and cleverly avoid hearing the call of another who had exceeded the utmost range of possible solvability. Never, when she had all that to do, had she found it so heavy upon her as it was to amuse Gervase. She invented noisy games for him, she plied him with caresses when other methods failed, she endeavoured to revive the old teasings and elusions of the courtship ; but as Gervase's imagination had never had

much to do with his love-making, these attempts to return to an earlier stage were generally futile. He could not be played with—made miserable by a frown, brought back again by a smile, as had once been the case. And Patty had more than the labours of a Hercules in keeping her Softy in order. There was no one to defend him from now, no tyrannical mother to be defied, to make him feel the force of the wife's protection. When Sir Giles was well enough to come to the drawing-room after dinner, the task was quite beyond the powers of any woman; for it was needful to please the old gentleman, to give up everything for him, to represent to him that his company was always a delight to his children. Poor old Sir Giles had winked and blinked in the many lights of the great drawing-room. He had been dazzled, but he had not been ill-pleased.

"We never used this, you know, in your mother's time but for company," he said. It was Gervase whom he seemed to address, but it was Patty who replied.

"I thought it would be a little change for you," she said. "A change is always good, and there's more light and more air. You should always have plenty of air, and not the associations that are in the other room."

"Perhaps you are right, my dear," the old gentleman said with a sigh. It was she who was "my dear" now; and, indeed, she was very attentive to Sir Giles, never neglecting him, doing everything she could think of for his pleasure. It was on one of the evenings when she was devoting herself to him, playing the game he loved, and allowing him to win in the cleverest way, that Gervase, who was strolling about the room with his hands in his pockets, half jealous of his father, calling her, now in whispers, now loudly, to leave that and come to him, at last disappeared before the game was finished. Patty went on hurriedly with the backgammon, but she was on thorns all the while. She had established the habit of sending off Dunning, whom she was slowly undermining, less

for any serious reason than because he was a relic of the past *régime*; and, therefore, she was now helpless; could not leave Sir Giles; could not interrupt the process of amusing and entertaining him. Where had the Softy gone? to prowl about the house looking for something that might amuse him; to fling himself dissatisfied upon his bed and fall asleep in the utter vacancy of his soul? An uneasy sense that something worse than this was possible oppressed Patty as she sat and played out the game of backgammon. Then there ensued another dreadful interval, during which Sir Giles talked and wondered what had become of his son. "He has gone to sleep somewhere, I shouldn't wonder," said Patty; "the nights are growing long, and poor dear Gervase wants a little amusement. I was thinking of suggesting, dear papa (this was the name she had fixed upon Sir Giles, who had resisted at first, then laughed, and finally accepted the title with the obedience of habit), that we should both play, he and I against

you. You are worth more than the two of us, you know."

"Nonsense, you little flatterer. You've a very pretty notion of the game. I had to fight for it that last round. I had, indeed. I had to fight for my life."

"Ah, dear papa!" said Patty, shaking her head at him. "You are worth far more than the two of us! but it would keep us all together, all the family together."

"I don't like Gervase to play with me," said Sir Giles fretfully. "He's too noisy, and he has no sense; he can't understand a refined game. I shouldn't wonder if he had gone out to some of his old haunts that his poor mother couldn't bear. The Seven——. I beg your pardon, my dear, I am sure," the old gentleman cried, colouring up to his eyes.

"Dear papa, why should you beg my pardon? But oh, no! Gervase has not gone to the Seven Thorns. He went there for me. That

makes all the difference. Why should he go back now?"

"My dear," said Sir Giles again, "I must beg your pardon. I didn't intend to make any insinuation. Of course it was for you. But it's a dangerous thing to acquire a habit, especially for one that—for one that doesn't, don't you know, take in many ideas at a time."

"I know him better than that. I know where he is, the lazy boy. But, dear papa, fancy, it is ten o'clock; your bedtime. Oh, how soon ten comes when we have a pleasant game, and in such good company! I suppose I must ring for Dunning now."

"Yes, you had better ring for Dunning. If I am a little bit late, and should have a headache or anything, he throws it in my teeth. We have had a very pleasant game, and I must say that for you, my dear, that you know how to make the time pass. Well, Dunning, here I am, ready you see, ready to the minute, thanks to Mrs. Gervase, who is

a great deal more careful of me than you are, you surly old beggar. Good night, my dear; but tell Gervase from me that it isn't good manners to break up the party; but he never was renowned for good manners, poor boy," the old gentleman said, shaking his head as he was wheeled away.

And then Patty had a bitter moment. She went to the library, where he sometimes took refuge, falling asleep upon the old sofa, where he had lain and kicked his heels as a child; and then to his room, where he sometimes went when he was dull, to throw himself upon his bed. But Gervase was not to be found in either place. He came stumbling to the old door which opened on the yew avenue, late at night, and she herself ran downstairs to admit him—angry, yet subduing herself. He had resumed his old habit, as his father had guessed: the habit which had been formed for Patty, and which she had so sharply shaken him out of with a power and mastery which she no longer possessed. Patty felt in that moment the

first drawback of that unexampled elevation which she had attained with such unexpected ease. Had she married in her own class, the publican's daughter would not have been very deeply wounded by her husband's return on an occasion in such a plight. But when she stole down through the sleeping house and admitted the future master of Greyshott, and led him upstairs, hushing his broken speech and stumbling gait, that nobody might hear, Patty learned something which no other manner of instruction could have conveyed to her. She found that there were things that were harder upon a lady (such as she flattered herself she had become) than on a village woman. She coaxed and soothed him to bed, like a nurse with a child, that nobody should suspect what had happened ; and she ground her teeth and vowed vengeance upon her father, who had dared to take the Softy in and treat him like this. And thus there arose before Patty a prospect which appalled even her brisk and courageous spirit. What if she should not be able

to put this down summarily and with the strong hand? Then what would become of her hopes of winning a place in the county, and being acknowledged by all the great people as worthy to make her entrance among them? After the first unexpected triumph of becoming mistress of a great house and a number of servants, her ambition had risen to higher flights; and this was what that over-vaulting ambition aimed at. But what would become of that hope, or of many others, if the Softy, startled out of himself for a moment by his marriage, should fall back into the beerhouse society which suited him best? Patty fell from the height of her dreams when she saw that sight which is always a pitiful one for a young wife. She felt the burden of "the honour unto which she was not born" come down for the first time with a crushing weight upon her. Oh, it was not so simple after all—so easy, so pleasant to be a lady! She had begun already to forget that it was to Gervase she owed her advancement, and

to feel the burden of keeping him amused and employed. Now she felt that the Softy had it in his power to mar that advancement still. She had cleared every hostile influence out of the house; she had got rid of every rival. She had conquered Sir Giles, and gained possession of the keys, and become the acknowledged mistress of Greyshott. What a great thing, what a wonderful thing, for Patty Hewitt! And yet she felt, in the bitterness of her heart, that it might be better to be still Patty Hewitt, with all the world before her, than to be Mrs. Piercey, of Greyshott, with that Softy to drag her down.

This was the first big thorn that pierced Patty's foot, and reminded her that she was mortal, as she was marching on in her victorious way.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PATTY had been triumphantly successful in the first chapter of her career. She had an easy victory over her father-in-law. She had cleared the house of everybody whom she disliked or feared. First, Mrs. Osborne, and with her—not least in Patty's estimation—Sarah, Osy's maid, who had been at school with her, and whom she was still more anxious to get rid of than her mistress. Then Parsons, who knew a great deal too much of the family to be endurable for a moment; then the one servant in the house who had ventured to be rude to Gervase's wife, John the footman: a dreadful example, whose sudden fate had exercised the most salutary influence over the rest of the household. It is true that Dunning still remained Sir Giles' attend-

ant, against whom there were the same objections as against Parsons; but for the moment, at least, Dunning was indispensable, and had to be borne with. She stood, however, after the first month of her sway on the very top-gallant of success, supreme in the house, her word a law, the oldest and most secure arrangements falling to pieces at her will, the entire order of affairs changed to please her. Everything had gone as she desired, and no head had been lifted up in rebellion. The great wardrobes were full of fine clothes. She had shuffled off Miss Fletcher, the village dressmaker, and procured the finest and most highly cultivated maid that ever advertised in the *Times*. Lady Piercey's stores of lace and linen, and even her old-fashioned jewellery, which was much more valuable than beautiful, were in Patty's hands. She had realised all her dreams, and more than all. But there is nothing perfect in human affairs, and now the reverse of her good fortune began to rise out of the mists before Patty's eyes.

The first trouble of all was, perhaps, the cutting off

of her connection with her home and origin. Her father had come to see her very early in her story, had been received in the half-dismantled library for a short angry conference, and left with a crimson countenance and a volley of muttered oaths, and had never come again. But there was another member of the family who was less easy to get rid of. Miss Hewitt made a call in state, in her most splendid costume, with a bonnet still more exuberant in red and yellow than that in which she had witnessed the funeral of Lady Piercey. She descended upon Patty at an early hour, when Mrs. Gervase was still profoundly occupied with the restoration of the great drawing-room, and made her way there, regardless of the opposition of the polite butler. "Perhaps you are not aware that I am Mrs. Piercey's own aunt," that lady said fiercely; "I shall go to my niece wherever she is. I have no fear of not being welcome." The butler knew, also, too well who the visitor was, and he trembled for the consequences of his weaknes as she pushed her way before him into

the room where the carpenter and his apprentice and a couple of housemaids were executing Patty's orders, under her close superintendence. The men were on ladders cleaning the long mirrors, the maids were busy with the furniture, while Patty, seated in a gilt and brocaded chair sat in state looking on. "Place that table in the corner, there, and these two chairs beside it. Not that, you stupid; the deep gentleman's chair on one side, and this one without arms on the other—let me see. Yes, that will do, with a palm or a great fern behind." Patty held her head on one side to contemplate the effect, while the two housemaids stood looking on, not yet so much accustomed to the new sway that they did not exchange a glance, a "la! much she knows about it," when her attention was called away.

It was, indeed, with no small start and sensation that Patty's attention was called away. She was sitting thus, with her head on one side, contemplating the group of furniture, perhaps imagining herself in the chair without arms, with a silken train arranged

about her feet (when her mourning should be over, for Patty was, in all things, a stickler for propriety), while some grand gentleman, a viscount at least, leant over the table entertaining her from the depths of the "gentleman's chair": when there suddenly burst upon her consciousness a bustle at the door, a quick throwing open, and a voice which was harsh and jarring, but alas, how well known and familiar!

"Patty, my pet, here I am! That man of yours wanted to put me in a waiting-room, but I said, Where she is there I'll go; and here I am, my little lovey, and a happy woman to see you in your own house."

"Oh!" cried Patty, rising quickly from her chair. Her wits were so much about her, even in this great and sudden shock, that she refrained from saying aunt in the hearing of that excited audience—which was foolish, indeed, since all the housemaids and all the carpenters in Greyshott parish knew very well that Miss Hewitt, of Rose Cottage, was Mrs. Piercey's

aunt, and far the richest, consequently the most respectable of her kindred. Patty could not say much more, for she was enfolded in the heavy drapery of Miss Hewitt's Paisley shawl, and almost stifled in her close embrace. "And bless you, all's ended as I said it would; and ain't I glad I was the one to help you to it?" Miss Hewitt said in her enthusiasm, bestowing a large audible kiss on Patty's face.

"Oh, dear!" said Patty, as soon as she could speak. "This isn't the place to receive any one in. Jervis, why didn't you show the lady into the morning-room? I can't talk to you here, with all the servants about."

"Don't blame the man," said Miss Hewitt; "I wanted to see you free, without stopping whatever you were doing. "It's not as if I were a mere visitor as couldn't make allowances. I just like to see everything, and what it was like before, and what you're doing. I know you, Patty. They won't know it for the same 'ouse afore you're done with

it. Well, this is a nice room! but none too big for what you'll want when you get things your own way. Greyshott won't know itself with all the doings there'll be."

"Oh, but I can't receive any lady here," said Patty. "Let me take you into the morning-room; it's where I always sit in the morning. I couldn't possibly sit and talk with a caller before lunch in any other place. If you don't mind I'll show you the way."

The butler held the door open with an obsequious air in which there was, as that functionary was well aware, an over-acting of his part—but that did not occur to the ladies who swept out, Patty in advance, and to whom it would scarcely have seemed too much if Jervis had walked backwards before them. He stayed behind to make his comment with uplifted hands and eyes upon the spectacle. "Lord, ain't she a-going it!" said Jervis. It was, perhaps, not dignified for a person in his position to unbosom himself to the housemaids and the carpenter; but how

could mortal man keep silent in circumstances so exciting? The ladies went to the morning-room in another frame of mind, both of them putting on silently their armour for the inevitable battle. When they had reached the room which was to be the scene of it, Miss Hewitt flung herself at once heavily into an easy chair. "Well! I call this a poky little place," she cried. "You might have sent the servants away, Patty. I liked that other place much better Morning-room! why it's no better than my parlour," she cried.

"It would only hold the whole of your house, kitchen and all," cried Patty; "and it's where I choose people to come," she added decisively, "when they've that little sense as to come in the morning, when *no* lady receives."

"Oh, that's how I am to be met, is it?" said Miss Hewitt, "you little ungrateful wretch! It was nothing but dear aunt, and how good I was, when you came to me to help you. Ah! you had to come to me to help to secure him at the last—and him

nothing but a Softy. If I had had somebody to stand for me like I did for you, Miss Patty, Greyshott would have been a very different place, and you'd never have got your nose in here!"

"Well, Aunt," said Patty, "if those are your ideas, you can't wonder that I shouldn't want you. For if you had married Sir Giles, which I suppose is what you mean, and would never have let me get my nose in, you'll understand that I don't want your nose in. I wouldn't have said it so plump if you hadn't begun. Though I don't believe Sir Giles ever thought of such a thing, now I know him well."

"He's not a Softy, you see," said the angry old lady, with a snort.

"No," said Patty, sedately; "he's not a Softy. I should think he'd had a good deal of common-sense in his day. But I don't want to quarrel," she added; "whatever you may do. No doubt you've come about your money, which is quite natural. You shall have your money, Aunt Patience. It wasn't so needful as I thought it would be, for Mr. Piercey had plenty for

what was wanted; but, of course, I'm much obliged to you all the same."

"Oh, Mr. Piercey: that's what you call the Softy now!" cried Miss Hewitt, in high scorn.

"It's what I always called him, and it's his name, and mine too. I'm Mrs. Piercey, as the heir's wife, and not Mrs. Gervase. My father-in-law says so, and he ought to know."

"Oh, your father-in-law," cried Miss Hewitt, with extreme bitterness; "you've changed all your relations, I see. When it comes to a person to disown their debts and their folks——"

"I do neither the one nor the other," cried Patty. "You shall have every penny of your fifty pounds—and interest, if you like, with that. And everybody knows my folks," she cried, with a toss of her head. "Oh, no fear that they'll ever be forgotten. Father's been here with the smell of beer about him like to knock you down, and when I told him I couldn't bear it, what does he do but fling out of the house cursing and swearing, and letting everybody see."

"Well, your father is a trial," Miss Hewitt allowed candidly. "I don't wonder, Patty, as you were hurt; but so was he, and he won't come back no more, won't Richard. You can't, anyhow, my pet, have the same objections to me."

Miss Hewitt held her head aloft, and her golden flowers nodded and rustled. The complacency of her smile, and the confidence that in her there was nothing to find fault with, was too much even for Patty. She could not say the words that came to her lips.

"Well, Aunt Patience," she said, in subdued tones, "I am treating you just the same as if you were Lady Hartmore."

"And no more than is my due, Patty. I might have been my lady many and many's the year if I'd had an Aunt Patience as would have done for me as I've done for you. Has she been to call already? She's one as always respects the rising sun."

"No," said Patty, still more subdued, "she has

not been yet—but that's easy explained, where there's been so lately a death in the house."

"And a good thing for you, too! If ever there was a tyrant of a woman—— But I see you're in deep crape, Patty, to show your grief."

"I hope I know better than to show any want of respect to my mother-in-law. And I think, Aunt Patience, *you* might have known better than to come to a house that's in such mourning with all these colours on your head."

"My bonnet!" cried Miss Hewitt. She caught sight of herself in a glass, and bridled and smiled at herself, instinctively arranging the bow of red ribbon that was tied under her chin. "I never had such a becoming bonnet in my life; and as for mourning, there's nobody could expect me to put on black for her."

"No," said Patty, "and that's why I hadn't expected even a call from you, Aunt Patience, during the mourning—not being in any way a real connection of the house."

Miss Hewitt fixed her eyes very wide open upon those of her niece, and the two maintained a silent combat by that method for at least a minute. It was the elder who gave in the first. "If that's how you're going to treat your own relations," she said, "Patty, you'll not see much of me. And I can tell you, as well as if it had happened already, you won't see much of other folks. There's none of the grand people as you're looking for that will come near the place. The rector'll call because he's bound to, and because you was once his show girl at the Sunday School; and the new curate will call to see if he can get a subscription for something, but, mark you my words: nobody else—no, not a soul! and when you've bundled everybody belonging to you out of your doors, then you'll see who you'll have to speak to. I'm sorry for you, Patty, I am indeed."

"Are you, Aunt Patience?" cried Patty, with defiance. "When it comes to that, I'll send for you back."

"It's a deal easier," said Miss Hewitt sententiously, "to whistle folks away than to bring them back."

But after this there was a cessation of hostilities, and in the end Miss Hewitt was taken over the house to see all its splendours, which, as much as possible, she depreciated. She was the only witness of her elevation whom Patty had as yet had, and though some sacrifice of pride and spirit was necessary, a natural longing to impress and dazzle her world, through the means of some spectator, was still stronger. Patty went so far as to offer her aunt some of those pairs of silk stockings which Parsons had been counting when her new mistress fell upon her. "They're such good stockings," Patty said, "but miles too big for me." "If you think I'll wear her old cast-off things!" cried Miss Hewitt, purple with rage, flinging them back into the drawers from which Patty had taken them. "And my foot, if anything, is a little smaller than yours," she added, with angry satisfaction. But when the visitor lingered and at last betrayed

her desire to be asked to stay for "dinner"—a word which came out unadvisedly, and which she immediately corrected, with a blush—"Lunch, I suppose you call it,"—Patty assumed very high ground.

"My dear Aunt! if we were by ourselves of course it would not matter; but dear papa always takes his luncheon along with us."

"And who's dear papa?" asked Miss Hewitt, with natural derision.

"I mean Sir Giles, of course; he's in very delicate health, and we have to be very careful."

"Sir Giles," said Miss Hewitt grimly, "has seen me before."

"Yes—he said so when he heard my name—he said, Where have I heard that name before?"

"Patty, you're a little devil; he knows a deal more than that of me."

"Ah, well, perhaps once, Aunt; but his memory's gone now; and to bring in a stranger to the luncheon table! Perhaps you don't remember," said Patty

severely, "that my poor dear mother-in-law has not yet been a fortnight in her grave."

Miss Hewitt was thus got rid of, though not without trouble; but Patty did not find it easy to forget what she had said, especially when it came true to the letter; for week after week went by and not a step, except that of the doctor, crossed the threshold of Greyshott. Patty took her place in the drawing-room every afternoon, with everything arranged very cleverly, and looking as like as an imitation could be to the little *mise en scène* of a young lady waiting for her guests; but no guests ever came. At length, after much waiting, there appeared—exactly as Aunt Patience had said—the rector! accompanied by his young daughter, for he was a widower. The rector called her Patty in the first moment of meeting, and though he amended that in a confused manner, and gave her finally her full honours as Mrs. Piercey, it was difficult to get over that beginning, which threw his young companion into utter discomfiture. And

then, to make matters worse, he delivered a little lecture upon the responsibilities of her new position and the difficulty of the duties that would come upon her. "You must not let your mind dwell on your disadvantages," he said kindly; "everybody, after a while, will make allowances for you." "You are quite mistaken if you think I want to have allowances made for me," said Patty, provoked. And what could the rector reply? He said, "Oh!" thus showing the poverty of the English language, and how little a man in such a predicament can find to say for himself; and then he began hurriedly to talk parish talk, and ask Mrs. Piercey's patronage for various charities—charities by which Patty Hewitt might almost have been in a position to benefit so short a time ago. "That's well over," he said to his daughter, wiping his forehead, when they went out of the gates of Greyshott. And he did not come again, nor she—not even the girl. And nobody came; and of all the difficult things in the world Mrs. Gervase Piercey found nothing so difficult as

to explain to her grand maid how it was that no visitor was ever seen at Greyshott. The thing itself was bad enough, but to explain it to Jerningham was still worse. "You see we are still in deep mourning," Mrs. Piercey said. "Yes, ma'am," said Jerningham, with a sniff of polite scepticism. For a lady who, however deep her mourning might be, had not a single friend to come to see her, was more than Jerningham could understand. And Patty sat alone in her fine drawing-room, and walked about her great house, and spoke to nobody but old Sir Giles and her own Softy; and thought many times, with a kind of alarm, of what Aunt Patience had said. Had it not already come true?

END OF VOL. II.

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