THE CUCKOO IN THE NEST.

A NOVEL.

In Three Vols.

By

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

THIS, however, was after all but a small matter; it was not actual misfortune. Patty, indeed, felt it much, partly on account of Jerningham and the other servants, who she felt must triumph in this non-recognition of her claims; and also a little for herself, for it was an extraordinary change from the perpetual coming and going of the Seven Thorns, and all the admiration and respect which she had there, the jokes, and the laughter and the talk, which if not refined, were good enough for Patty Hewitt—to the condition of having no one to speak to, not a soul—except old Sir Giles and her own Softy, whose conversation clever Patty could not be said to have enjoyed at any time. It was very

dull work going on from day to day with nothing better than poor old Sir Giles' broken talk, which was about himself and his affairs—not about her, naturally the most interesting subject to Patty. Many times she was tempted to go upstairs and sit with Jerningham to unbosom herself and relieve her mind of all the unspoken talk, and make a companion and *confidante* of her maid. Jerningham was a person much better trained and educated than Patty. She could have instructed her in many of the ways of the fine ladies which Mrs. Piercey could only guess at, or painfully copy out of novels ; but perhaps, if her mistress had yielded to this impulse it would have been Jerningham who would have held back, knowing her place and desiring no confidences. Patty, however, also knew her place, and that to confide in a servant was a fatal thing, so that she never yielded to this temptation. But how dull it was ! It is a fine thing to be the mistress of a great house, to have a large household under your orders, to be served hand and foot, as Patty

herself would have said; but never to have a gossip, never a jest with any one, she for whom every passer-by had once had a cheerful word, to have nobody to admire either herself or her dresses, to envy her good fortune, to wonder at her grandeur! that takes the glory out of any victory. Would Cæsar have cared to come back with all the joy and splendour of a triumphal procession had there been nobody to look at him? Patty had succeeded to the extent of her highest dreams, but, alas! there was nobody to see.

That, however, was merely negative, and there was always the hope that it might not last. She took her seat in the drawing-room every day with perennial expectation, still believing that somebody must come; and, no doubt, in the long run, her expectation would have come true. But Patty soon had actual trouble far more important than any mere deprivation. She had been afraid of Sir Giles, over whom her victory had been easy, and she had been afraid of the servants, whom she had now com-

pletely under her foot ; but she never had any fear about the Softy, her husband, who had been her dog—a slave delighted with his chains—who had desired nothing better than to do what she told him, and to follow her about wherever she went. That Gervase should become the only rebel against her, that he should escape her authority and influence, and take his own way in opposition to hers, was a thing which had not entered into any of her calculations—Gervase, whose devotion had been too much, who had wearied her out with his slavish dependence on her, how had he emancipated himself? It was inconceivable to Patty. She had felt sure that whatever happened she could always control him, always keep him in subjection, guide him with a look, be absolute mistress of his mind and all his wishes. The first revelation of something more in Softy which she had not calculated upon had come when she first found the difficulty of amusing him in the long evenings (lit with so many wax candles, surrounded with so many glories !). Then it was

revealed to Patty that she was not enough even for that fool. Then it began to dawn upon her faintly that the Seven Thorns itself had something to do with the attraction, and the excitement of the suspense, and the restraint and expectation in which she had held him: all these adjuncts were over now; he had Patty all his own, and he did not find Patty enough. Was that possible? could it be true?

Perhaps there was something in the very ease of Patty's triumph that had to do with this. Had his mother lived, and had Gervase experienced that protection of having a wife to stand by him, which he had anticipated, it is very likely that this result would have been long delayed, if, indeed, it had ever appeared at all. But there was nobody now against whom Gervase required to be protected. His father had never opposed him, and now that Sir Giles was, like everybody else in the house, under Patty's sway, not even the faint excitement of a momentary struggle with him chequered the Softy's well-being. The consequence was that he, as well as Patty, found it

dull. He had no one to play with him ; he longed for the movement of the alehouse, the sound of the carts and carriages, the slow jokes in the parlour, the smoke and the fun—also the beer ; and perhaps that most of all. It was hard work even when Patty was devoted to his constant amusement, for the Softy had no intervals ; he wanted to be entertained all the time : and when she flagged for a moment, he became sullen and tugged at his chain. But when Sir Giles came on the scene, and Patty's attention was distracted and her cares given to the old man, offence and sullen disgust arose in the mind of Gervase. He would not join in the game, as Patty called him to do ; neither father nor son indeed wanted a third in the game : and Gervase, duller than ever and angry too, went to sleep for a night or two, tried to amuse himself another evening or two with cat's cradle or the solitaire board—then flung these expedients aside in impatience, and finally strolled off, through the soft, warm darkness of the night, to the Seven Thorns. The Seven Thorns ! it was poetic justice

upon Patty, but that made it only the harder to bear.

Then there came upon Patty one of those curses of life which fall upon women with a bitterness and horror of which probably the inflictors of the pain are never fully aware. It would have been bad enough if this had befallen her in her natural position as the wife of a country tradesman or small farmer. Domestic misery is the same in one class as in another; yet it would be vain to deny the aggravations that a higher position adds to primitive anguish of this kind. The cottager is not so much ashamed of her husband's backslidings. In many cases they are the subject of the long monologue of complaint that runs through her life. They cannot be hid, and they become a sort of possession, the readiest excuse for every failing of her own. But that the young master should stumble night after night up to Greyshott; that he should be seen by all the neighbourhood drinking among the dull rustics at the Seven Thorns; that a crowd of servants should listen

and peep to hear his unsteady step, and his boisterous laugh, and the stammerings of excuse or explanations, or worse still, of noisy mirth, bursting from him in the middle of the quiet night—was something more terrible still. Patty—on that first occasion, when, long after every one else was in bed, she stole downstairs to admit him by that little door near the beech avenue, to which his unsteady footsteps naturally turned—was horrified and angry beyond description; but she did not doubt she could put a stop to it. Not for a moment did she hesitate as to her power. It should never happen again, she said to herself. Once was nothing. Henceforward she would be on her guard. He should not escape from her another time. She did not even upbraid Gervase—it was her own fault, who had never thought of that, taken no precautions; but it should never, never, she said to herself, with, perhaps unnecessary asseverations, happen again.

Gervase, upbraided as in sport by his laughing wife for forsaking her, as if he had been a naughty child,

did nothing but laugh and triumph in reply. "Weren't they just astonished to see me!" he said; "your father opened his mouth like this," opening his own large mouth with the moist hanging under-lip. "You should ha' seen him, you should ha' seen him, Patty—like I was a ghost! 'Hallo!' said he, and 'Hallo!' said I, 'here I am, you see.' There wasn't one of them could say a word; but afterwards I stood treat, and we had a jolly night."

"And, oh, how you did smell of beer, you naughty fellow, when you came in!"

"Did I? Well, not without reason, neither," said Gervase, with his loud laugh; "a set of jolly old cocks when you set them going. We only wanted you there in your old blue dress and your apron."

"That you will never see again, I can tell you; and it isn't very nice of you, Gervase, wishing your wife in such a place."

"It's a good enough place, and it's where you came from," said Gervase. "But I told 'em," he said,

nodding his head, "what an awful swell you have grown—nothing good enough for you. Didn't the old fellows laugh and nod their old heads. Ho, ho! He, he!"

"Gervase, dear," said his wife, "you won't go there again? you won't go and leave me all by myself, longing and wondering when you'd come back? I thought you'd gone and fallen asleep somewhere. I thought every minute you'd come into the room. You won't go again, Gervase, dear, and leave your poor Patty alone?"

"Why, you had father," Gervase said.

"Oh, papa; yes, dear, and I kept on playing to amuse him, dear old gentleman, and to keep it from him that you had gone out. If he had known where you were, it would have vexed him sadly, you know it would."

"It vexed them both," said Gervase, "when I went there after you; but I didn't mind—nor you either, Patty."

"A young single man has to have his liberty," said

Patty, "but when he's married—— You wouldn't have gone off and left me—your Patty, whom you said you were so fond of—in those days?"

"Ah," said the Softy, with the wisdom of his kind, "but I've got you now fast, Patty, at home waiting for me; so I can take my pleasure a bit, and have you all the same." He looked at her with a cynical light in his dull eyes. He, and she also, felt the strength of the argument. No need to please her now, and conciliate her in her own ideas about beer and the parlour of the Seven Thorns. She could no longer cast him off, or leave him in the lurch. Consequently, Gervase felt himself free to indulge his tastes in his own way, whatever Patty might think. She was struck silent by that new light in his eyes. He was not capable of argument, or of anything but sticking to what he had once said, with all the force of his folly. She looked at him, and, for the first time, saw what was before her. It had never occurred to her before that he had the strength to resist her, or that she could

not call him to her like a dog when her better sense saw it to be necessary. A docile fool is sometimes contemptible enough; but a fool resistant, a being whom reason cannot teach, who has no power of being convinced! Patty felt a cold dew come over her forehead. She saw what was before her with momentary giddiness, as if she had looked over the edge of a precipice. But she did not lose hope. She sent next day an imperative note to her father requiring his attendance: that he either should resist or refuse her call did not come into her mind. "Come up to Greyshott," she wrote, "at once, for I have something to say to you;" as she might have written to one of her servants. But Richard Hewitt was not a man who could be defied with impunity. He never appeared in obedience to her summons; he took no notice of it. He replied only by that silence which is the most terrible of all kinds of resistance. And it was not long before Gervase disappeared again. After the second catastrophe, Patty swept down upon the Seven Thorns in her

carriage—an imposing figure in her silk and crape. But Hewitt was not impressed even by the sight of her grandeur. "I'll not refuse no customer for you —there! and you needn't think you can come over me," he cried. "By George! to order me about—what I'm to do and whom I'm to have in this house. It's like your impudence; but I tell you, Miss, I'll see you d——d first," the angry man roared, bringing his clenched fist down upon the table, and making all the glasses ring. Patty was cowed, and had not a word to say.

And then there began for the triumphant young woman an ordeal enough to daunt the stoutest heart. It was true that she had not, like many a wife in such circumstances, the anguish of love to give a sting to everything. Patty had used the Softy partly as the instrument of her own elevation; but his folly had not disgusted or pained her as it might have done under other circumstances. She had a sober affection for him even, as her own property, a thing that belonged to her, and felt strongly the

impulse of protecting him from scandal and injury: more, he was so involved still in all her hopes of advancement, that she was as much alarmed for the betrayal of his bad behaviour, as if (like so many) she had feared the loss of a situation or work which brought in the living of the family. And it must be added for Patty that she did her very best to keep all knowledge of Gervase's conduct from his father. She sat and played his game of back-gammon, inventing almost every evening a new excuse. "Isn't he a lazy boy? He's gone to sleep again," was at first the easiest explanation. But Patty felt that would not do always. "What do you think, dear papa? Gervase has taken to reading," she said; "I gave him a nice novel, all hunting and horses, and he got so interested in it." "He never was any good outside a horse himself," Sir Giles said, with a little grumble. But he was easily satisfied. He asked nothing more than to have his mind relieved from that care for Gervase which Lady Piercey had always insisted he should

share. "He's got his wife to look after him, now," Sir Giles said, when Dunning hinted a doubt that Mr. Gervase was sometimes out of an evening. He was thankful to wash his hands of all responsibility. That apparent selfishness of old age, which consists very much of weariness and conscious inability to bear the burden, came over him more and more every day. Had such a thing been possible as that Gervase should have married a girl in his own position, and made her miserable, the good in Sir Giles would have been roused to support and uphold the victim. But Patty knew very well what she was doing. Patty had accepted all the responsibilities. She was able to take care of herself. He had his wife to take care of him, and to keep him off his father. Patty accepted her share of that tacit bargain honestly; and, as for Sir Giles, it must be said that he was easily satisfied—received her explanations, and gave her as little trouble as possible. He nodded his head, and went on with his game. Perhaps, if truth had been told, it was a relief to the

old man when the Softy—strolling about restlessly from place to place, interfering with the play, calling off his wife's attention, always troublesome and always ungainly—was not there.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PATTY had been married only about four months, when an incident happened that brought this period of humiliation and trouble after her triumph to a climax. The summer had gone, the dark days and long nights of early winter had come back, and Gervase's almost nightly visits to the Seven Thorns were complicated by the storms and rains of the season, which, however, were rarely bad enough to keep him indoors. Had Patty been free to keep a constant watch upon him, it was her opinion that she could have prevented his continual escape into the night. She could have made him so comfortable at home. By moments she had visions of what she could do to reclaim her husband and satisfy him, if the dreadful restraint of the old

man and his nightly game were withdrawn. Once or twice, when Sir Giles was indisposed, she had, indeed, managed to do this. She had brewed him hot and fragrant drinks to take the place of the beer, and exhausted herself in talk to amuse him. Poor Patty ! she thought to herself that surely she must, at least, be as amusing as the old fellows in the parlour at the Seven Thorns. Many a woman has thought the same: a brilliant young creature, full of knowledge and spirit, and wit and pleasantness, might not she think herself as attractive as the dull gossip of the club? But it is a dangerous conflict to enter into, and the race is certainly not to the swift nor the battle to the strong in this respect. And Patty was not an amusing conversationalist. She knew the methods of rustic flirtation, and how to hold off and call on a provoked and tantalised lover; and she could be very lively in talk about herself and what she meant to do; but the first was no longer a method to be employed with Gervase, who was now brutally conscious of being Patty's

proprietor; and he was not even so much interested in what she meant to do as he once had been. He much preferred the heavy jokes, the great guffaw, the half-mocking attention that was paid to himself in the parlour at the Seven Thorns. He was not in the least aware that the big laugh that went round, and in which he himself joined with a sensation of truly enjoying himself, was chiefly at him and his folly. And his freedom to do what he liked, to drink as much as he liked, and babble and maunder at his pleasure, was very sweet to Gervase: he liked it better than anything else in the world; perhaps not better than Patty if there had been a conflict between the two—but then, as he said, he had Patty all the same whatever he might do, and why shouldn't he enjoy himself when it was so entirely in his power?

But when Patty sat the whole evening through playing backgammon with Sir Giles, her ears on the alert for every sound, her hopes sometimes raised by a footstep on the stairs to imagine that

he had not gone out after all, or her fears excited by some noise to the terror of believing that he had come back earlier than usual, and was coming in—like the fool he was, to betray himself to his father! it was not wonderful if she looked sometimes with a suppressed bitterness at her old father-in-law fumbling at his game. What good was his life to that old man? He could not walk a step without assistance. He was bound to that chair whatever happened. He had nobody of his own age to speak to, no one except people of another generation, whom he was keeping out of what Patty called "their own." "Oh, if the old man were out of the way, how soon I could put everything right!" Patty said to herself. Though she had indeed failed, and received a grievous defeat, her confidence in herself was not shaken. It was only circumstances, she thought, that were to blame. If she had things in her own hands, if her evenings were unencumbered, if she could devote herself to her husband as she had intended to do, let us see how long the Seven Thorns

would have stood against her! And, oh, what good was his life to that old man! If he were to die, what a blessed relief it would be! Full of aches and pains, his nerves shattered, unable to keep from crying when he talked, unable to think of anything except his walk (walk! in his chair driven by Dunning), and his dinner, which was chiefly slops, and his cups of beef tea, and his drops, and his game at night, which he was allowed to win to please him! Poor Sir Giles! It was not, indeed, a very pleasing programme: but it is to be supposed that it did not seem so miserable to him as to Patty, for Sir Giles showed no inclination whatever to die. He might have thought, if he had been an unselfish old man, that he was a burden, that he kept the young people from enjoying their lives, while getting so little good out of his own—that if he were but out of the way Patty would be my lady, and free to look after her own husband and keep him straight; but he did not do so. She sat all the evening through, and said: "Yes, dear papa," and "How capitally you play!" and

"What luck you have!" and "I am nowhere beside you, dear papa," smiling and beaming upon him, and, to do her justice, exerting all her powers to amuse him; but all the time saying to herself, "Oh, what good is his life to him! Oh, how can he go on like this, keeping Gervase out of his right place, and keeping me that I can't do anything for my own husband! Oh, that we had the house to ourselves and I were free to keep Gervase straight!"

One evening, Patty had been feeling more keenly than usual this keen contrariety and hindrance of everything. Sir Giles had sat longer than he generally did, sending off Dunning when he appeared, demanding an hour's grace and another game. He was in higher spirits than usual. "Come, Patty," he said, "you're not tired. Have your revenge and give me a good beating. I'm in high feather to-night. I don't care that! for Dunning. Come back in an hour, and perhaps I'll go to bed."

"'Alf an hour, Sir Giles: and that's too long," Dunning said.

"Half an hour, dear papa—you must not really tempt Providence by staying any longer," said Mrs Gervase. "Have my revenge? Oh, no! but I'll give you another chance of beating me all to atoms. Isn't Sir Giles well to-night, Dunning? He looks ten years younger."

"He's excited with all that play," said Dunning. "I don't 'old with so much backgammon. If he's ill in the morning I wash my hands of it. He knows well enough hisself he didn't ought to be so late."

"The white for me as usual," said Sir Giles. "I'm a sad, selfish, old fellow, always appropriating the winning colour, eh, Patty? Never mind, you are coming on beautifully—you play a very pretty little game. I'm training you to beat myself, my dear, if not to-night, well, some other night. Come along, don't let's waste any time if that old curmudgeon gives us only half an hour."

Patty drew her chair to the table again, with her most smiling aspect. "Here I am, dear papa,"

she said. The renovated drawing-room, if it was, perhaps, in the taste of a past time and a little heavy and ungraceful, was a handsome room, abundantly lighted, with an atmosphere of warmth and luxurious comfort; and Patty in her black silk, with her hair carefully dressed *à la* Jerningham, and her dress from a fashionable mantua-maker, recommended by that accomplished attendant—was as good an imitation of what a lady at home ought to be, as it would be easy to find; and as she sat there ministering to her old father-in-law, keeping him in comfort and good humour, giving up her time and her attention to play over again the same monotonous unending game—the picture, both moral and physical, was one that would have gained the admiration of any spectator. But as she drew her chair again towards the table, there flashed across Patty's mind a remembrance of another scene: the parlour at the Seven Thorns full of a cloud of smoke and a smell of beer; the rustic customers, with their slow talk, holding forth each to his neighbour,

calling with knocks upon the floor and table for further supplies; while she, Patty, the same girl, hastened to see what was wanted, and to bring them what they called for—she, Mrs. Piercey, the wife of the heir of Greyshott, the mistress of all this great house! And it was only four months ago. How clearly she saw that scene! The same thing would be going on to-night while she played backgammon with Sir Giles, and smiled, and talked to her dear papa—and with a thrill of mingled rage, vexation, and anxiety, Patty felt herself deserted and her husband there! It gave her a pang which was all the more keen from her confidence in what she could do, and her sense of the bondage which prevented her from doing it. Oh, why should this old man go on with his cackle and his dice, and his life which was no good to any one? Why, why couldn't he die and set her free? "Here I am, dear papa," she said.

"Perhaps that sleepy fellow, Gervase, will wake up and appear before we've done," said Sir Giles.

"I wouldn't humour him too much, my dear. It's one thing to be devoted to your husband, and another thing to let him muddle his brains away. He sleeps a great deal too much, that's my opinion. He's not too bright at the best of times, and if you let him drowse about like this it'll do him harm—it'll do him harm. I don't see that he gets up any earlier in the morning for sleeping like this at night. His poor mother would never have permitted it. Sixes, my dear. No, no, you mustn't humour him too much."

"What luck you have, dear papa! Oh, yes, I know, I know, he's humoured too much. But some need more sleep than others; and don't you think, on the whole, it does him good? His mind comes out so much; he's so sensible when you talk to him. I couldn't wish for better advice than Gervase gives."

"I'm very glad to hear you say so, my dear; there's a great deal in him, poor boy; I always said so; more than anybody knows. But I wouldn't

let him sleep like that. What, Dunning, you old rascal, here again already? It can't be half an hour yet."

"Oh, yes, dear papa," said Patty, "it is the half-hour; and that last throw has quite made an end of me. Good-night, and I hope you'll sleep well. And I'll go, as you say, and wake up that lazy boy. He *is* a lazy boy. But I'll try and break him of it now you've told me. I thought it was best to humour him. But I'll break him of it, now I know what you think."

"Do, my dear, do!" said Sir Giles, nodding his head at her as he was wheeled away. Dunning gave Mrs. Gervase a look behind his master's chair. Ah, you may keep such a secret from those whom it affects most, but to keep it from the servants is more than any one can do! Dunning knew well enough where Gervase was. He knew how Gervase returned home, at what hour, and in what condition. Dunning, in addition, thought he knew that it was Patty's doing, part of some deep-laid scheme of

hers, and could not divine that the poor young woman's heart was beating under that fine gown with terror and anxiety. She gave a little gasp of relief when the sound of Sir Giles' chair died away, and his door was closed audibly. And then she rang to have the lights put out, telling the butler that Sir Giles and Mr. Piercey had both gone to bed; and then Patty, heroic as any martyr, placed herself under Jerningham's hands to have her hair brushed, going through all the routine that nobody might think from her demeanour that anything was wrong. She was quivering with anxiety in every limb when she sent the maid away; and then, in her dressing-gown, stole downstairs to open the side door, and strain her ears for the heavy footstep stumbling through the blackness of the night.

Poor Patty! what thoughts went through her mind as she kept that vigil! Fury and determination to do something desperate, to stop it at all hazards —and that this should be the last time, the very

last! She would take him by the shoulder and shake the very life out of him rather than that this should go on. She would fling herself at his feet and implore him—alas, Patty knew very well that to implore and to threaten were alike useless, and that the fool would only open his moist mouth and laugh in her face. What could she do? what could she do? She would make an appeal to her father, she would threaten him with the loss of his licence, she would bribe him with all the money she could scrape together, she did not know what she would not do—but to bear this longer was impossible! And then she fell into a dreary calm, and thought over all that had happened, her wonderful triumph, the change in everything, the contrast. And yet what advance had she made if she never, never could separate herself from the Seven Thorns? Whether it was she who was there or her husband, what did it matter? Who would ever acknowledge them or give them their own place if this were to go on? Oh, if these county

people had but done as they ought, if they had but shown themselves friendly and taken some notice of the young pair, people who had known Gervase all his life, and ought to have felt for him! Patty shed a few hot tears over the unkindness of the world, and then, as is so natural, her mind went back upon her own hopes, and the ideal she had formed of her life which, as yet, was so little realised. She had thought of herself as driving about the country, paying visits at those grand houses which had been to her as the abodes of the blest; her husband at her side, well-dressed and well set up, with everybody saying how much he had improved! And invitations raining upon them, and fortune smiling everywhere. Sir Gervase and Lady Piercey! how delightfully it had seemed to sound in her fortunate ears! To be sure all this could not be realised until poor old Sir Giles had been fully convinced that it was not for his advantage to live any longer; but that might have happened any day. Oh, if he could but be

convinced of it now, and leave her free to care for her husband! Was not Gervase her first duty? Why should this old man go on living, keeping his son out of his own?

And then Patty's mind went back to the Seven Thorns, that place from which it appeared she could not get free. She saw herself there before anything was yet settled, while all her life was before her. As she sat alone and shivered and listened, the image of Patty, light-hearted and free, came up before her like a picture. How busy she had been, how everybody had admired her, even the old fellows in the parlour! And the young ones, how they had watched for a word with her, and some had almost come to blows! Roger, for instance, who had made so much fun of the Softy, who had looked such a gallant fellow in his brown velveteen coat and his red tie! She remembered how he had appealed to her not to do it, not to bind herself to a fool. The impudent fellow! to talk so of Gervase—Sir Gervase Piercey that was

soon to be! Oh, poor Gervase, poor Gervase! he was not, perhaps, very wise, but he could still be set right again and kept straight if she were but free to give herself up altogether to the care of him. Roger Pearson could never have been anything but a country fellow living in a cottage. It was true that he was handsome, and all that. Patty seemed to see him, too, though she did not wish it, with the light in his eyes, looking at her with his air of mastery, the Adonis of the village. Every girl in the place had wanted Roger, but he had eyes for only her. Why did he come before her now? She did not want to see him or to think of him—far from that. There was not a fibre of the wanton in Patty's nature. She had no understanding of the women who, with husbands of their own, could think of any other man. And if she had the choice to make over again, she knew that she would do the same; but still she could not help thinking of Roger Pearson, though she had no idea why.

This effect, however, was shortly after explained to her in the most trying way. The night grew darker and darker, and colder and colder. The Seven Thorns must have been closed long ago, and all its revellers dispersed to their homes. What could have happened to Gervase? where could he have gone? Could he have taken so much that he was made to stay there, as unable to take care of himself, a thing which Patty could remember to have happened in her time? She became afraid to look at her watch or to listen to a clock, in the sickness of her heart. It was impossible but that he must have reached home long ago had he left the Seven Thorns in the natural way. Oh, where was he? where was he? Where had he gone? what had happened to him? Patty dared not go upstairs to bed, even when she was convinced that he could not be coming now; for her father, she was sure, would turn him out in the early morning if this was what had happened. Yet how could she remain up, and on the watch, when the servants would be stirring, revealing what had happened to the whole household?

Patty is, perhaps, not a person for whom to appeal to the reader's sympathies, but she was very unhappy, very anxious, not knowing what to think.

At last, in the blackest hour of the night, about three o'clock or so in the morning, her anxious ear heard, or seemed to hear, a faint sound. Steps, and then a pause, and then steps again, and the sound of the little side gate in the beech avenue pushed open. Patty was immediately on the alert, with unspeakable relief in her mind. But the sounds were not those of one man stumbling home. Sometimes there was a noise as of something being tugged along the grass, then another stop, and the steps again making the gravel fly, and then the sound as of a fall. In her terror she stole out into the darkness, fearing she knew not what, and at last, by faint perception through the gloom, by sound, and by almost contact in the stifling dark, perceived how it was—her husband, scarcely conscious, being dragged and hustled along through the dark by another man.

"Is it you, Gervase? oh, is it you, Gervase?" she cried.

Oh, poor Patty! is there any one so hard-hearted as to refuse to pity her in her misery? The voice that answered her out of the blackness of the night was not that of Gervase. He uttered no sound but that of heavy breath. Yet it was a well-known voice, a voice that made her heart jump to her throat with intolerable horror, anger, and shame—to hear how sober, manful, energetic, and capable it was.

"There's nothing wrong with him," it said, clearly and quickly, "except that he's drunk. Show a light and I'll get him in. I've had such a job, but I'll manage now; only for goodness' sake look sharp and show a light."

It was the voice of Roger Pearson, whom she had been thinking of, whose presence had sent some subtle intimation through the air to bring him to her thoughts.

Patty hurried back to the open door and brought

out the candle, which burned steadily in the motionless blackness of the air. She said not a word. Of the pang it gave her to see the man whom she had rejected bringing back the man whom she had married she gave no sign. If she could have covered her face that he might not see her, she would have done so; but that being impossible, Patty never flinched. She held the light to direct him, while now and then roused to take a step of his own accord, but generally dragged by the other, Gervase was got in. She led the way to the library, which was on the same level, stepping with precaution not to be heard, shading the light with her hand, with all her wits about her. There was not a tinge of colour on Patty's face. She was cold, shivering with excitement and distress. It was not till Gervase had been laid upon the sofa that she spoke.

"I am sorry you have had this trouble," she said. "I hope you have not over-strained yourself with such a weight. Can I get you anything?" She looked at him courageously in the face. It was

right to offer a man something who had brought, even were it only a strayed dog, home.

And he, too, looked at her, and for a moment said nothing. He stretched his arms to relax them.

"I'm not a man that cares for the stuff," he said, "but perhaps I'd be none the worse for a drop of brandy to take off the strain. He's safe enough there," he added. "You needn't be anxious. He'll wake up before the daylight, and then you can get him upstairs."

Patty did not say a word, but led the way to the dining-room, where there was brandy to be got. It was a thing any lady might have done, she said to herself, even through the wild beating of her heart, and the passion in her breast—the passion of rage, and exasperation, and shame. He was cool enough, thinking more of stretching and twisting himself to ease his muscles than of the silent anguish in which she was. When he had swallowed the brandy he advised her, with rough friendliness, "Take a little

yourself. It's hard on you ; you want something to give you a little strength ! "

" Will you take any more ? " said Patty, sharply.

" No, I don't want no more. It's awful good stuff ; it runs through a man like fire. I'd been at a bit of an 'op over there by Coulter's Mill, and I nigh fell over him lying out on the moor. He might have got his death ; so when I saw who it was, I thought I'd best bring him home. But he'll take no harm ; the drink that's in him will keep the cold out."

" I am much obliged to you," said Patty. " If there's any reward you'd take—— "

" Meaning money ? " he said, with a suppressed roar of a laugh. " No, I won't take no money. I might say something nasty to you after that, but I won't neither. It ain't very nice for you, poor girl, to have your man brought home in that state by your old sweetheart. I feel for you ; but you always had a sharp tongue, and you never would give in. I advise you to take more care of the Softy now you've got him back," he said as he went away.

Patty shut and locked the door with an energy of rage and humiliation which almost overcame the horror of being heard. And then she went into the library and sat beside her husband till he had sufficiently recovered from his stupor to be taken upstairs. What hours of vigil! All the sins of her triumph might have been expiated while she sat there and shivered through the miserable night.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PATTY had thoughts enough, surely, to occupy her that night, but it is doubtful whether there were any that came into her mind with the same reality—repeated again and again, as if by accident the recollection had been blown back upon her by a sudden wind—as those careless words uttered by Pearson when he had described how he had found Gervase: "I had been at a little hop at Coulter's Mill;" he said 'op, but though Patty had never used that manner of speech herself it did not hurt her. A little hop at Coulter's Mill. Such things were going on while she was shut up in the dismal grandeur of Greyshott. Girls were whirling round with their partners, receiving their attentions, which, though they might be rough and not very

refined, were all that Patty knew of those delights of youth ; while she, Patty, whom they all envied, who was now so far above them, sat and played back-gammon with an old dotard, or watched half the night for her Softy's return. There were still such things, and Roger Pearson went to them ! Patty had a soft place in her heart for Roger ; she wished him no harm, and it might very well have been, had not Gervase and ambition come across her path, that she should have been his wife ; and though she wished him nothing but good, Patty did hope that she had more or less broken his heart. She thought he would never have wished to go to those sort of places again, where every tune that was played and every dance would remind him of her. His careless speech took her, therefore, full in the breast, with a stupefying surprise. And he did not say it as if it was anything wonderful, but only as the calm ordinary of life, " I 'd been at a little 'op at Coulter's Mill." And he was returning about two o'clock in the morning, which showed that he had amused himself well.

Could such things be, and she out of them all? Every time this thought crossed her mind it gave her a new shock. It seemed almost impossible that such things could be.

But at all events, it was a comfort that Gervase at last was roused and got safely to his room before the servants were stirring, which it had been Patty's fear would not be possible. She had made up her story what to say in case she had been surprised by the early housemaid. She meant to keep the door closed, and to say that Mr. Piercey had been ill in the night and could not sleep, and now had fallen asleep on the sofa, and must not be disturbed. Happily, however, it was not necessary to burden her conscience with this additional fib. She got him upstairs safely, and to bed, and lay down herself upon the sofa with great relief. What a night! while all the girls who had been at the dance at Coulter's Mill would still be sleeping soundly, and if they ever thought of Patty, would think of her with such envy! Poor Patty, she was very brave. She snatched a little sleep, and was

refreshed before Jerningham came to the door with that early cup of tea, which Patty understood all the fine ladies took in the morning. For once she was glad of that unnecessary refreshment. She told Jerningham that Mr. Piercey had been ill, and that she feared he had taken a bad cold: and then Patty closed the door upon the maid, who guessed, if she did not already know exactly, the character of the illness, and began to think steadily what she should do. She would tell Gervase that another night, if it happened again, he would be brought in dead, not alive. He would die, she would tell him, on the roadside like a dog. His was not a mind that could take in milder imaginations, but he would understand *that*. And Patty made up her mind to have another conversation with her father equally trenchant. She would tell him that if anything happened to Gervase she would have him tried for manslaughter. There would be abundant evidence, which she would not hesitate to bring forth, that the victim was half-witted, that he had been taken advantage of, and that the

man who plied him with drink and then turned him out, his poor brain more clouded than ever, to find his way home, was his murderer and nothing else. Patty said to herself that she did not mind what scandal she would raise in such circumstances. If Richard Hewitt were brought to the scaffold she would not mind, though he was her father. She would tell him that she would drag him there with her own hands. She set her fierce little teeth, and vowed to herself that she would ruin him were he ten times her father, rather than let *this* go on. She would frighten Gervase to death; but before she was done she would set her foot on the ruins of the Seven Thorns.

Gervase, however, was too ill to be threatened the day after that dreadful vigil. He had caught cold lying out upon the moor, and he was very ill and in a high fever, quite unable to get up, or to have anything but nursing and kindness. Patty had the confidence of a woman well acquainted with the consequences of a debauch, that this would wear off in a short time and leave no particular results. She gave

him beef-tea and gruel and kept him quiet, and told him, like a child, that he would be better to-morrow. "Gervase has caught a bad cold," she told Sir Giles, "but you must not be anxious, dear papa. I am keeping him in his warm bed, and he'll be all right to-morrow." "Right, right, my dear," said Sir Giles. "Bed is the best place. There is nothing like taking a cold in time, nothing like it. And we must remember he was always delicate. There's no stamina in him, no stamina." "He'll be all right to-morrow," Patty said, and she kept running up and down between the games to see if he was asleep, if he was comfortable, if he wanted anything. "Good creature!" said Sir Giles, half to himself, half to Dunning, who silently but consistently refused to appreciate Mrs. Piercey. "Now, what would you and I have done with the poor boy if he had been ill, and no wife on the spot to look after him?" "Maybe he wouldn't have had the same thing the matter with him," said Dunning, significantly. "Eh, what do you mean? What's the matter with him? He's got a bad cold,"

cried Sir Giles. "There are colds and colds," said the enigmatical Dunning. But Patty came back at the moment, saying that Gervase was quite quiet and asleep, and resumed her place for the second game. It was a longer game than usual, and Patty played badly, wishing her dear papa we will not venture to say how far off. But it came to an end at last, as everything does. "I hope you'll have a good night, my dear, and not be disturbed with him," the old gentleman said kindly. "Oh, I feel sure," cried Patty, "he'll be better to-morrow." But, as a matter of fact, she was not at all sure. The fumes of the drink ought to have died off by that time, but the fever had not died off. He was ill, and she was frightened and did not know what to do. And instead of being better in the morning, poor Gervase was worse, and the doctor had to be sent for, to whom, after various prevarications, poor Patty was obliged to confess the truth. Impossible to look more grave than the doctor did when he heard of this. "It was enough to kill him," he said. Patty understood (with a private

reserve of vengeance against her father, who had been the cause of it) that Gervase was really ill and had escaped something still worse. But she was confident in her own powers of nursing, and did not take fright. She was really an excellent nurse, having a great deal of sense, and the habit of activity, and no fear of giving herself trouble. She devoted herself to her husband quite cheerfully, and even during the two first nights went down in a very pretty dressing-gown to play his game with Sir Giles. "We must not look for any change just yet, the doctor says, but he'll soon be well, he'll soon be well," she said; and believed it so thoroughly that Sir Giles, too, was quite cheerful, notwithstanding that Dunning, in the background, shook his head. Dunning would have shaken his head whatever had been the circumstances. It was part of his position to take always the worst view. And the household in general also took the worst view. Nobody had said anything about that fatal lying out on the moor. Mrs. Gervase certainly had not said a word (except to the doctor), and Roger

Pearson had resisted every temptation to betray his share in the matter; yet everybody knew. How did they know? It is impossible to tell. The butler shook his head like Dunning, and so did the cook. "He have no constitution," they said.

But it was not till some days after that Patty began to take fright. She said "He'll be better to-morrow," even after she saw that the doctor looked grave—and resisted the aid of a nurse as long as she could, declaring that for a day or two longer she could hold out. "For he's not going to be long ill," she said, cheerfully. "Perhaps not," the doctor replied, with a tone that was exasperating in its solemnity. What did he mean? "You must remember, Mrs. Piercey," he continued, "that your husband has no constitution. Fortunately he has had no serious illness before, but he has always been delicate. It's common in—in such cases. He never had any stamina. You cannot expect him to throw off an attack such as this like any other man."

"Why not like any other man?" cried Patty. She was so familiar with Gervase that she had forgotten his peculiarities. Except when she thought of it as likely to serve her own purpose with her father, she had even forgotten that he was the Softy. He was her husband—part of herself, about whom, assuredly, there was no fibre of weakness. "Why shouldn't he shake it off like any other man?" she cried angrily.

The doctor gave her a strange look. "He has no constitution," he said.

The words and the look worked in Patty's mind like some strange leaven, mingling with all her thoughts. She could not at first imagine what they meant. After a while, when she was relieved by the nurse and went into another room to rest, instead of going to sleep, as she had, indeed, much reason to do, she sat down and thought it all over in the quiet. No constitution—no stamina. Patty knew very well, of course, what these words meant; it was the application of them that was difficult. Gervase! He was a

little loose in his limbs, not very firmly knit perhaps, with not so much colour as the rustics around—but he was young, and healthy, and strong enough. Nobody had ever imagined that he was not strong. As for being a little soft, perhaps, in the mind, that was because people did not know him ; and even if they did, the mind had nothing to do with the body, and it was all in his favour, for he did not worry and vex himself about things as others did. Like other men —why wasn't he like other men ? He was as tall as most, he was not crooked or out of proportion, he was——

Did it mean that he might die ?

Patty rose from her chair and flung her arms above her head with a cry. She was not without natural affection ; she liked her husband, and was not dissatisfied with him, except in that matter of going to the Seven Thorns. She did not object to him because he was a fool ; she was fond of him in a way. But when it suddenly flashed upon her that this might be the meaning of what the doctor said, it was

not of Gervase's fate that she thought. Die! and deprive her of what she had made so many efforts to secure! Die! so that she never, never should be Lady Piercey, should she live a hundred years! Patty stood for a moment all quivering with emotion as she first realised this thought. It was intolerable, and not to be borne. She had married him, coaxed him, kept him in good humour, given up everything for him—only for this, that he should die before his father, and leave her nothing but Mrs. Piercey—Mrs. Piercey only, and for ever! Patty raised her hands unconsciously as if to seize him and shake him, with a long-drawn breath and a sobbing, hissing "Oh!" from the very bottom of her heart. She had it in her mind to rush to him, to seize him, to tell him he must not do it. He must make an effort; he must live, whatever happened. It was inconceivable, insupportable that he should die. He must not, should not die before his father, cheating his wife! She stood for a moment with her hands clenched, as if she had in reality grasped Gervase by his coat, and then she

flung herself upon her face on the sofa in a passion of wild weeping. It could not, could not be; it must not be. She would not allow the possibility. Before his father, who was an old man—leaving all the honours to—anybody, whoever happened to be in the way, Margaret Osborne, for anything she knew—but not Patty, not she who had worked for them, struggled for them! It could not, and it must not be.

Patty did not sleep that day, though she had been up all night and wanted sleep. She bathed her face and her eyes, and changed her dress, and went back to her husband's bedside with a kind of fierce determination to hold by him, not to let him die. There was no change in him from what there had been when she left him, and the nurse was half offended by her intrusion. "I assure you, ma'am, I know my duties," she said, "and you'll break down next if you don't mind. Go, there's a dear, and get some sleep; you can't nurse him both by night and day. And there's no change, nothing to make you anxious."

"You are sure of that, nurse?"

"Quite sure. He's quite quiet and comfortable, so far as I can see."

"But they say he has no constitution," said Patty, gazing into the woman's face for comfort.

"Well, Mrs. Piercey; but most times it's the strongest man with whom it goes hardest," the nurse said.

And this gave Patty great consolation; it was the only comfort she had. It was one of those dicta which she had heard often both about children and men, and therefore she received it the more willingly. "It goes harder with the strong ones." That was the very commonest thing to say, and perhaps it was true. The old women often knew better than the doctors, she said to herself. Indeed, there was in her mind a far greater confidence in such a deliverance than in anything the doctors could say.

And nothing could exceed the devotion with which poor Gervase was nursed. His wife was by his

side night and day. She never tired—never wanted repose; was always ready; the most careful and anxious of nurses.

"He's much better to-day, don't you think?" was her greeting to the doctor when he came. And Dr. Bryant said afterwards that Mrs. Piercey looked as if she would have flown at his throat when he looked grave. She could not bear to be contradicted or checked in her hopes. And every day she went downstairs and assured Sir Giles that his son would soon be better.

"We can't expect it to pass in a day," she said, "for it is a very serious attack."

"And he has no stamina, no stamina; we always knew it—we were always told that," said the old gentleman.

Mrs. Piercey looked fiercely at her father-in-law, too. She could not bear to hear this repeated.

"Dear papa," she said, "it comes hardest always on the strongest men."

"God bless you, my dear!" cried old Sir Giles,

falling a-sobbing, as was his wont when his mind was disturbed, "I believe that's true."

Oh, how could he go on living—that old man for whom nobody cared; who did nothing but keep the younger ones out of their own! What had he to live for? Patty wondered, with a wild, yet suppressed rage which no words could express; old, helpless, not able to enjoy anything except that wretched, tedious backgammon, and keeping others out of their own; yet he would live and see Gervase die! He would go on, and on, and see his only child buried, as he had seen his wife, and forget all about it after a week, and play his backgammon, and be guarded by Dunning from every wind that blew. Dunning! Was it Dunning, perhaps, that kept him alive; that knew things which the doctors don't know? It was natural to Patty's education and training to think this, and that some private nostrum would do more than all the drugs in the world.

"Shall I send down a nurse to you for a moment,"

she said to Sir Giles suddenly, "and will you let Dunning come up and look at him?" Dunning could not refuse to go, but he looked at Patty suspiciously, as if she meant to betray him into some trap.

"I don't know nothing about that kind of illness," he said.

"Oh, but you don't know what kind of illness it is till you see him," cried Patty. She hastily led the man to her husband's bedside, and watched his looks while he stood awkwardly, holding as far aloof as he could, looking down upon the half-sleep, half-stupor, in which the patient lay.

"Oh, Dunning, what do you think?"

"I think as he looks very bad," Dunning said, in a subdued and troubled voice.

"That's not what I want you to tell me. I want you to think if there is anything we could give him to rouse him up. What he wants is to be roused up, don't you see? When you are roused to see the need of it, you can do a deal

for yourself, however ill you may be. What could we give him, Dunning, to rouse him up?"

Dunning could see nothing but some unintelligible trap that was being laid for him in those words.

"I'm not a doctor," he said, sullenly. "I know what's good for Sir Giles, as is chronic; but I don't know anything about the like of this. I should say there's nothing to give him, but just wait and—trust in God," said Dunning.

"Oh, God!" said Patty, in the unintentional profanity of her hot terror and distress. He was so far off; so difficult to get at; so impossible to tell what His meaning was! whereas she had felt that this man might have known something—some charm, some medicine which could be given at once.

"You had better go back to Sir Giles," she said, shortly, and sat down herself by that hopeless bed. But it was not hopeless to Patty. As soon as Dunning was gone she began to take a little

comfort even from what he had said: "Wait, and trust in God." Patty knew all that could be said in words about trusting in God, and she knew many collects and prayers; but, somehow, even she felt that to ask God by any means, whatever happened, to exert His power that she might be Lady Piercey in the end—that the old man might die and the young man live for this purpose—was a thing not thought of in any collect: her mouth was stopped, and she could not find a word to say.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

IT was with nothing less than consternation that the county received the intelligence of Gervase Piercey's death, which flew from house to house nobody could tell how; told by the early postman on his rounds, conveyed with the morning's rolls from the villages, brought up at a pace much accelerated by the importance of the news by grooms with letter-bags, and every kind of messenger. Gervase Piercey was dead: the Softy of the village—poor Sir Giles' only son. Though he was a fool, he was Sir Giles' only child! There were ladies in the county who had wondered wistfully whether, if he were "taken up" by some capable woman, he might not have been so licked into shape as to have justified that capable woman

in marrying him to her daughter. Nobody had been so brave as to do it, but several had speculated on the subject, thinking that, after all, to preserve a good old family from the dust, and hand on Greyshott to better heirs, might be worthy the sacrifice of a few years of a girl's life. These ladies, though none of them had been brave enough to take the necessary steps, felt doubly outraged by his marriage when it took place; and the consternation in their minds at the receipt of this last piece of news was tinged with something like remorse. Oh, if they had but had the courage! Maud or Mabel, if she had been forced to marry that unfortunate simpleton, would, as they now saw, have been so swiftly released! but it is needless to go back upon what might have been, after the contrary events. And now what a conjunction was this—what a terrible position for the poor old father! his only son taken from him; left alone with that woman in the house! Nobody knew anything about Patty; it was enough that she was

Patty, and that she had married that poor half-witted young man. And then the question arose in a great many houses—What were they to do? They had not called upon Mrs. Gervase—nobody had called upon Mrs. Gervase—but how were they to approach Sir Giles now, with that woman there? Poor old Sir Giles! he had allowed her to take possession of his house for his son's sake, no doubt, and for peace, not being strong enough for any struggle, and what would he do now? Would he send her away, and thus be accessible again to his old friends, or what would he do? This question occupied the mind of the neighbourhood very much for the day or two after the news was received, and it became apparent that something must be done. The old man could not be left alone in his trouble, unsolaced by any friendly word; the details must be inquired into—the time of the funeral, so that proper respect might be paid. Many people sent cards, and servants to make the necessary inquiries, but one or two gentlemen went themselves.

Lord Hartmore in particular, who as virtually the head of the county, and actually a very old friend, felt it incumbent upon him to carry his sympathy and condolence in person. Lord Hartmore was received by a young lady in very deep mourning, already covered in crape from top to toe, and crowned with the most orthodox of widows' caps. She was very quiet, but very firm.

"I cannot allow any one to disturb Sir Giles," she said; "he is very much broken down. Absolute quiet, and as little reference as possible to the details of our great trouble, are indispensable, the doctor says."

Lord Hartmore was much surprised at the self-possession of the young woman, and at her language.

"The tone of the voice was of course a little uneducated," he said, "but she talked, my dear, she talked as well as you or I, and made use of the same expressions!"

"Why, what other expressions could any one make use of?" cried Lady Hartmore.

"I said an old friend like myself should surely be made an exception; but she didn't give in. 'My father-in-law has seen none of his old friends for a long time,' she said quite pointedly; 'he is not accustomed to seeing them. It would be a great agitation to him, and I am charged to see that he is not disturbed.' I assure you," said Lord Hartmore, "I didn't know what to say. We have all deserted him in the most horrid way. The young woman was right: to put in an appearance just at this moment, not having shown since poor Lady Piercey's funeral, might quite probably be very discomposing to the old man!"

"And what about the funeral?" was the next question that was asked.

"There, again," said Lord Hartmore, "I can't blame her. She's met with no attention from us, and why should she take any trouble about us? The funeral is to be on Thursday; but she said, 'My father-in-law will not go. I can't put him to such a trial. I will follow my husband to his

grave myself, and I don't know that I wish anybody else to take the trouble.' She carries things with a very high hand, but I can't blame her, I can't blame her," Lord Hartmore said. It must be added that the consternation of the county neighbours was increased by this report. Their consternation was increased, and so were their doubts as to what they should do; but at the same time their curiosity was piqued, and a certain sense of compunction rose in their bosoms. If it was merely the recklessness of disappointment and despair which moved Patty, or if it was severe and subtle calculation, at least her policy was wonderfully successful. There was a large attendance at poor Gervase's funeral, at which she appeared alone, occupying by herself the blackest of mourning coaches, and in such a depth of crape as never widow had worn before. But Mrs. Gervase was exceedingly *digne* in her woe. She made no hysterical demonstration. She had none of her own people in attendance upon her, as had been expected, though

Richard Hewitt occupied a conspicuous position in the crowd, thrusting himself in among the county gentlemen in the procession. Patty stood by the grave all alone, and saw her hopes buried with real anguish. She fulfilled the part so well that Lord Hartmore (a candid man, as has been seen), could not contain himself for pity, and stepped quietly forward to her side and offered his arm. She took it silently, but with a trembling and evident need of support which went to the good gentleman's heart. Poor thing, poor thing! then she had been really fond of him after all. Lord Hartmore reflected silently that to a girl in her position the defects of the poor half-witted fellow might not be so apparent, and if she loved him, strange as that seemed! He led her back to her carriage with an almost fatherly friendliness, the whole village looking on, all the other gentlemen a little ashamed of themselves, and Richard Hewitt's red face blazing through the crowd. "My wife will call to inquire for you," he said, as he put

her in, "and I hope that I may be admitted soon to see my dear old friend, Sir Giles." Patty answered only by a bow. It was all that could be expected of the poor young new-made widow, who had fulfilled this sad duty alone with no one to stand by her. The spectators were all impressed, and even overawed, by Patty's loneliness and her crape and her youth.

And she did in reality feel her downfall too much to get the good of Lord Hartmore's civility, or indulge the elation which sprang up in her mind, instinctively accompanying the consciousness that everybody saw her leaning upon Lord Hartmore's arm. Ah! what a thing that would have been a month ago! but now was it only a tantalising flutter before her eyes of what might have been, at present when all the reality was over? It would be unkind to Patty to say that no regret for poor Gervase in his own person was in her heart. She had not been without affection for Gervase, and the thought of his early death had

been very sad to her at the moment. Poor Gervase, so young, and just when better things might have been in store for him! But the mind very soon familiarises itself with such an event when there is no very strong sentiment in question. It was not Gervase, but herself, whom Patty chiefly mourned. After all she had done and all she had gone through, to think that this was what was left to her—a position as insecure as that of any governess or companion, at the mercy of an old and ailing man, with one of her enemies at his ear. Oh, that it should be that old man, that useless, ailing old man, that should live and Gervase die! There seemed no justice in it, no equity, no sense of right. Sir Giles had lived his life and had all its good things, and there was no advantage to him or to any one in his continuance; whereas Gervase, Gervase! He, poor fellow, had it in his power to make his wife Lady Piercey, to secure her position so that nobody could touch it. And it was he that had gone, and not his father!

Patty wept very real tears as she drove slowly home alone—real! they were tears of fire, and made her eyelids burn. Oh, how different from the last time when she drove along that same road, thrust in anyhow, clambering up without a hand to help her, sitting by Dunning's side—but with all the world before her, and the sense of a coming triumph in her veins! Patty did not deceive herself about her position now. A son's widow is a very different thing from a son's wife. The latter must be received, and has her certain place; the other is a mere dependant, to be neglected at pleasure. And it all rested with Sir Giles what was to become of her. He might keep her there as the mistress of his house, or he might make her a little allowance and send her away, desiring to see no more of her. Patty was altogether dependent, she felt, on the caprice of the old man. She had as good as nobody but he in the world, for she said to herself that nothing would induce her ever to speak to her father

again, who had murdered Gervase and all her hopes. She would never look at him with her free will, never speak to him. That he should have dared to come to the funeral was a sin the more. Never, never! Patty said to herself she would rather go out to service, rather starve! These five months had placed a gulf between her and the Seven Thorns which nothing could ever bridge over. If it was suggested to her that she should return home, as young widows often do, she would say that she had no home, and it would be true. She would rather be a servant, rather starve!

And then her mind went back to Sir Giles. What would he do with her? The old man liked her, she felt sure. And she had been good to him. Whatever her motives had been, whether they would bear scrutiny or not, she had been good to him. She had kept pain away from him as far as she could. She had taken care of all his comforts. She had not permitted him to be

disturbed. Dunning and all the rest would have thought it essential that he should go to the funeral and undergo all the misery and excitement of that ceremony. But Patty had prevented that. He had reason to be grateful to her; but would he be grateful? This was the tremendous question. Would he keep her there as the mistress of his house, or would he send her away? Patty had in her jewel-case, carefully locked up, a letter from Margaret Osborne to her uncle, which she thought it wisest to keep back. If Sir Giles received it, it might make him think that Mrs. Osborne was the best mistress for his house, which she was not, Patty felt sure. She put it aside, saying to herself that some time, when the excitement was over and everything had settled down, she would give it—but not now: to what purpose now? Poor Sir Giles wanted to forget his trouble, not to have it forced upon him by condolences. Margaret had written to Patty also a short note full of sorrow for poor Gervase, and asking whether it would be

desirable that she should come to Greyshott for his funeral; to which Patty had replied explaining that everything was to be very quiet in consequence of the condition of "dear papa." "It is he that must be considered in everything," Patty wrote; "I have the doctor's orders to keep him as much as possible from all emotion. I will bury my dear husband myself. Nobody else, as you know, has ever been very fond of him, and I shall not ask anybody to come for the form's sake. If possible, dear papa is not to be told even the day. He is very broken and miserable, but when he is let alone and not reminded, he forgets." Margaret had accepted this as a refusal of her visit, and she had asked no more. It would have been a painful visit in any case. Colonel Piercey was abroad. There were, therefore, no relations to come to make the occasion more difficult for Patty, and yet there had been no want of "respect." The county magnates had all attended the melancholy funeral—where the young wife

alone was chief mourner. "Why did not Margaret come?" they all asked, and blamed her. But a feeling of sympathy arose for Patty all over the neighbourhood. The doctor spoke with enthusiasm of her devotion as a nurse, and her intelligence and understanding. Poor thing! Poor thing! Whatever her antecedents had been, and however she had acquired that place, she had certainly behaved very well; and now what was to become of her? people asked with pity. It was assumed that she would return to her friends, as other young widows did—though not in this case to her father's house.

If they had but known how anxiously she was herself debating that question as she drove along in her crape and her woe, with the blinds down, and every symptom of desolation! Dunning had not allowed his master to dine out of his own rooms, or to indulge in any diversion in the evening, since the death of his son. If other people did not know or care what was right, Dunning

did, and at all events poor Mr. Gervase should be respected in his own house as long as he lay there. Above all, on the evening of the funeral day, Dunning was determined there should be no relaxation of that rule. He was disposed to think, as were the rest of the servants, that Patty's reign was over; but the others were more wary than Dunning, and did not show any signs of emancipation as yet. He did so with premature exultation, rejecting almost roughly her suggestion that Sir Giles should dine as usual on that gloomy evening. "Master's not equal to it," said Dunning, "and if he was he didn't ought to be. I don't hold with folks that dance and sing the day they've put their belongings in the grave—or eat and drink, it's just the same."

"You forget what the doctor says, that nothing must be allowed to upset him. I hope you don't talk to Sir Giles on—melancholy subjects," Patty said, with all the dignity of her widow's cap.

"I don't know what subjects there can be but

melancholic subjects in this 'ouse of mournin'," Dunning said.

"Then I will come and see him myself," said Patty. She went to Sir Giles' room accordingly, after his too simple dinner had been swallowed, and devoted herself to him.

"I think we'll send Dunning away for a little, dear papa," she said. "We have things to talk of, haven't we?—and Dunning has been on duty a long time, and a little society will make him more cheerful."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Giles," said Dunning, "but whatever some folks may think I don't 'old with being cheerful, not on the day of a funeral."

"What does he say, my dear? what does he say?" said Sir Giles. "But look you here, Dunning, whatever it is I won't have Mrs. Piercey contradicted. Do you hear, sir? Do as Mrs. Piercey tells you," and he struck his stick upon the floor.

Dunning in consternation withdrew, for when

Sir Giles was roused he was not to be trifled with.

"She's found out some d——d trick to come over the old man," he said in the housekeeper's room to which he retired. But this was a mistake; for it was Sir Giles himself who had invented the trick. He turned to Patty with great tenderness when the man disappeared, and took her by both hands and drew her to a chair beside him.

"My dear," he said, "I've forgotten, like an old sinner, what Meg Osborne told me. I've been allowing you to do all sorts of things and wear yourself out. But it sha'n't happen again, it sha'n't happen again. Now that my poor dear boy is gone we must be more careful than ever—for it's our last hope both for you and for me to have an heir for the old house."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IT was Sir Giles himself who had found this charm which had so great an effect on the after-history of Greyshott. Patty, among other qualities which were not so praiseworthy, had the almost fierce modesty of the young Englishwoman, and would not have spoken on such a subject to a man, even so harmless a person as an old man like Sir Giles, for any inducement. She did not even understand what he meant at first, and the same impulse of *farouche* modesty made her ashamed to explain, or do more than blush deeply and remonstrate, "Oh, dear papa!" as she would have done probably in any case, whether his supposition had been false or true. The old gentleman in his melancholy and confused musings over Gervase,

had suddenly remembered, the thought being recalled by some merest trifle of association, the hurrahs of little Osy which had mingled with his own feeble cheer on some forgotten occasion. He remembered it suddenly as the strangest contrast to his feelings now. What had the old father, desolate and childless, to cheer about? What had he heard that could have produced that cheer? It was when Meg was going away—when she had told him she was going to take Osy away from him. That was nothing to cheer about. What was it that had made him forget Osy, but which the dear little fellow had caught up and shouted over, though it was an unkindness to himself? and then he recollected all at once. What Mrs. Osborne had said had been the most common and ordinary wish that children might arise in the old house, which was the most natural thing, the most certainly to be expected. She had meant no more: but Sir Giles had at once attributed to Meg a knowledge which was at the moment impossible, without

reflecting either that she was the last person to receive the confidence of Patty. He forgot now that it was months since this had been said, and only remembered that it had been said, and that the prospect was like life from death. Life from death! That was what it would be—from his dead son an heir, in whom the old house might blossom and grow glad again. He took up the idea where he had dropped it with a sudden exhilaration which drove away all sorrow. An heir to the old house, a thing all made of hope, with none of poor Gervase's deficiencies, a being whom the old man fondly hoped to "make a man of" even yet before he died.

And it would not be too much to say that the first feeling of Patty, when she understood what the old gentleman meant, was one of consternation. She did not know how to answer him, how to tell him that she had no such hope. Her lips were closed partly by the tradition of silence on such subjects which an unsophisticated Englishwoman

seldom surmounts, and partly because she was so utterly astonished and taken aback by the suggestion. She did not even see the advantage in it, nor how it placed this feeble old man whose life hung on a thread in her hands. It was not till after she had left him and was alone, and could think, that these advantages occurred to Patty ; and there was probably no suggestion of a treacherous kind which it would have seemed to her so impossible to make use of. The scruples of life are very much things of circumstance, that seeming quite legitimate and right to one which is the height of immodesty and indelicacy to another. Patty had one distinct object in her mind, now that all her hopes were over, which was to induce her father-in-law, by whatever means were possible, to make a provision for her. He was really, she felt, the only one to whom she could now cling, her sole support and protection, and she meant to be also his protector, to take care of him as he had never been taken care of before. All this she steadfastly intended,

meaning nothing but good to the ailing and desolate old man; but she also intended that he should provide for her, as was her right as his son's wife. Should Sir Giles die at the present moment, Patty was strongly and painfully aware that she would be in no way the better for having taken that step which had seemed so prodigious a one, which had raised her so high above all her antecedents and belongings, by becoming Gervase Piercey's wife. She was Mrs. Piercey, but she was without a penny, poorer by the burden of that name than Patty Hewitt could ever have been. Her first duty, her first determination was to be provided for, in whatever manner it might be most possible to do that. But it is only just to her to say that this way of influencing her father-in-law, and of moving him to do what she wished, had never occurred to her, and even when thus suggested it was very repugnant to her—the last thing she desired to do. But Patty, shut up in her room of widowhood and mourning, with her cap with its long,

white streamers visible upon the table, and everything black about her, even the dressing-gown which she had put on to sit by the fire, and her mind so alert and unfatigued going over everything, speculating how best to pluck from the nettle danger the flower of safety, could not shut out the suggestion from her thoughts. It might even yet prove to be so, she said to herself, blushing hotly, even though she was alone. And if not, why shouldn't she permit Sir Giles to think so? It would give him a great deal of pleasure, poor old gentleman. It would tide him over the worst time, the immediate crisis of his son's death, and it would double her every claim upon him, and make it more than ever necessary that he should put her at once beyond the reach of want or suffering of any kind. Still, it was with reluctance that she accepted this weapon which had been thrust into her hand.

Sir Giles could not get his new discovery out of his head. He told Dunning of it before he

went to bed. It was whispered all through the house in the morning; and though some of the women scoffed and declared it to be an invention, yet it was, of course, the most natural idea in the world. From Patty not a word came, either in assertion or denial. She said nothing; she understood no hints; she never allowed herself to be betrayed into reference to her supposed hopes. Sir Giles alone talked to her on the subject with joyous laughter and chuckles, and a loudly expressed determination that she should be obeyed and not contradicted, which was of priceless value to Patty, at the moment when her sway was a little uncertain, and when expectation was strong in the household that she should be displaced and Mrs. Osborne sent for in her place. The household by no means desired Mrs. Osborne in Patty's place. Margaret had been too much and too long a dependant to be popular among the servants; and Patty, who was so peremptory, who had acted upon her convictions, and managed to

turn out everybody whom she feared or disliked, had powerful recommendations in her imperious authority. She meant what she said, and could not be driven or persuaded out of it; and she knew when work was well done, and gave the capable housemaid or cleaner of plate the praise which was his or her due. And she was not unjust, save in the case of personal disrespect to herself, which she never pardoned—a quality which the servants' hall entirely approved. Mrs. Osborne could be got to "look over" anything by judicious entreaty or representation, especially if it was a mere offence against herself, and was less respected and considered in consequence. It was not, therefore, in any way desired that she should take up the reins; yet, all the same, it made a great difference to Patty that Sir Giles had taken it into his head that she must not be contradicted. It established her once more firmly in her seat.

And the little group in the great drawing-room in the evening was all the more cheerful in consequence.

It was, to look at, a forlorn group enough: the old gentleman, more feeble than ever, with Dunning behind his chair, ready to move it according to his caprice, and the young widow in her deep crape, a black spot upon the white and gold of the room. Patty had been requested by Sir Giles to "take that thing off her head," and did so obediently in her father-in-law's presence, though she was far too determined to do her duty by her dead husband to dispense with that symbol of grief on any other occasion. They sat with the backgammon-board between them, playing game after game. There was in Patty's mind unutterable relief from the misery and suspense which she had suffered in Gervase's lifetime; but other thoughts, scarcely less anxious, occupied her fully. Yet she talked to the old gentleman with an endeavour to please and amuse him which was heroic. It was a great strain upon Patty. She could talk of herself without difficulty; she could have talked, had she thought it expedient, of her

father and aunt, and their sins against her; she could have talked of Gervase; but these subjects being all tabooed, it was very hard upon Patty to find anything to say. She knew nobody whom Sir Giles knew. She could not tell him the news, for she knew none, except the affairs of the village, which interested herself, and which she seized on greedily from every possible channel. But Patty could not talk on any other subject. She had to talk about the backgammon, to remind him of the wonderful stroke he had played last night, and the wonderful luck he had always; and how it was such an amazing chance for her to play, a poor ignorant thing as she was, with such an accomplished player as dear papa. This was but a scanty thread to spin through night after night, and had it not been made up so much of applause it is very doubtful how long it would have sufficed. But there is nothing of which the ordinary mind can swallow so much as praise; and when the interest of life is reduced to a

game, the player thinks as much of his lucky chances and his skilful movements as if it were something of the highest importance; so that, on the whole, this talk did very well and kept them going. But still Patty had not ventured to introduce her great subject—that provision for herself which she felt became more and more important every day; for who could tell whether any morning Sir Giles might not be found to have passed away from this life altogether, or to be enclosed in the living tomb of paralysis, unable to act or devise anything more.

Lady Hartmore did not call next day as her lord had promised, but she did call, and was received by Patty in full panoply of mourning and with a heart that beat loudly with suppressed excitement. Lady Hartmore was neither so much touched by the sight of the young widow, nor so sympathetic as her husband had been. She examined Patty curiously, with searching eyes, full not only of the superciliousness of rank, but of

the experience of a much older woman, which Mrs. Gervase would have opposed with defiance, but for the false pretence which, though she had never put it forth, and though it had arisen most innocently, gave her something of a sensation of guilt. This, however, though Patty was not aware of it, did her service with the great lady. It subdued her natural determination, and gave an apparent softness to her aspect which did not belong to it by nature. Lady Hartmore put a great many questions to the young widow: did she think of remaining at Greyshott, which must be so melancholy a place nowadays? did she think this last shock had very much shaken Sir Giles? did she not feel it a great responsibility to be left in charge of him? and many other such questions. To these Patty replied very properly that she could not possibly leave Sir Giles alone; that he had been very kind to her, like a father, and that nothing would induce her to desert him; that he was very well on the whole, "quite

himself," and that she tried to be as cheerful as she could on his account. She took no notice of the question about leaving Greyshott. It was not indeed necessary to reply to it, when she had already made that answer about the impossibility of leaving Sir Giles.

"But you must want somebody to speak to,—somebody to take care of you, too," said the great lady, meaning more than she said.

"Oh, no," said Patty; "I have always had very good health, I have never been delicate. I am very fond of my dear father-in-law. He does not want very much—he is very easily amused, and so kind, always so kind. We do very well all by ourselves—as well," Patty added, with a sigh, "as in the circumstances we could possibly do."

What could any one say to such perfect sentiments? Lady Hartmore was baffled in her inquisitions. "Still," she said, "I should have thought that some one who was a relation—some one of your own family—a woman to speak to——"

'I am sure," said Patty, "that Lady Hartmore knows my family are not likely to be welcome at Greyshott; and I have but an old aunt who was never married, and therefore has no experience." She blushed as she said this, and Lady Hartmore was very quick to take up the inference for which she was prepared. But Patty was too wise to be led into any further disclosures or to answer any of the searching questions which her ladyship proceeded to put.

"How did you find the poor thing?" her husband asked when he joined her in the carriage—for Lord Hartmore had visited Sir Giles while Lady Hartmore thus did her duty by Patty.

"I found the poor thing very well and extremely well able to take care of herself," said the lady. "I don't think you need waste so much sympathy upon her." But Lord Hartmore was full of feeling, and could not be persuaded to take this view.

"The poor old fellow is quite exultant," he said.

"It is a wonderful blessing for him, whatever you may think of it in any other connection. It has given him a new lease."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Lady Hartmore.

"Oh, come!" cried her husband. "It is one thing to trust your own judgment, which is an excellent one, I don't gainsay it—but quite another to set it up against those who must know the facts best. By the way, he bewildered me by saying Meg told him. Has Meg been here?"

"Not that I know of; but she may have made a hurried run to see her uncle. If Meg told him——" said Lady Hartmore, in subdued tones. She added after a pause, "I shall think more of her if Meg is her *confidante*."

Thus on the whole the impression was favourable to Patty, even though the grounds upon which it was formed were false.

After this visit Patty took her first active step towards the accomplishment of her desires. Sir

Giles, who had been pleased with the Hartmore visit and augured great things from it, opened the way by asking if she had not liked Lady Hartmore and found her kind? "A nice woman, a good-hearted woman," he said.

"Yes, dear papa; but one thing she said gave me a great deal of pain; for she seemed to think I should go back to my family, and leave you," she said, putting her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Leave me? nonsense!" said Sir Giles, "I sha'n't let you leave me, my dear. I shouldn't have sent you away, anyhow, you may be sure; no, no, I shouldn't have sent you away; but in present circumstances, my dear—Why, you're all our hope at Greyshott, you're all our stand-by, you're—you're our sheet-anchor."

"How kind, how kind you are, dear papa! I try to do my best to keep everything straight, though I never could pretend to be of so much consequence as that. But people feel free to speak," said Patty, with a sigh, "because they know I have no ground

to stand on. I wasn't dear Gervase's equal when he married me, and there were no settlements or anything, you know; and I am quite dependent, quite dependent, as much as a servant—but without any wages," Patty added, with a faint laugh.

It was at one of the rare moments when Dunning was absent, intervals of which Patty eagerly took advantage. Dunning was, indeed, a thorn in her flesh, though after mature deliberation she had decided that it was wiser to retain him, that he might take the responsibility of Sir Giles' health.

"Dependent!" cried Sir Giles, "nonsense, nonsense! A servant, my dear? Don't let me hear such a word again. No, no; no, no; never could have been so, for you've been quite a daughter, quite a daughter. But, in the present circumstances——"

"Ah, dear papa, don't let us think of that. I love to be with you—it's the only comfort I have; but still I can't forget that I have no provision. I might have to go away and work for my living, if somebody were to over-persuade you, or if you were

—ill or anything. A Mrs. Piercey having to work for her living—or perhaps take a situation! I shouldn't mind it for myself, but when I think, dear papa, of your name."

"Good Lord!" cried Sir Giles, "you must be out of your mind, my dear, to think of such a thing. My poor boy's wife, and a good wife to him, too, if he had but lived to profit by it. That's all nonsense, all nonsense, my dear."

"Ah, dear papa! but it would not be nonsense if I had not you to trust to," cried Patty, laying her hand upon his arm. "It is you who are my sheet-anchor. I have not a penny of my own, not even to pay for my mourning; and I can't earn any for myself, don't you know, because of dear Gervase and your name—the first in the county. I couldn't take in needlework, could I, in Greyshott? and a woman, you know, has always little expenses——"

"My dear," said Sir Giles, "have all the fal-lals you can set your face to, and send in the bills to me; you've nothing to do but send in the bills to me."

"Dear papa! as if I ever doubted your kindness. It is not fal-lals I am thinking of; this," cried Patty, holding up her crape, "is not much of a fal-lal, is it? But what I am thinking of is the time to come, when I shall require to have a little provision or income or salary of my own."

"Do you mean," cried the old man, in the half-sobbing tone into which he was betrayed by any emotion, "when—when—I'm no more; when I'm dead? Is that what you mean?"

Patty stooped down and laid her face against the large old limp hand, which reposed on the arm of Sir Giles' chair. "I hope I'll be dead, too, before that," she said; "for what should I have to live for then?"

This, it need not be pointed out, was no answer to his question; but it seemed so, and Sir Giles was much affected and sobbed, which Patty echoed with a deep sigh or two which seemed to give a more refined expression to his feeling. He put his other hand upon her head.

"Please God, we'll see better days before that," he said.

And then Dunning came back, and a new game was begun.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IT was not till some days after this, that Sir Giles referred to the subject again. Patty thought it had entirely failed to make any impression on his mind, and that she must herself renew the conversation, when he surprised her by saying suddenly, as if there had been no interval, "It won't be necessary, my dear, it won't be necessary. As his mother, everything will be in your hands."

"Dear papa!" she cried, with a quite natural start; "how you frightened me!"

"I don't want to frighten you, my dear; anything but that—anything but that! But you must see that any little arrangements we might make would be all needless, quite needless. Of course, everything will go to the natural heir. There will

probably be a long minority, for you know, my dear, with the best intentions in the world, an old fellow like me——though I would give half my kingdom to see him come of age — half my kingdom! But no, no, that's a selfish thought; for I should wish him to have the property unimpaired, if not added to—if not added to. You'll take great care of it, I am sure. You're quite a woman of brains." Sir Giles spoke very fast, to get through this long effort of thought and consideration before Dunning came back. Then he added, with his usual mingled outburst of laughing and sobbing, patting her arm with his large old nerveless hand, "So you see it's needless, needless, my dear, for everything will be in your hands."

"Dear papa!" cried Patty. She was silent for some time in confusion and embarrassment. Then, "There's nothing certain in this world," she said.

"What, what?" cried Sir Giles. "Nothing's happened—nothing's happened, my dear? I hope you don't mean to tell me that?"

"Nothing has happened, dear papa," cried Patty, with a painful flush upon her face. She had not meant to deceive him, and certainly not in this way. It was indeed hard upon her that she had, without any fault of hers, this fiction to keep up. "But there's nothing certain in this world," she said. "Who would have thought five months ago that I should need to be thinking of a little provision for myself—I, that was Gervase's wife, and had no need to think of anything? I married him without a thought of having anything settled on me, or even wanting a penny but what he gave me." Patty put her handkerchief to her eyes to absorb some real tears, for though her grief for poor Gervase could scarcely be expected to be very profound, her pity for herself was sincere and lasting. "Dearest papa! I can't bear to ask for myself. I've always been used to work, and I could get my own living at any time. It is just that I can't bear, being Mrs. Piercey, that I should have to do it in that way—Gervase's widow, with *your* name."

"Don't, my dear, don't! For goodness' sake don't agitate yourself! Don't cry, my dear, don't cry!" said Sir Giles, anxiously.

"Oh, I wouldn't cry if—if I could help it. I would do nothing to vex you, dear papa. But when I think of all that has happened—oh, who should know so well as I that there's nothing certain in this world!"

"My dear, my dear, I'll send for Pownceby to-morrow. You must not upset yourself—you mustn't, indeed. What should I do, and everybody, if—if anything was to happen?" Sir Giles cried. And he became so excited in his anxiety to calm her, that Patty was compelled to conquer herself and regain her self-command. She looked up with a mournful smile from her pocket-handkerchief. "Dear papa," she said, "we are two of us that mustn't do that. If you get upset it will upset me, and that will upset you still more: so we must each hold up for the sake of the other. Suppose we have another game?'

"You always know exactly what I want," said the old gentleman, his sob turning into a laugh, as his laugh so often turned into a sob. There was not, in fact, much difference between the two; and the rest of the evening was passed as usual in admiring exclamations on Patty's part as to his wonderful play and wonderful luck, so that even Dunning did not suspect that there had been anything more.

Patty reminded her father-in-law next morning when she went to him, as she had begun to make a practice of doing, to see if he wanted any letters written, that he had spoken of some Mr. Pownceby who was to be written to. "I don't know who Mr. Pownceby is, but you said something about him, dear papa!" And the result was that in a day or two Mr. Pownceby came, the family solicitor, whom Patty indeed did not know, but of whose faculties and position in the matter she had a shrewd guess. She had to entertain the little gentleman to luncheon after he had been closeted with Sir

Giles all the morning ; and Mr. Pownceby was much impressed by Mrs. Piercey's dignified air, and her crape and her widow's cap. "I suppose it's within the range of possibilities that a girl in that position might be fond even of a poor fellow like Gervase Piercey," he said to himself doubtfully ; and he made himself very agreeable to the young widow. He informed her that he had received instructions to charge the estate with an annuity of a thousand pounds a year for her, of which the payments were to begin at once. "A very proper arrangement," he said, and he was impressed by the composure with which Patty received the information. She was not indeed at all elated by it. A thousand pounds a year was a great thing for Patty Hewitt of the Seven Thorns. She would have thought it a princely revenue when she became Gervase Piercey's wife ; but a few months' familiarity with the expenditure of Greyshott had made a great change in Patty's views. To descend into a small house like the Rectory, for instance (she had once thought

the Rectory a palace), and to do without a carriage, was far from an agreeable prospect. "How shall I ever do without a carriage?" Patty said to herself, and she thought with scorn of the little basket-work pony-chaise which was all the rector could afford. Was it possible that she should ever come down to that? Mr. Pownceby, when he went away, held her hand for a moment, and asked whether a very old friend of the family, who had known poor dear Gervase from his birth, might be permitted to say how pleased and thankful he was that there were hopes—— ? which made Sir Giles so very happy, poor old gentleman? "And I fear, I fear, my dear old friend has not many days before him," the lawyer said; "he's quite clear in his mind, but it was not to be expected that a worn-out constitution could bear all those shocks one after another. We'll not have him long, Mrs. Piercey, we'll not have him long!"

"Does the doctor say so?" asked Patty.

"My dear lady, the doctor says he has the best of

nursing; and everything so much the better for a lady in the house." It was with this *douceur* that the solicitor took his leave, being a man that liked to please everybody. And there can be no doubt that a softened feeling arose in the whole neighbourhood about Patty, who was said to be such a good daughter to Sir Giles. "Thrown over her own people altogether—no crowd of barbarians about the house, as one used to fear; and quite gives herself up to her father-in-law; plays backgammon with him half the day, which can't be lively for a young woman; and expects——." These last were the most potent words of all.

Patty was, indeed, very good to her father-in-law, and that not altogether for policy, but partly from feeling; for he had been kind to her, and she was grateful. The winter was dreary and long, and there were sometimes weeks together when Sir Giles could not get out, even into the garden, for that forlorn little drive of his in the wheeled chair. Patty gave herself up to his service with a devotion which was

above all praise. She bore his fretfulness when weakness and suffering made the old man querulous. She was always at hand, whatever he wanted. She looked after his food and his comfort, often in despite of Dunning and to the great offence of the cook, but both these functionaries had to submit to Patty's will. Had she not carried everything with a very high hand, it is possible that her footing might not have been so sure; for the women soon penetrated the fiction, which was not indeed of Patty's creation, and Dunning even ventured upon hints to Sir Giles that all was not as he thought. The old gentleman, however, got weaker day by day; one little indulgence after another dropped from him. March was unusually blustery, and April very wet. These were good reasons why he should not go out; that he was more comfortable in his chair by the fire. Then he got indifferent to the paper, which Dunning always read to him in the morning, and only took an interest in the scraps of news which Patty repeated to him later on.

"Why did not Dunning read me that, if it is in the paper? The fellow gets lazier and lazier; he never reads the paper to me now! He thinks I forget!" When Dunning would have remonstrated Patty checked him with a look.

"You must never contradict Sir Giles!" she said to him aside.

"And he says I'm never to contradict *her*!" Dunning said indignantly in the housekeeper's room, where he went for consolation; "between them a man ain't allowed to say a word!"

The women all cried out with scorn that Sir Giles would find out different from *that* one o' these days.

"Then he'll just die," said Dunning. Things had come to a very mournful pass in the old melancholy house.

By degrees the backgammon, too, fell out of use. Patty sat with him still in the evening, but it was in his own room, often by his bedside, and many, many conversations took place between them, unheard by any one. Dunning would catch a word now and then,

as he went and came, and gathered that Sir Giles was sometimes telling her of things he would like to have done, and that sometimes she was telling him of things she would wish to be done.

"As if she had aught to do with it!" Dunning said with indignation. Dunning, observing everything, imagined, too, that Sir Giles began to grow anxious about those expectations which were so long delayed. His attendant sometimes heard mutterings of calculation and broken questioning with himself from the old gentleman.

"It's a long time to wait—a long time—a long time!" he said.

"What is a long time, Sir Giles?" Dunning ventured to ask—but was told to hold his tongue for a fool.

One day, towards the end of April, he suddenly roused from a long muse or doze by the fire, and called to Dunning to send a telegram for Pownceby.

"Tell him to come directly. I mayn't be here to-morrow," Sir Giles said.

"Are you thinking of changing the air, Sir Giles?" said the astonished servant.

The rain was pouring in a white blast across the park, bending all the young trees one way, and pattering among the foliage.

"Air!" said the old man; "it's nothing but water; but I'm soon going to move, Dunning, as you say."

"Well, it might do you good, Sir Giles, a little later—when the weather's better."

Sir Giles made no reply, but Dunning heard him muttering: "She always says there's nothing certain in this world."

Mr. Pownceby came as quick as the railway could bring him.

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked of Mrs. Piercey, who met him at the door.

"Oh, I am afraid he's very bad," said Patty; "I am afraid he's not long for this world."

"Why does he want me? Does he want to change his will?"

"I don't know—I don't know. Oh, Mr. Pownceby, I don't know how to say it. I am afraid he is disappointed: that—that you said to me last time——"

"Was not true, I suppose?" said the father of a family, who was not without his experiences, and he looked somewhat sternly at Patty, who was trembling.

"I never said it was," she said. "It was not I. He took it into his head, and I did not know how to contradict him. Oh, don't say to him it's not true! rather, rather let him believe it now. Let him die happy, Mr. Pownceby! Oh, he has been so good to me! Say anything to make him die happy!" Patty cried.

The lawyer was angry and disappointed, too; but Patty's feeling was evidently genuine, and he could not help feeling a certain sympathy with her. Sir Giles was sitting up in bed, ashy white with that pallor of old age which is scarcely increased by death.

"I'm glad you're come in time, Pownceby—very

glad you're come in time. I'm—I'm going to make a move; for change of air, don't you know, as Dunning says. Poor Dunning! he won't get such an easy berth again. My will—that's it. I want to change—my will. Clear it all away, Pownceby—all away, except the little legacies—the servants and that——"

"But not Mrs. Piercey, Sir Giles? If—if she's been the cause of any—disappointment; it isn't her fault."

"Disappointment!" said the old man. "Quite the contrary. She's been just the reverse. It was a good day for me when she came to the house. No, I don't mean that it was a good day, for it was my poor wife's funeral; but if anybody could have made a man of Gervase she would have done it. She would have done it, Pownceby. Yes, yes; sweep her away! sweep everybody away! I give and bequeath Greyshott and all I have—all I have, don't you know? Gerald Piercey can have the pictures if he likes; she won't care for them to——"

The old man was seized with a fit of coughing, which interrupted him at this interesting moment. Mr. Pownceby sat with his pen in his hand and many speculations in his mind. To cut off his daughter-in-law's little income even while he praised her so! And who was the person to whom it was all to be left without regard for the rest? Meg Piercey, perhaps, who was one of the nearest, though she had never been supposed to have any chance. The lawyer sat with his eyes under his spectacles intently fixed upon Sir Giles, and with many remonstrances in his mind. Mrs. Gervase might be wrong to have filled the poor man with false hopes; but to leave her to the tender mercies of Meg Piercey, whom she had virtually turned out of the house, would be cruel. Sir Giles began to speak before his coughing fit was over.

"She says, poor thing," and here he coughed, "she s—says that there's nothing—nothing certain in this world. She's right, Pownceby—she's right. She—generally is."

"There's not much risk in saying that, Sir Giles."

"No, it's true enough—it's true enough. It might grow up like its father. God grant it otherwise. You remember our first boy, Pownceby? Wasn't that a fellow! as bold as a lion and yet so sweet. His poor mother never got over it—never; nor I neither, nor I neither—though I never made any fuss."

Was the old man wandering in his mind?

"I hoped it would have been like him," said Sir Giles, with a sob. "I had set my heart on that. But none of us can tell. There's nothing certain, as she says. It might grow up like its father. I'll make all safe, anyhow, Pownceby. Put it down, put it down—everything to——"

"Sir Giles! to whom? Everything to——?"

"Why, Pownceby, old fellow! Ah, to be sure he doesn't know the first name. Sounds droll a little, those two names together. Quick! I want it signed and done with, in case I should, as Dunning says—don't you know, change the air."

"But, Sir Giles!" cried the lawyer, in consterna-

tion: "Sir Giles!" he added, "you don't mean, I hope, to leave the property away from the family and the natural heir?"

"What a muddlehead you are, Pownceby!" said Sir Giles, radiant. "Why, It will be the natural heir. It will be the head of the family. And it will grow up like our first boy, please God. But nothing is certain; and supposing it was to turn out like its father? My poor boy, my poor Gervase! It wasn't as if we weren't fond of him, you know, Pownceby. His poor mother worshipped the very ground he trod on. But one can't help hoping everything that's good for It, and none of the drawbacks —none of the drawbacks. Make haste, Pownceby; draw it out quick! You're quicker than any clerk you have, when you'll take trouble. Nothing's certain in this world; let's make it all safe, Pownceby, however things may turn out."

"I'll take your instructions, Sir Giles—though I don't like the job. But it's a serious matter, you know, a very serious matter. Hadn't you better

think it over again? I'll have the will drawn out in proper form, and come back to-morrow to have it signed."

"And how can you tell that you'll find me to-morrow? I may have moved on and got a change of air, as Dunning says. No, Pownceby, draw up something as simple as you like, and I'll sign it to-day."

The solicitor met Mrs. Piercey again in the hall as he went out. He had not been so kind on his arrival as she had found him before; but now he had a gloomy countenance, almost a scowl on his face, and would have pushed past her without speaking, with a murmur about the train which would wait for no man. Patty, however, was not the woman to be pushed aside. She insisted upon hearing his opinion how Sir Giles was.

"I think with you that he is very ill," he replied, gloomily, "and in mind as well as in body——"

"Oh no," cried Patty, "not that, not that! as clear in his head, Mr. Pownceby, as you or me."

He gave her a dark look, which Patty did not

understand. "Anyhow," he said, "he's an old man, Mrs. Piercey, and I don't think life has many charms for him. We have no right to repine."

Mr. Pownceby had known Sir Giles Piercey all his life, and liked him perhaps as well as he liked any one out of his own family. But to repine—why should he repine, or Patty any more, who stood anxiously reading his face, and only more anxious not to betray her anxiety than she was to hear what, perhaps, he might tell? But he did not do this. Nor would he continue the conversation, nor be persuaded to sit down. He asked that he might be sent for, at any moment, if Sir Giles expressed a wish to see him again. "I will come at a moment's notice—by telegraph," he said, with a gloomy face, that intended no jest. And he added still more gloomily, "I believe it will be for your advantage, too."

"I am thinking of my father-in-law and not of my advantage," Patty said with indignation. The anxiety in her mind was great, and she could not divine what he meant.

CHAPTER XL.

MARGARET OSBORNE had lost no time in settling down in a cottage proportioned to her means, with her little boy and the one maid, who did all that was necessary, yet as little of everything as was practicable, for the small household. The place she had chosen was not very far from Greyshott, yet in the impractability of country roads, especially during the winter, to those who are out of railway range, almost as far apart as if it had been at the other end of England. The district altogether had not attained the popularity it now enjoys, and the village was very rural indeed, with nobody in it above the rank of the rustic tradesmen and traffickers, except the inevitable parson and the doctor. The vicar's wife seized with enthusiasm

upon the new inhabitant as a representative of society, and various others of the neighbouring clergy-women made haste to call upon a woman so well connected, as did also the squire of the place, or, at least, the ladies belonging to him. But Mrs. Osborne had no such thirst for society as to trudge along the muddy roads to return their visits, and her income did not permit even the indulgence of the jogging pony and homely clothes-basket of a little carriage, in which many of the clerical neighbours found great comfort. She had to stay at home perforce, knowing no enlivenment of her solitude, except tea at the vicarage on rare occasions. Tea at the vicarage in earlier and homelier days would have meant a quiet share of the cheerful evening refreshments and amusements, when the guest was made one of the family party, and all its natural interests and occupations placed before her. But tea, which is an afternoon performance and means a crowd of visitors collected from all quarters, in which the natural household is altogether swamped, and the

guest sees not her friends, but their friends or distant acquaintances, of whom she neither has nor wishes to have any knowledge—is a very different matter. At Greyshott there had been occasional heavy dinner-parties, in which it was Margaret's part to exert herself for the satisfaction, at all events, of old friends, most of whom called her Meg, and had known her from her girlhood. These were not, perhaps, very entertaining evenings, but they were better than the modern fashion. She lived, accordingly, very much alone with Osy, and the maid-of-all-work, whom, knowing so little as she did of the practical arrangements of a household, she had to train, with many misadventures, which would have been amusing had there been anybody with whom she could have laughed over her own blunders and Jane's ignorance. But alas! there was no one. Osy was too young to be amused when his pudding was burned or his potatoes like stones. He was more likely to cry, and his mother's anxiety for his health and comfort took the fun out of the ludicrous, yet painful, errors

of her unaccustomed housekeeping. It depends so much on one's surroundings whether these failures are ludicrous or tragical. In some cases they are an enlivenment of life, in others an exaggeration of all its troubles. These, however, were but temporary; for Mrs. Osborne, though she knew nothing to begin with, and did not even know whether she was capable of learning, was, in fact, too capable a woman, though she was not aware of it, to be long overcome by troubles of this kind; and it soon became a pleasure to her and enlivenment of her life to look after her own little domestic arrangements, and carry forward the education of her little maid-servant. There was not, after all, very much to do—plenty of time after all was done for Osy's lessons, and for what was equally important, Margaret's own lessons, self-conducted, to fit her for teaching her boy. At seven years old a little pupil does not make any very serious call upon his teachers, and though Margaret was aware of having no education herself, she was still capable of as much as the little fellow wanted, except

in one particular. Osy had, as many children have in the first stage, a precocious capacity for what his mother called "figures," knowing no better; for I doubt whether Margaret knew what was the difference between arithmetic and mathematics, or where one ends and the other begins. Osy did in his own little head sums which made his mother's hair stand erect on hers. She was naturally all the more proud of this achievement that she did not understand it in the least. She was even delighted when Osy found her all wrong in an answer she had carefully boggled out to one of those alarming sums, and laughed till the tears came into her eyes at the pitying looks and apologetic speeches of her little boy. "It isn't nofing wrong, Novver," Osy said. "Ladies never, never do sums." He stroked her hand in his childish compassion, anxious to restore her to her own esteem. "You can wead evwyfing you sees in any book, and write bof big hand and small hand, and understand evwyfing; but ladies never does sums," said Osy, climbing up to put his arms round her neck and

console her. These excuses for her incapacity were sweeter to Margaret than any applause could have been, and such incidents soon gave pleasure and interest to her life. It is well for women that few things in life are more delightful than the constant companionship of an intelligent child, and Margaret was, fortunately, capable of taking, not only the comfort, but the amusement, too, of Osy's new views of life. These, however, we have not, alas! space to give; and as she was obliged to engage the instructions of the village schoolmaster for him in the one point which was utterly beyond her, Osy's mathematical genius and his peculiar phraseology soon died away together. He learned to pronounce the "th," which is so difficult a sound in English, and his condition of infant prodigy in respect to "figures" and all the wonders of his mental arithmetic came to an end under the prosaic rules of Mr. Jones, as such precocities usually do.

Margaret's life, however, had thus fallen into tolerably happy vein, full of cheerful occupation and

boundless hope and love—for what eminence or delight was there in the world which that wonderful child might not reach? and to be his mother was such a position, she felt, as queens might have envied —when the news of her cousin's death broke upon her solitude with a sudden shock and horror. She had heard scarcely anything about him in the interval. One or two letters dictated to Dunning had come from her uncle in answer to her dutiful epistles, but naturally there was no communication between her and Patty, and Gervase had scarcely ever written a letter in his life. Sometimes at long intervals Lady Hartmore had taken a long drive to see her, but that great lady knew nothing about a household which nobody now ever visited. "I might give you scraps I hear from the servants," Lady Hartmore said,— "one can't help picking up things from the servants, though I am always ashamed of it,"—but these scraps chiefly concerned the "ways" of Mrs. Piercey, which Margaret was too loyal to her family to like to hear laughed at. Gervase dead! it seemed one of those

impossibilities which the mind feels less power of accustoming itself to than much greater losses. Those whom our minds can attend with longing and awe into the eternal silence, who are of kin to all the great thoughts that fill it, and for whom every heavenly development is possible, convey no sense of incongruity, however overwhelming may be the sorrow, when they are removed from us. But Gervase! How hard it was to think of him gaping, incapable of understanding, on the verge of that new world. Who could associate with him its heavenly progress, its high communion? Gervase! why should he have died? it seemed harder to understand of him whose departure would leave so slight a void, whose trace afar would be followed by no longing eyes, than of one whose end would have shaken the whole world. The news had a great and painful effect upon Margaret, first for itself, and afterwards for what must follow. She wrote, as has been said, to her uncle, asking if she might go to him, if a visit from her would be of any comfort to him; and she wrote

to Patty with her heart full, forgetting everything in the pity with which she could not but think of hopes overthrown. Patty replied with great propriety, not concealing that she had kept back Margaret's letter to Sir Giles, explaining how little able he was for any further excitement, and that all that could be done was to keep him perfectly quiet. "He might wish to see you, but he is not equal to it," Patty said; and she ended by saying that her whole life should be devoted to Sir Giles as long as he lived, "for I have nothing now upon Earth," Patty said, with a big capital. All that Margaret could do was to accept the situation, thinking many a wistful thought of her poor old uncle, from whom everything had been taken. Poor Gervase, indeed, had not been much to his father, but yet he was his son.

The winter was long and dreary—dreary enough at Greyshott, where the old gentleman was going daily a step farther down the hill, and often dreary, too, to Margaret, looking out from the window of her little

drawing-room upon the little row of laurels glistening in the wet, with now and then a passer-by and his umbrella going heavily by. There are some people who have an invincible inclination to look out, whatever is outside the windows, were it only chimney-pots ; and Margaret was one of these. She got to know every twig of those glistening laurels shining in the rain, and to recognise even the footsteps that went wading past. There was not much refreshment nor amusement in it, but it was her nature to look out wherever she was. And one afternoon, in the lingering spring, she suddenly saw a figure coming up the village road which had never been seen there before, which seemed to have fallen down from the sky, or risen up from the depths, so little connection had it with anything there. Mrs. Osborne owned the strangeness of the apparition with a jump of the heart that had been beating so tranquilly in her bosom. Gerald Piercey here! He had been for a long time abroad, travelling in the East, far out of the usual tracks of travellers,

and had written to her three or four times from desert and distant places, whose names recalled the Arabian Nights to her, but nothing nearer home. The letters had always been curt, and not always amiable: "I note what you say about having settled down. If you think the stagnant life of a village the best thing for you, and your own instructions the best thing for a boy who will have a part to play in the world, of course it is needless for me to make any remark on the subject." Margaret received these missives with a little excitement, it must be allowed, if not with pleasure. She confessed to herself that they amused her: "a boy who will have a part to play in the world!" Did he think, she asked herself with a smile, that Osy was seventeen instead of seven? At seven what did he want beyond his mother's instructions? But it cannot be denied that letters, with curious Turkish hieroglyphics on the address, dated from Damascus, Baghdad, and other dwellings of the unknown, had an effect upon her. To receive

them at Chillfold, in Surrey, was a sensation. The Vicarage children, who collected stamps, were much excited by the Turkish specimens, and she could not help a pleasurable sensation as she bestowed them. Even Osy's babble about Cousin Colonel was not unpleasing to his mother's ears. Gerald was far away, unable to take any steps, or even to say much about Osy. She liked at that distance to have such a man more or less belonging to her. The feeling of opposition had died away. He had been fond of Osy, wanted to have him for his own —as who would not wish to have her beautiful boy?—and what could be more ingratiating to his mother than that sentiment, so long as it was entertained by a man at Baghdad, who certainly could not take any steps to steal the boy from his mother? Into this amicable, and even vaguely pleased state of mind she had fallen—when suddenly, without any warning, without even having seen him come round the corner, Gerald Piercey stood before her eyes.

Margaret went away from the window and sat down in the corner by the fire, which was the corner most in the shade and safe from observation. That her heart should beat so was absurd. What was Gerald Piercey to her, or she to Gerald Piercey? He might make what propositions he pleased, but he could not force her to give up her boy. At seven it was ridiculous—out of the question! At seventeen it might be different, but that was ten long years off. If this was what his object was, was not her answer plain?

He came in very gravely, not at all belligerent, though he looked round with an air of criticism, remarking the smallness of the place, which recalled to some extent Mrs. Osborne's old feelings towards him. He had no right to find the cottage small. She thought him looking old, worn, and with care in his face. He, on the other hand, was astonished to see her so young. The air of Chillfold, the tranquillity and freedom, had been good for Margaret. The desert sun and wind had baked

him black and brown. The quiet of the cottage, the life of a child which she had been living, had brought all her early roses back.

"I have come," he said, taking her hand in his, "on a sad errand." And then he paused and cried hurriedly, "What have you done to yourself? Why, you are Meg Piercey again."

"Margaret Osborne at your service," she said, as she had said before; but with a very different feeling from that which had moved her on the previous occasion: to be recognised with surprise as young and fair, is a very different thing from being accused angrily of having lost your freshness and your youth,—"but what is it, what is it?"

"Uncle Giles is dying, Cousin Meg."

"Uncle Giles!" She drew her hand from him and dropped back into her chair. For a moment she did not speak. "But I am not surprised," she said. "I looked for it: how could he go on living with nobody—not one of his own?"

"He might have had you. Poor old man! it is not the time to blame him."

"Me?" said Margaret. "I was not his child; nothing, and nobody, can make up for the loss of what is your very own."

"Even when it is—Gervase Piercey?"

"Poor Gervase!" said Margaret. "Oh, Gerald Piercey, you are a man with whom things have always gone well. What does it matter what our children are? they are our children all the same. And if it were nothing but to think that it was Gervase—and what poor Gervase was."

Though she was perhaps a little incoherent, Gerald did not object. He said: "At all events, I am very sorry for my poor old uncle. Mrs. Gervase wrote to me to say that he was sinking fast, should I like to come? and that she was writing to you in the same sense. I had only just arrived when I got her letter, and I thought that the best thing was to come to you at once, in case you were going to see him."

"Of course, I should wish to go and see him; but I have had no letter. I must see him if she will let me. Dear old Uncle Giles, he was always good and fatherly to me."

"And yet he let you leave your home—for this."

"Cousin Gerald," said Margaret, "don't let us begin to quarrel again. This is very well—it suits me perfectly—and I am very happy here. It is my own. My dear old uncle was not strong enough to struggle in my favour, but he was always kind. I must go to see him, whether she wishes it or not."

"I have a carriage ready. I thought that would be your decision. We shall get there before dark."

"We?" she said, startled; then added, almost with timidity, "you are going——?"

"Certainly I am going. You don't, perhaps, think what this may be to me. My father will be the head of the house——"

"And you after him. I fully understand what it is to you," she said.

He gave her a singular look, which she did not at all understand, except that it might mean that with this increased power and authority he would have more to say about Osy. "And to you too," he said.

CHAPTER XLI.

PATTY received her two visitors without effusion, but with civility. Her demeanour was very different from all they had known of her before. She had been defiant and impertinent, anxious to offend and disgust, rather than to attract, with the most anxious desire to get rid of both, and to make them feel that they had no place nor standing in Greyshott. She had, indeed, been so frightened lest she herself should be overthrown, that all the "manners" in which Patty had been brought up deserted her, and she behaved like the barmaid dressed in a little brief and stolen authority, which they believed her to be. Indeed, the "manners" which Patty had been taught chiefly consisted in the inculcation of extreme respect to her "betters;"

and her revolt from this, and conviction that she had now no betters in the world, carried her further in the opposite direction than if she had had no training at all. But in her calm tenure of authority for nearly a year, Patty had learned many things. She had learned that the mistress of a house does not need to stand upon her authority, and that a right, acknowledged and evident, does not require to be loudly asserted. It might have been supposed, however, that a certain awe of the heir-at-law—a humility more or less towards the man to whom shortly she must cede her keys, her place, and all the rights upon which she now stood, would have shown themselves in her. But this was not at all the case. She was quite civil to Colonel Piercey, but she treated him solely as a guest—her guest—without any relationship of his own towards the house in which she received him. To Margaret she was more friendly, but more careless in her civility. "I ordered them to get ready for you the room you used to have. I thought you would probably

like that best," she said. Colonel Piercey was lodged quite humbly in one of the "bachelor's rooms," no special attention of any kind being paid to him, which was a thing very surprising to him, though he could scarcely have told why. To be aware that you are very near being the head of the house, and to be treated as if you were a very ordinary and distant relation, is startling in a house which is full of the presence of death. That presence, when it brings with it no deep family sorrow, brings a sombre business and activity, a sense of suppressed preparations and watchfulness for the end, which is very painful to the sensitive mind, even when moved by no special feeling. Waiting for an old man to die, it is often difficult not to be impatient for that event, as for any other event which involves long waiting. Patty went about the house with this air of much business held back and suspended until something should happen. She was called away to have interviews with this person and that. She spoke of the "arrangements"

she had to attend to. "Would it not be better that Colonel Piercey should relieve you of some part of the trouble?" said Margaret. "Oh, no; one should always do one's own business. Outsiders never understand," said Patty, with what would have been, had she been less dignified, a toss of her head in her widow's cap.

Was Gerald Piercey an outsider in the house that must so soon be his own? He had given Margaret to understand during their long drive that his father would not change his home or his life, and that it was he, Gerald, who would occupy Greyshott. I think Colonel Piercey was of opinion that he had made something else clear, though it had not been spoken of in words—namely, that there was but one mistress possible for Greyshott in its new life; but Mrs. Osborne did not by any means clearly understand him, having her mind preoccupied by the belief that his feelings to her were not of an affectionate kind, and that his first object was to deprive her of her child. She felt, however,

that he was kind—bewilderingly kind, and that there was something in him which wanted explanation; but all the more, Margaret was anxious and disturbed by this attitude of "outsider" attributed to him. If Gerald Piercey was an outsider in Greyshott on the eve of his uncle's death, to whom he was natural heir, who else could have any right there? He did not remark this, as was natural. He was not surprised that Patty should hold him at arm's length. It was quite to be expected that she should feel deeply the mere fact that he was the heir. Poor girl! He wondered what provision had been made for her—if any; and if there should be none, promised himself that his father's first act, as Sir Francis, should be to set this right. He was, in fact, very sorry for Mrs. Patty, whose ambitions and schemes had come to so summary an end. She should never require to go back to the alehouse, but should be fitly provided for as the wife of the once heir of Greyshott ought to be. He confided these intentions to Margaret at the very moment

when Mrs. Osborne's mind was full of Patty's speech about the outsider. "You mean if Uncle Giles has not done so already," Margaret said.

"It is very unlikely he should have done so. Of course there could be no settlement; and who was there to point out to him that such a thing was necessary?" Colonel Piercey was so strong in his conviction that Margaret did not like to suggest even that Patty might herself have pointed it out. But her own mind was full of vague suspicion and alarm. An outsider! Gerald Piercey, the natural heir of the house?

Late that night the two visitors were called to Sir Giles' room. "He is awake and seems to know everybody; I should like you to see him now," Patty said, going herself to Mrs. Osborne's room to call her. Colonel Piercey was walking up and down in the hall, with an air of examining the old family pictures, which Patty had not thought it necessary to meddle with, though she had removed those that had been in the library. He was not

really looking at them, except as accessories to the scene—silent witnesses of the one that was passing away, and the other that was about to come. Gerald Piercey had a deep sadness in his heart, though he could not keep his thoughts from the new life that was before him. The very warmth of the rising of that new life and all its hopes made him feel all the more the deep disappointment and loss in which the other was ending. Poor Gervase would never have been a fit representative of the Pierceys, but as Margaret said, as she had always said, he was his father's son, and the object of all the hopes of the old pair who had reigned so long in Greyshott. And now this branch was cut off, their line ended, and the old tree falling that had flourished so long. He wondered if it would really be any comfort to poor old Sir Giles, dying alone in his desolate house, that there were still Pierceys to come after him: the same blood and race, though not drawn from his source. It seemed questionable how far he would be comforted by this; perhaps not at all,

perhaps rather embittered by the fact that it was a cousin's son and not his own, who should now be the head of the house.

"Come now, come now," cried Patty eagerly, "as long as he is so conscious and awake. He sleeps most of his time, and it's quite a chance—quite a chance. I want you to see with your own eyes that he's all himself, and has his faculties still." She had an air of excitement about her perhaps not quite appropriate to the moment, as if her nerves were all in motion, and she could scarcely keep her fingers still or subdue the quiver in her head and over all her frame. She led the way hurriedly, opening the doors one after another in an excited way, and pushing into the sick room with a "Look, dear papa, who I've brought to see you." Sir Giles was sitting up in his bed, his large ashy face turned towards the door, his dim sunken eyes looking out from fold upon fold of heavy eyelid, his under-lip hanging as that of poor Gervase had done. "Ah," he stammered, "let 'em come in—to the light, my dear. I'm not in a

state—to see strangers; but to please you—my dear."

"Uncle Giles," said Margaret, with an exclamation of pain, "surely you know me?"

"Eh? let her stand—in the light—in the light; why, why, why—Meg: it's Meg,—that's Meg." She kissed him, and he made an effort to turn his feeble head, and with his large moist lips he gave a tremulous kiss in the air. "I'm—I'm glad to see you, Meg. You were the first to—tell me—to tell me: I'll be always grateful to you—for that."

"For what, dear uncle? It is I who owe everything to you. Oh, Uncle Giles, if I could only tell you how much and how often I think of it! you were always kind, always kind; and dear Aunt Piercey; you gave me my home, the only home I ever had."

"Eh! eh! What is she saying, my dear? You'll --you'll look after Meg—never let her come to want. She was the first to tell me. The greatest news that has come—to Greyshott. You remember, Meg—and

Osy, bless him, how he cheered! There's—there's something for Osy. He cheered like a little trump, and he gave—he gave my boy his only wedding present, the—the only one. Dunning, where is my purse? Osy must have a tip—two tips for that."

"Dear papa," cried Patty, "don't disturb yourself; oh, don't disturb yourself! I'll see to it."

"My—my purse, Dunning!" The purse was procured while they all stood by, and the old man fumbling, got with difficulty, one after another, two sovereigns, which fell out of his trembling fingers upon the bed. "One for—for cheering; and one for —for the other thing. Give 'em to Osy, Meg, bless him; and my blessing. When It comes and all's right, that'll be a friend for Osy—always a friend, better than an old man."

"Dear papa," cried Patty, pushing forward again, "here is some one else to see you—Colonel Piercey, dear, don't you remember? Colonel Piercey—Gerald —that once paid you a long visit; I know you'll remember if you try. Here," she said, seizing his

arm, pulling him forward, "stand in the light that he may see you."

She was vibrating with excitement like a creature on wires. The touch of her hand on Gerald's arm was like an electric cord; and to be pushed forward thus, and accounted for as if he had been an absolute stranger, to be brought with difficulty to the mind of the dying man, was to Gerald Piercey, as may well be supposed, an insupportable sensation. He drew back, saying hastily, "I cannot disturb him. I will not have him disturbed for me—let him alone, let him alone."

"Eh? what? who's that? somebody else? Gerald?" said Sir Giles. He held out his hand vaguely into the air, not seeing where his attention was called, the large old limp grey hand, with so little volition or power left in it. "Ah, Gerald, come to see the end of the old man? that's kind! that's kind! My poor wife and I used to think if our first boy had lived, don't you know, he might have been a man like you. Well, Gerald, I've nothing to give you, but

my blessing—but my blessing. You won't mind if your nose is put out of joint, you know, as the old folks say. And you'll stand by It, Gerald, a—a good fellow like you."

"Dear papa, I think they'll go now; it's late, and you ought to go to sleep."

"Not yet," said Sir Giles, who had fallen into the old strain of faint sobbing and laughing; "plenty—plenty of time for sleep. Thousands of years, don't you know, till it's all—all over. Where are they? eh, Meg. I scarcely see you; eh!" he kissed the air again with his hanging, lifeless lips, "good-night; and t'other man. Gerald, be kind to her, my boy; a good girl, Meg, a good girl. She's been married, which some might think a drawback; but if you're fond of her, and she's fond of you. Eh, Dunning? well I'm not tired, not tired a bit—let him be the god-father, my dear; and good-night to you, good-night to you—all."

He died in the night.

The third funeral within a year from Greyshott!

What a melancholy record was that—father and mother, and the only child! Sir Giles was the only one of the three who could be said to have been beloved. His wife had always been an imperious woman, his son had been a fool; but the old man was full of gentleness and kindness, and had been a model country gentleman in his day, known to everybody, and always genial to rich and poor. Once more the avenue was full of carriages, and the house of mourners, and there were some tears, and many kind recollections, and a great deal of talk about him as they carried him away. "It will be a long time before we see the like of him again," the country folk and tenants said, while the gentlemen of the county congratulated themselves that the old name was not to be extinct nor the land transferred to other hands. The new baronet was not there; he was also an old man, and not fond of much movement, but Colonel Piercey was his representative, and an excellent representative, a man of whom the whole district might be proud. He was looked to by every

one, pointed out to those who did not know him, and surrounded by a subtle atmosphere of suspended congratulation and welcome, notwithstanding the universal grief for Sir Giles. The old man's dying words had not made a very deep impression on Colonel Piercey, except those which concerned Margaret. He had not understood the allusions, nor indeed thought of them, save as the wanderings of weakness. It seemed all of a piece to him—the thought that Sir Giles' firstborn, the boy dead some thirty years ago, might have grown such a man as he, and his nose being put out of joint, and the petition that he should be good to some one, and stand by it. All these wild and wandering words Gerald Piercey put out of his head as meaning nothing. It was, perhaps, the "first boy," whom he had never heard of before, whom he was to be good to, yet who would put his nose out of joint. It was all a muddle, and Gerald did not attempt to grope his way through it. He was deeply impressed and touched by the image of the old man dying; but he had no doubt as to his own

prospects, and thought of no disaster. How could there be any doubt? If there had been a new will made since the death of Gervase, no doubt the estate had been charged with an adequate provision for Gervase's wife; if there had been no will made, his father and he, as the next-of-kin and heir-at-law, would of course take that into their own hands, and secure it at once. Beyond this and the natural legacies, Gerald suspected no new thing.

Margaret, on the other hand, had been deeply alarmed and startled by what she heard. She did not remember what she had said on the occasion to which her uncle referred, but she remembered his outburst of cheering, and Osy, with his legs wide apart and his hat waving in his hand, giving forth his hip, hip, hurrah. Was it possible that the old man had made out to himself some fiction of what might be going to happen, some illusion which buoyed him up with false hopes? Was it possible that Patty——? Margaret did not know what to think. She would fain have confided her alarm to

Gerald, and taken counsel with him; but those other words of Sir Giles had been too broadly significant and he was the last person in the world to whom she could talk on any subject that would recall them. She had avoided Gerald, indeed, since that scene, and it had not been referred to again between them. But her mind was full of perplexity and doubt. The bearing of Patty (always *digne*, always just what a daughter-in-law's chastened grief should be,—not too demonstrative), so confident, so authoritative, so determined to do everything herself, without assistance from an "outsider," increased this sensation of alarm and uncertainty in Margaret's mind. She did not know in the least what was coming. But it seemed to her certain that something was coming which was not in the course of nature, or according to the common expectation. Her mind grew more and more confused, yet more and more certain of this as the crisis approached; for Patty never had been independent, so confident, so sure of being the head of everything, as on the funeral day.

Yet Patty had her troubles, too, which she had to bear alone, and without any aid at this crisis of her career. Miss Hewitt, whose indignation at her reception on her first visit had been so great that she had made a vow never to see her ungrateful niece again, had, by the time that Sir Giles' dangerous condition had become publicly known, got over her fury. She had been paid her fifty pounds, and she had begun to believe in Patty's continued success and in her cleverness and power. There had been a pause of alarm in the family after the death of Gervase, when they had all feared (little knowing her spirit) that Patty would be sent back on their hands. But when that alarm was well over and Patty was found to hold her own, the admiration of her relations was doubled. Her father was the first to claim a renewal of friendship; but his reception was so alarming, and his daughter poured forth upon his head such torrents of wrath, telling him that, but for the exposure of family affairs, she would have him tried for manslaughter, that the landlord

of the Seven Thorns slunk off completely cowed and without a word to say. This added to Miss Hewitt's regard for her brave and victorious niece, who feared no one, and she had in the meantime made many attempts to obtain a footing at Greyshott. Partly to impress still more sensibly upon her father her utter and unchangeable hostility, and partly because some one to speak to became a necessity, Patty had admitted her aunt on various occasions; and now Miss Hewitt demanded, with a persistence which all Patty's spare moments had been spent in resisting, first an interview with Sir Giles, and then a place in the carriage which conveyed her niece to his funeral. Patty had not yielded in respect to the first, but in the extreme state of mental excitement in which she was, her resolution gave way before the second prayer. It had not been her intention to "mix herself up with any of the Hewitts," but in face of the scene which she anticipated at the reading of the will, it gradually came to appear more and more desirable to her to have some one to stand by her,

some one to be dazzled by her position and good fortune, and to take her part whatever opposition she might meet with. Patty did not know what might happen at the reading of the will. She had a prevision, but not even now any absolute certainty, what the will was. And if it were as she believed, she did not know what powers might be brought into action against her, or what might be done. She decided at last that to have her aunt, who at bottom was a thoroughly congenial spirit, to defend and stand by her, would be an advantage. And this was how it was that Miss Hewitt attained the lugubrious triumph of her life, the satisfaction of following her former lover in his old carriage, his wife's carriage, whom she considered her triumphant rival, to his grave.

CHAPTER XLII.

IT was a strange triumph, and yet it was one. Miss Hewitt closely followed her niece, once more wrapt in a new extravagance of crape ; and these ladies had the satisfaction of seeing Mrs. Osborne quietly take her place opposite to them on the front seat of the carriage. This gave both to Patty and her aunt an acute sensation of pleasure, which would have been greater, however, had the victim seemed in any way conscious of it. But Margaret was full of many thoughts, recollections, and anticipations. She, too, looked forward to the disclosure of her uncle's will with a curiosity and anxiety which had nothing to do with any expectations of her own. She had put away the two sovereigns so tremulously extracted from his purse

by the dying man with a half smile and a tear. That, she concluded, was all that Osy would ever have from his great-uncle, who might so easily have made a provision for the boy. She had never expected it, she said to herself, but that was a different thing from this certainty that it never would be; still there was a tender familiarity about the "tip" for the child which went to Margaret's heart. Poor old uncle! If he had been left to himself, if he had been able to think, he would have acted differently. She put away the two pieces of money for Osy without any grudge, with a tender thought of the old man who had been as good as a father to her all her life. And now was this the end of Greyshott so far as she was concerned? or was there a strange something looming out of the clouds, another life of which she would not think, which she could not understand, to which she did not consent? She put all thought out of her mind of anything that concerned herself, or tried her best to do so—but the family was dear to her still. Was there any plot threatening the

name, the race, the old, old dwelling of the Piercys? There was a subdued triumph in Patty's look, a confidence in her voice and step, and the authoritative orders she gave, which did not look like a woman who after to-day would have no real authority in Sir Francis Piercey's house. She could not imagine what it could mean; but the advent of the elder woman, also in crape, and full of ostentatious sympathy and regret, strengthened all her apprehensions, though she did not know of what she was afraid.

One or two of the oldest friends remained for the reading of the will. It was felt on all sides that the grief which attended Sir Giles to his tomb was of a modified kind. No one except Mrs. Osborne could be supposed to regard the old gentleman with filial love or sorrow, and the party which assembled round the luncheon table was serious, but put on no affectation of woe. Patty took her place at the head of the table with a quiet assurance to which nobody objected. She had too much sense to talk of "dear papa" before all these people, and if she showed

the composure of an authorised and permanent mistress of the house, it was probably because she had been accustomed to do so. Lord Hartmore, if his sympathies were not so much aroused as on the day of Gervase's funeral, still retained a sort of partisan feeling for the young widow. She was his *protégée*. His wife had not fallen in with his views, except in the most moderate way, merely to honour the promise he had made for her. Lady Hartmore did not attempt to improve her acquaintance with Patty. She was quite at her ease at the other end of the table by the side of Colonel Piercey, who now was *de facto*, in her assured belief, the master of the house. Margaret was not present at the luncheon, and Miss Hewitt, who was elated beyond expression by finding herself seated among all the great people, on the other side of Lord Hartmore, felt herself the principal person at table, and demeaned herself accordingly. "To think," she said, "my lord, that I should find myself 'ere on such an occasion; me that once thought to be the mistress; but oh! the

ideas of the young is different from what comes to pass in life. 'Im as we have laid in his grave, dear gentleman, was once—— Well, Patty, love, as you say, this ain't a time to talk of such things. Still, it do come upon me sitting at 'is table, and 'im not 'ere to bid me welcome. But it's a mournful satisfaction to see the last of 'im all the same."

"Aunt was an old friend of my dear father-in-law," Patty explained, curtly. "I believe, Lord Hartmore, that you know more of Margaret Osborne than I do. Margaret Osborne has not shown very much sympathy to me, and all this winter I have never been able to get out for such a purpose as making calls. I couldn't have taken a three hours' drive to be away so long, not if it had been a matter of life and death. That means almost a whole day, and dear Sir Giles never liked to let me out of his sight."

"Ah, 'e always knew them that were really fond of 'im," said Miss Hewitt. "You couldn't blind 'im, my lord, with pretences. I was kep' back by

my family, and thoughts of what the world might say; but 'e knew that Patty was the same stuff like, and 'e took to her the double of what 'e would have done on that account. Oh, your lordship, what a man 'e was! You're too young to remember 'im at 'is best: 'andsome is as 'andsome does, folk say —but a gentleman like 'im can't always act as 'e would like to. You must know that from yourself, my lord. Sometimes the 'eart don't go where the 'and 'as to be given."

"Well, that is certainly sometimes the case," said Lord Hartmore, with a subdued laugh, "though I don't think I know it by myself."

"Aunt's so full of her old times," cried Patty. "If there was anything that was ever wanted for the little Osborne boy, Lord Hartmore, I should always be pleased to help. He got too much for my dear father-in-law latterly, being noisy, and such a spoiled little thing; but he was fond of him, and spoke of him at the very last. "I can never forget that," said Patty, putting her handkerchief lightly to her

eyes. "And if there should be need of a little help for his education, or setting him out in life—but I should have a delicacy in saying so to Margaret Osborne, unless you'd be so good as to do it for me."

"Oh, you're very kind, Mrs. Piercey," said Lord Hartmore, confused. "Our dear Meg is rather a formidable person to approach with such a proposal."

"Yes, isn't she formidable?" cried Patty, eagerly. "That's just the word; one is frightened to offer to do her a good turn."

"Let us hope," said Lord Hartmore, "that her good uncle has left her beyond the need of help."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Patty, with a very serious face.

"I feel sure of it," said Lord Hartmore, with genial confidence. "He was far too good a man, and too kind an uncle. Mrs. Piercey, I see my friend Gerald looking this way, and Mr. Pownceby wriggling in his chair, as if——." He made a slight movement as if to rise—which perhaps was not the

highest breeding in Lord Hartmore; but it was very slight and accompanied by a look of deference, suggesting a signal on her part.

"Mr. Gerald Piercey is not master here, nor is Mr. Pownceby," said Patty, with dignity. "They may look as they please, but in my own house it's my part to say when people are to leave the table."

"She do have a spirit, Patty does," Miss Hewitt murmured under her breath.

Lord Hartmore settled himself in his chair again, abashed. "I beg your pardon," he said; and then, in a subdued tone, "Most likely Pownceby has a train to catch."

"In that case I don't mind stretching a point," said the lady of the house, "though Mr. Pownceby is no more than a hired servant paid for his time, and it is no business of his to interfere."

A hired servant! Old Pownceby, who had all the secrets of the county in his hands, and most of its business! Lord Hartmore grew pale with awe at this daring speech. He looked straight before him,

not to see the signals of his wife telegraphing to him from Gerald Piercey's side. "I'll have nothing to do with it," he said to himself; and, indeed, in his consternation, Lord Hartmore was the last to get up when the movement of the chairs convinced him that Mrs. Piercey had condescended to move. He offered that lady his arm humbly, on an indication from her that this was expected. "I suppose we shall see Mrs. Osborne in the library?" he said.

"Oh, Margaret! I suppose she'd better be there for form's sake, though I don't suppose it matters much. Aunt, will you tell Margaret Osborne to come directly, please? I have never," said Patty, with a smile, "got into the way of calling her Mėg, as you all do."

Lord Hartmore could scarcely dissimulate the little start of consternation with which he heard this. The forlorn young widow, for whom he had been so sorry, was appearing in a new light; but, of course, it was only her ignorance, he said to himself. The party had all assembled in the library when the voice of

Miss Hewitt was heard outside calling to some one who seemed to be following: "This way, Margaret —this way. They're all in the library. I don't know the 'ouse so well as I might, but this is the way. Come along please, quick, and don't keep the company waiting," Miss Hewitt said.

Gerald Piercey started forward to open the door, for which Miss Hewitt rewarded him with an "Oh! thank you, but I'm quite at 'ome, quite at 'ome." Margaret came in in the wake of that bustling figure, pale, and with an air of suspense. "Was it necessary to send for me in that way?" she said to Gerald. He had placed a chair for her beside Lady Hartmore. "Oh, Heaven knows what is necessary!" said that lady. "You know the proverb about beggars on horseback." She was not so careful to subdue her voice as she might have been, but in the commotion it was not observed. Gerald Piercey stood with his hand on the back of his cousin's chair. They were the family, the only persons present of the Piercey blood. The old friends of the house stood

near them. At the upper end of the room were Patty and her aunt. Mr. Pownceby stood in front of the large fireplace with a paper in his hand.

"I must explain," he said, "how the will I have to read is so very succinct a document. Sir Giles had made his will like other men, and as there was a good deal to leave, there were a number of bequests. The late Mr. Gervase Piercey was, of course, the heir, under trustees, as he was not much—acquainted with business. Sir Giles thought fit to change this, as was to be expected, after his son's death. He sent for me hastily one day, and gave me instructions which surprised me. I begged him to allow me to take these back with me in order that the new will should be properly written out, proposing to come back next day to execute it, and, in short, hoping that he might reconsider the matter; but he would hear of no delay. This document I will now read."

Gerald Piercey stood quite undisturbed, with his hand on the back of Margaret's chair. He was not anxious. It had not occurred to him that the house

of his fathers could be alienated from him, and short of that, his poor old uncle's wishes would, he sincerely felt, be sacred whatever they were. He was glad to hear that there was a new will made, which, no doubt, provided for Mrs. Piercey; and waited with an easy mind to hear what it was. As for Margaret, the event about to happen began to dawn clearly upon her. She saw it in Patty's eyes, in her pose, sitting up defiant in Lady Piercey's chair. She looked up at her cousin with an eager desire to warn him, to support him, but was daunted by the calm of his look, fearing no evil. "Gerald, Gerald," she said, instinctively. The lines of his face melted suddenly; he looked down upon her with an encouraging, protecting smile, and took her hand for a moment, saying "Meg!" and no more. He thought she was appealing to him for his care and protection in face of a probable disappointment to herself.

Mr. Pownceby cleared his throat and waved his hand. He ran over the exordium, name, and formula, of sound mind, etc., etc., to which everybody listened

impatiently, "do give and bequeath the whole of my estates, property, real and personal, etc., to——" here he paused a little, as if his own throat were dry—"Patience Piercey, my daughter-in-law, and companion for the last six months, to be at her entire disposal as it may be best for the interests of the family, and in remainder to her child. This I do, believing it to be best for meeting all difficulties, and in view of any contingency that might arise.

"Signed, Giles Piercey," added the lawyer, "and dated Greyshott, 16th June, just a fortnight ago."

There was a pause. Even now it did not seem to have struck Colonel Piercey what it meant. He listened with a half smile. "And ——?" he said, waiting as if for more.

"That is all, Colonel Piercey, every word. The house, estates, money, everything. Even the servants are cut out. He said she'd look after them. Mrs. Piercey takes everything—house, lands, money, plate, everything. It is a very unusual and surprising will but that is all."

And then there was another pause, and a general deep-drawn breath.

"It is a very surprising will indeed," said Lord Hartmore.

It was a sort of remark to himself, forced from him by the astonishment of the moment; but in the silence of the room it sounded as if addressed like an oration to all who were there.

"Pardon me," cried Colonel Piercey, "but Greyshott? Do you mean that Greyshott, the original home of the family——?"

"I represented that to Sir Giles, but he would hear nothing. It is Mrs. Piercey's with all the rest."

"It is the most iniquitous thing I ever heard," cried Lady Hartmore, rising quickly to her feet. "What! not a word of anybody belonging to him, nothing of Meg and her boy, nothing of his natural heirs, nothing of old Dunning even, and the old servants?—The man must have been mad."

Here Patty rose and advanced to the conflict. She was very nervous, but collected. "Mr. Pownceby

can bear me witness that I knew nothing about it," she said. "I wasn't there."

"No, you were not there," said the lawyer.

"I thought it right I should have a provision," said Patty, "and so it was right; and if my dear father-in-law thought that the one that stood by him, and nursed him through all his illness, when everybody else forsook him, was the one that ought to have it, who's got anything to say against that? I didn't want it; but now that I've got it, I'll stick to it," cried Patty defiantly, confronting Lady Hartmore, who had been the only one to speak.

"I have no doubt of it," cried that lady, "but if I were Colonel Piercey, I shouldn't stand it; no, not for a moment! Why, the old man was in his dotage, no more equal to making a will than——than his son would have been."

"Mary!" cried her husband in dismay.

"Well!" said Lady Hartmore, suddenly brought to herself by the consciousness of having said more than she ought to have said, "I am glad, I am quite

glad, Hartmore, for one thing, that you'll now see things in their proper light."

"And a very just will, too," cried Miss Hewitt, coming to her niece's side,—"just like 'im, as was a very right-thinking man. Patty was an angel to 'im, that she was, night and day. And it is nothing but what was to be expected, that 'e should give 'er all as 'e had to give. And not too much, neither, to the only one as nursed 'im, and did for 'im, and gave up everything. Oh! I always said it—'e was a right-thinking man."

Colonel Piercey said nothing after that exclamation of "Greyshott!" but he retired with the lawyer into a corner as soon as the spell of consternation was broken by the sudden sound of these passionate voices. He had seized Margaret by the arm and drawn her with him. "We are the representatives of the family," he said, hurriedly; and Mrs. Osborne was too much startled (though she had foreseen it), too sympathetic, and too much excited, to object to the manner in which he had drawn her hand within his

arm. "Our interests are the same," he said, briefly, with a hurried nod to Mr. Pownceby; and they stood talking for some minutes, while a wonderful interchange of artillery went on behind. This was concluded by a sudden clear sound of Patty's voice in the air, ringing with passion and mastery. "I believe," she said, "Lord Hartmore's carriage is at the door." And then there arose a laugh of sharp anger from the other side. "We are turned out," cried Lady Hartmore, "turned out of Greyshott, where we were familiar before that chit was born." It was a little like scolding, but it was the voice of nature all the same.

"And I think," said Colonel Piercey, "Meg, that you and I had better go, too."

"Oh, as you please!" cried Patty; "Meg can stay if she likes, and I've already said I shouldn't mind giving any reasonable help to educate the little boy. And as for you, Gerald Piercey, you can do what you like, and I can see you are bursting with envy. You can't touch me!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

IT was thus in wrath and in consternation that the party dispersed. Patty stood in the hall, flushed and fierce, with defiance in every look, supported by her aunt, who stood behind her, and gave vent from time to time to murmurs of sympathy and snorts of indignation. Patty had almost forgotten, in her mingled triumph and rage, the anxiously chastened demeanour which she had of late imposed upon herself. She was a great deal more like Patty of the Seven Thorns than she had ever been since her marriage. The opposition and scorn of Lady Hartmore had awakened all her combative tendencies, and made her for the moment careless of consequences. What did she care for those big wigs who looked down upon her? Was she not as

good as any of them, herself a county magnate, the lady of Greyshott? better than they were! For the Hartmores were not so rich as comported with their dignity; and Patty was now rich, to her own idea enormously rich, and as great a lady as any in England. Was she not Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott, owning no superior anywhere? It is curious that this conviction should have swept away for the moment all her precautions of behaviour, and restored her to the native level of the country barmaid, as ready to scold as any fishwife, to defy every rule of respect or even politeness. She waited to see Lady Hartmore to the door, having swept out of the room before that astonished lady with a bosom bursting with rage. Truth to tell, Lady Hartmore was much disposed to fight, too. She would have liked, above all things, to give the little upstart what humbler persons call a piece of her mind. Her pulses, too, were beating high, and a flood of words were pressing to her lips. It was intolerable to her to accept the

insult to herself and the wrong to her friends without saying anything—without laying the offender low under the tempest of her wrath. As for Lord Hartmore, it must be owned that he was frightened, and only anxious to get his wife away. He held her arm tightly in his, and gave it an additional pressure as he led her past the fierce little adversary who, no doubt, had a greater command of appropriate language than even Lady Hartmore had, whose style was probably less trenchant, though more refined. "Now, Mary, now, my dear," he said soothingly. The sight of the carriage at the door was delightful to him as a safe port to a sailor. And though the first thing Lady Hartmore did when safely ensconced in her corner, was to turn upon him the flood of her suppressed wrath with a "So this is your interesting little widow, Hartmore!" he was too glad to get away from the sphere of combat to attempt any self-defence. He, too, was saying "the little demon!" under his breath.

Patty still stood there, when Margaret, who had hastily collected the few things she had brought with her, came down to join Colonel Piercey in the hall. He had been standing, as he had been on a previous occasion, carefully examining one of the old portraits. It was not a very interesting portrait, nor was he, I suppose, specially interested in it; but his figure, wrapt in silence and abstraction, made a curious contrast to that of Patty, thrilling with fire and movement. It was evident that she could not long restrain herself, and when Margaret appeared coming down the great stairs, the torrent burst forth.

"Oh, you are there, Meg Osborne: I wonder you didn't go with your great friends, the first people in the county, as you all think, insulting me in my own house! Ah, and I'll teach you all it's my own house! I won't have nobody here turning their backs to me, or going out and in of my place without as much as a thank you! You're studying my pictures, Colonel Piercey, are you?

They're my pictures, they're not yours; and I'll have you to know that nobody sha'n't even look at them without my consent."

Colonel Piercey turned round, almost angry with himself for the fury he felt. "I beg your pardon," he said, very gravely, yet with a sort of smile.

"Oh, you beg my pardon! and you laugh as if it were a joke! I can tell you it's no joke. They're all mine, willed by him as knew best who he wanted them to go to; and I'll keep them, that I will, against all the beggarly kinsfolk in the world; coming here a-looking as soon as the old man's in his grave for what they can devour!"

"Are you ready, Margaret?" Colonel Piercey said.

"Don't you turn it off to her, sir: speak to me! It's me that has to be considered first. You are going off mighty high: no civility to the head of the house, though I've taken you in and given you lodging in my house, at least Meg there, near a week? Oh, you laugh again, do you? And who

is the head of the house if it's not me? I'm Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott. The pictures are mine, and the name's mine, as well as everything else; and you are nothing but the son of the younger brother, and not got as much to do with it as Pownceby there, the lawyer."

"My dear Mrs. Piercey," said Mr. Pownceby, "however much you may despise Pownceby the lawyer, he knows a little more on that subject than you do: a lady is rarely, if ever, the head of a house, and certainly never one who belongs to the family only by marriage. One word, if you please: Colonel Piercey's father, now Sir Francis Piercey, is the undoubted head of the house."

"Oh, you'll say anything, of course, to back them up; you think they're your only friends and will pay you best. But you'll find that's a mistake, Mr. Pownceby the lawyer, just as they'll find it's a mistake. What do you want here, Dunning? What business has servants, except my footman to open the door, here? You've been a deal too

much petted in your time, and you'll find out the difference now."

"Mr. Pownceby, sir," said Dunning, who had suddenly appeared on the scene, exceedingly dark and lowering, "Is it true, sir, what I hear, that none of us old servants, not me, sir, that looked after him night and day, is named in my old master's will?"

"I am sorry to say it is quite true, Dunning," Mr. Pownceby said; "but I don't doubt that Mrs. Piercey will remember your long service, as Sir Giles wished her to do."

"How do you know what Sir Giles wished? I know best what Sir Giles said I was to do," cried Patty. "As for long service, yes, if holding on like grim death and taking as little trouble as possible is what you mean."

"Me take little trouble!" cried Dunning, foaming. "I've not had a night's rest, not an unbroken night, since Lady Piercey died—not one. Oh, I knowed how it would be! when she come about

him, flattering him and slavering him, and the poor dear old gentleman thought it was good for Mr. Gervase; and then after, didn't she put it upon him as she was in the family-way, and she never was in the family-way no more than I was. Hoh! ask the women! Hoh! look at her where she stands! He thought as there was an heir coming and there ain't no more of an heir coming than——"

"Let us go, please, let us go," cried Margaret, in distress. "Cousin Gerald, Mr. Pownceby, we have nothing, nothing surely, to do with this. Oh, let us get away."

"Put that fellow out of my house!" cried Patty, "put him out of my house! You're a nice gentleman, Gerald Piercey, to stand there and encourage a man like that to insult a lady. Robert, take that man by the shoulders and put him out."

"He had just best try," said Dunning, squaring his shoulders. But Robert, who was young and slim, knew better than to try. He stood sheepishly fumbling by the door, opening it for the party

who were going out. Dunning was not an adversary to be lightly encountered. Colonel Piercey, however, not insensible to the appeal made to him, laid his hand on Dunning's shoulder.

"This lady is right," he said; "we must not insult a woman, Dunning. You had better come with us in the meantime. It will do you no good to stay here."

"Ah, go with them and plot, do," cried Patty; "I knew that's how it would end. He knows I can expose him and all his ways—neglecting my dear old father-in-law; he knows he'll never get another place if people hear what I've got to say of him! Oh, yes, go with 'em, do! They thought they were to have it all their own way, and turn me out. But all of you, every one, will just learn the difference. If he had behaved like a gentleman and her like a lady, I might have given them their old rubbish of pictures. I don't care for that trash; they're no ornament to the place. I intend to have them all taken down and carted off to the

first auction there is anywhere. I don't believe they'd bring above a few shillings; but all the same they are mine, and I'll have no strangers meddling with them," Patty cried. "Oh, for goodness' sake, Aunt Patience, hold your tongue, and let me manage my affairs myself."

"The only thing is just this, ladies and gentlemen," said Miss Hewitt. "She's got put out, poor thing, and I don't wonder, seeing all as she's 'ad to do; but she don't mean more than a bit of temper, and she'll soon come round if you'll have a little patience. This is the gentleman that come to me, and that I first told as my niece was married to Gervase Piercey, and no mistake. 'E is a very civil gentleman, Patty, and, Lord, why should you go and make enemies of 'im and of this lady, as I should say was a-going to be 'is good lady, and both belonging to the family! Nor I would not go and make an enemy of Mr. Pownceby, as 'as all the family papers in his 'ands and knows a deal, and could be of such use

to you. I'd ask them all to stay, if I was you, to a nice bit of family dinner, and talk things over. What *is* the good of making enemies when being friends would be so much more use to you?" said Miss Hewitt, with triumphant logic. But Patty, who had heard with impatience and many attempts to interrupt, turned away before her oration was over, and, turning her back upon her recent guests, walked away as majestically as was possible, with her long train sweeping over the carpet, to the drawing-room, where she shut herself in, slamming the door. Miss Hewitt threw up her hands and eyes. "That's just 'er," she cried, "just 'er! Thinks of nothing when 'er temper's up; but I 'ope you won't think nothing of it neither. She'll be as good friends in a hour as if nothing had 'appened; and I'll go and give her a good talking to," the aunt said.

When Miss Hewitt reached the drawing-room she found Patty thrown upon the sofa in the second stage of her passion, which was, naturally, tears.

But these paroxysms did not last long. "I let you talk, Aunt Patience," she said. "It pleased you, and it looked well enough. But I know my affairs better than you. Enemies! of course they're all my enemies, and I don't blame them. What I said I said on purpose, not in a temper. I had them here on purpose to see the old gentleman before he died, so that they might know for themselves that he was in his right mind, and all that; and old Pownceby knows; and I wanted to show them that I wasn't afraid of them, not a bit. However, that's all over, and you needn't trouble your head about it. I have a deal to do before the trial——"

"The trial!" said Miss Hewitt, in consternation. "Is there going to be a trial?"

"Of course there will be a trial. They won't let Greyshott go without a try for it, and you'll see me in all the papers, and the whole story, and I don't know that there's anything to be ashamed of. The thing I've got to find out now

is who to have for my lawyers. I want to have the best—the very best; and some one that will make it all into a story, and tell all I did for the poor old man. I was good to him," said Patty, with an admiration of herself which was very genuine—"I was indeed. Many a time I've wanted to get a little pleasure like other folks—to enjoy myself a bit. Oh, there was one night! when Roger Pearson was here and had been at a dance, and I knew all the girls were at it, and all as jolly as ——, and me cooped up, playing backgammon with the old gentleman, and—and worse beside."

"Good Lord, Patty!" cried Miss Hewitt. "Roger Pearson! where ever did you see Roger Pearson? I thought *that* was all over and done with!"

"What did you please to mean by that remark? said Patty, with great dignity. "It doesn't matter where I saw him. I did see him; and there's not many girls would have gone on with the backgammon and—the rest, as I did, just that

night. Aunt Patience, you may know a few things, but you don't know the trials of a married woman."

"The trials!" said Miss Hewitt. "I've known a many that have boasted of the advantage it was. But trials—no. You'll be very willing, I shouldn't wonder, to have 'em again."

"That depends upon many things; but I think not," said Patty.

"You mightn't be lucky the first time, and yet be lucky the second," said her aunt; "but it can't be said to be unlucky, Patty, when it leaves you here, not twenty-five yet, with this grand property all to yourself. Lord! I thought you was lucky at the first, when you got 'im; for I knew they couldn't put 'im out of 'is rights, Softy or no Softy; but just think the luck you've had since; 'is mother dead afore you come home, and that was a blessing, and then 'imself just a blessed release, and then——"

"I'll thank you, Aunt Patience, not to speak of

my husband in that way. A release! Who'd have dared to say a word if Gervase had been here? Oh!" she said, springing up from her seat, and stamping her foot upon the carpet, "and here I am for ever and ever just what I am now, when I would have been my lady all my life, and nobody to stop me, if he had lived but six months more!"

"Dear, and that's true," said Miss Hewitt deeply struck with the tragedy of the event. "I do pity you, my pet! my poor darling! That's true, that's true!"

While this scene was going on in Greyshott, Gerald and Margaret were jogging on towards Chillfold in their hired chaise. They had a great deal to say, and yet there were long silences between them. Gerald was more angry, Margaret more sad.

"I should have minded nothing else," the Colonel said, "if he had kept the old house for us, the house that has produced us all—Greyshott

that has never belonged but to a Piercey; and, Meg, if he had done justice to you."

"There was no justice owing to me," she said. "I left the house at my own free will. I belong to another house and another name——"

"That might have been true," said Colonel Piercey, with something of his old stiffness and severity, "if——"

"It is true," she said, "I am of the family of my child."

"Oh," he cried, "what folly, at your age! I was angry to have lost you; but now, I can't tell how it is, you are Meg Piercey again."

"You have got used to my changed looks," she said. "You have accepted the fact that I am no longer in my teens. But this is not worth discussing when there is so much more to think of. What shall you do? or, indeed, what can you do?"

"Fight it, certainly," he said. "As soon as I have taken you home, I am to meet old Pownceby,

and lay the whole case before the best man we can get. Thank Heaven, I am not without means to fight it out. Poor Uncle Giles! It is hard to call him up to a reckoning before all the world; but he could not have meant it; he could never have meant it."

"I have his little tip for Osy," said Margaret, with tears in her eyes.

"His little tip! when he ought to have provided for the boy!"

"Poor Uncle Giles! He was never very strong; and I believe she was very kind to him, and he was fond of her."

"Do you want me to accept this absurd will, this loss to the race, because she was kind to him (granting that)—and an old man, in his dotage, was fond of a scheming woman?"

"Don't call names," said Margaret. "He was not in his dotage. We saw him——"

"Ah—called on purpose, that we might help to establish the fact," said Colonel Piercey, fiercely.

"What do you call it but dotage—that tip over which you are inclined to weep; and the reason alleged for it, that you had been the first to tell him something? Yes, I know what that means. Pownceby told me. That's—how long since? But he believed it, just the same as ever, in the same kind of distant hope. What is that but dotage, Meg?"

"And must it all, everything—the mere foolish hope I expressed to please him, and anything she may have said—must it all be dragged before the public, and poor Uncle Giles' foolish hopes?"

"Would you like me to throw it all over, and leave that woman to enjoy her ill-gotten gains? Do you say I am to do that, Meg?"

"I—say? Oh, no. What right have I? No, Cousin Gerald, I do not think you should give up your claim. I think"—she paused a moment, and her face lighted up, the words seemed to drop from her lips. Other thoughts flashed up in her eyes—an expectation, the light of happiness

and peace. The carriage had turned a corner, and Chillfold, with her cottage in it, and her boy, brought the relief and ease of home to Margaret's face. Her companion watched her eagerly. He saw the change that came over her. His thoughts followed hers with a quick revulsion of sympathy. He laid his hand upon hers.

"Meg," he said, "do you know there has never been anybody in the world whose face has lighted up like that for me?"

"You had a mother, Gerald," she said quickly, almost ashamed of her self-revelation; "but you forget—as Osy also will forget."

"At my age one wants something different from a mother," he said, "and one does not forget."

She did not say anything. She did not meet his look; but she gave a little pressure, scarcely perceptible, to the hand that held hers. Their long duel had come, at least, to peace—if nothing more.

CHAPTER XLIV.

PATTY had a great deal to do before the trial; for it is needless to say that no time was lost in bringing the matter to a trial. It was in some respects an unequal contest, for, clever as she was, she knew no more to whom she should apply, or in whose hands she should place her cause, than any other person of her original position. Mr. Pownceby was the only representative of law with whom she was acquainted, he and the shabby attorney of the village, who was the resort of litigious country folk. And Mr. Pownceby, whom she had insulted, was, as she had foreseen, on the other side. There was no help to be found in Miss Hewitt for any such need, except in so far that after many years'

strenuous reading of all the trials in the papers, the names of certain distinguished advocates in various *causes célèbres* and otherwise were at that lady's finger ends. The idea of the two women was to carry their business at once, without any intervention of an intermediate authority, to one of the very greatest of these great men, with whom, indeed, Patty herself managed to obtain an interview, with the boldness of ignorance. The great man was much amused by Patty, but he did not undertake her case. He even suggested to her that it would be a good thing to compromise matters, and agree with her adversary in the way, which did not at all commend itself to Mrs. Piercey. She would rather, she declared, spend to the half of her kingdom than tamely compromise her "rights," and leave Greyshott to the heir-at-law. The Solicitor-General (I think it was that functionary) was very kind. He was amused by her story, by her youth and good looks, by her fierce determination and her ignorance. It was

seldom that he had so genuine a study of human nature before him, and that instinct of human nature which makes our own cause always seem the one that is most just and right. He was moved to advise her to avoid litigation rather from a desire to keep that piquant story for his private gratification, instead of casting it abroad to all the winds, than from any higher motive. And yet he did a great deal for her, telling her who were the solicitors in whose hands she ought to place herself, with a sense that Mrs. Piercey would not be too particular about the means used to secure her success ; and suggesting counsel with something of the same idea, and a somewhat malicious amusement and delighted expectation of what would be made of the case by such advocates. He would no more have suggested either the one or the other to Margaret Osborne, than he could have justified himself on moral grounds for recommending them to Mrs. Piercey. Like clients like advisers, he said to himself. He felt that Patty

in the witness-box, manipulated by his learned brother, would be a sight for the——well, not perhaps for the gods, unless it were the gods of the shilling gallery, whom such an advocate would cause to weep over the young widow's woes—but for the delectation of the observant and cynical spectator. How wicked and wrong this was it is needless to say; and yet in the mingled issues of human concerns it was very kind to Patty, who was not, as he divined, particular about the modes to be employed in her campaign.

I will not enter into all those preparations for the trial which brightened life immensely to Mrs. Piercey, and made her feel that she had scarcely lived before, and that, however the trial might turn out, this crowded hour of glorious life was worth the age without a name which would have been her fate had all been peaceful and undisturbed. She had constant visits from her solicitors or their emissaries; constant correspondence; a necessity often recurring for running up to town,

which opened to her many new delights. No expense was spared in these preliminaries, the lawyers, to whom the speculative character of the whole proceedings was clearly apparent, thinking it well (they were, as has been said, not scrupulous members of their class) to make as much out of it in the meantime as possible ; and Patty herself having, in a different degree, something of the same feeling. She was ready, as has been said, to sacrifice half of her kingdom in order to win her plea, and, at the same time, she indulged freely in the pleasure of spending, with the idea before her that even in the event of losing, that pleasure could not be taken from her. Whatever she acquired now would, in that respect, be pure gain. Therefore there can be no doubt that she enjoyed her life during this interval. She had committed one or two imprudencies, which her advisers much regretted and gently condemned. She had made an enemy of Dunning for one thing, which they blamed greatly, and she had alienated

the sympathies of her neighbours by her behaviour in the first flush of her triumph, which Lady Hartmore did not fail to publish. But if the client were not foolish sometimes, to what good would be the cleverness of her guides and counsellors? Patty, for her part, declared that she had no fear of Dunning. What could Dunning say that could affect her position? He could describe Sir Giles' hopes, which, it was evident, must have been mistaken; but she could swear, with a good conscience, that she had never said anything about those hopes to Sir Giles. Patty's modesty, the instinct that had made her really incapable of taking advantage of Sir Giles' delusion, had, it is to be feared, by this time, by dint of familiarity with the subject, become much subdued. She had shrunk with a blush from any such discussion, even with her old father-in-law; but she was not afraid now of the ordeal of being examined and cross-examined on the subject before all the world. She was not, indeed, at all afraid

of the examination which nowadays frightens most people out of their wits. This, no doubt, was partly ignorance, but it was partly also a happy confidence in her own power to encounter and discomfit any man who should stand up to question her. This confidence has been seen in various cases of young women who have encountered jauntily an ordeal in which it is difficult for the strongest not to come to grief; but an ignorant girl often believes in her own sharp answers more than in any inquisition in the world.

Except these advisers-at-law, however, and her aunt, whom she by no means permitted to be always with her, Patty had actually no supporters or sympathisers. She lived in her great house alone: nobody entering it save one of these advisers; nobody sitting at her table with her; nobody taking any share in the excitement of her life. She had indeed waylaid the rector one day, and compelled him to come to her carriage door to speak to her, which he did with great reluctance,

being openly and avowedly on the other side. "What have I ever done to you that you should be against me?" she said; "you used to be my friend once——"

"I hope I am everybody's friend—who does well," said the rector.

"And haven't I done well? If to nurse old Sir Giles night and day, and lay myself out in everything to please him wasn't doing well, why, then I must have been taught my duty very badly, for I thought it was 'I was sick and ye——'"

"Oh! that is how people force a text and put their own meaning to it," said the rector, with a gesture of impatience. "But," he added, in a more subdued tone, "nobody denies, Mrs. Piercey, that you were kind to the old man."

"And wasn't that my duty?" said Patty, triumphantly; but though she silenced her spiritual instructor she did not convince him that it was his duty to support her. No text about the wrongs of the widow had any effect upon him.

He stood and looked down at the summer dust in which his feet were planted, and shook his head. It is a great thing to have the enthusiasm of a cause to prop you up, and to have lawyers coming and going from town, and a great deal of business on hand; but to have nobody to speak to, nobody to give you either help or sympathy at home, is hard. When Patty came home from London, after one of the expeditions in which she had been more or less enjoying herself, the blank of the house, in which there was not a soul who cared whether she won or lost, whether she lived or died, was sometimes more than she could bear. One evening, late in July, she went out for a walk, which was a very unusual thing with her, upon the great stretch of common land which lay outside the beech avenue. Patty had begun by this time to grow so much accustomed to the use of a carriage, that she no longer felt it the most delightful mode of conveyance. She had at first, when she came into the possession of that luxury,

felt it impossible to walk half a dozen steps without her carriage at her heels; but now she became a little bored by the necessity of a daily drive, and loved to escape for a little walk. She had been in town all day, and it had been hot and uncomfortable. Patty had nowhere to go to in town for a little lunch and refreshment, as ladies have generally. It seemed a wrong to her that ladies had that; that they went in twos and threes enjoying their shopping and their little expedition, laughing and talking to each other, as some did who had gone to town in the same carriage with her, and again had travelled with her coming down, full of news and chatter and purchases. Patty had no one to go with her—there was no house in town where there were friends who expected to see her at lunch; and when she came back, though she might have bought the most charming things in the world, though there might be diamonds in her little bag, there was nobody to wish to see them, to exclaim over their beauty, and

envy their happy possessor. These ladies sometimes spoke to her when they did not know her, but often looked askance and whispered to each other; and anyhow, the contrast they made with herself inflamed her very soul with anger. They could wander out, too, in the cool of the evening, still talking, laughing over their adventures, while she was always alone. It was soothing to see that many of them drove home from the station in a bit of a pony carriage or shabby little waggonette with one horse, while her carriage waited for her in lonely grandeur. Sometimes, even, they walked, carrying their parcels, while Patty looked down upon them with immeasurable contempt. But a carriage is not good for everything, and Patty sometimes strayed out alone, thinking the exercise would be good for her, but in reality hoping to escape a little from herself.

It was seldom that she met any one on that lonely moor, but on this particular evening there came towards her, with the glow behind him of

the setting sun, a figure, which Patty felt to be, somehow, familiar; though as she did not expect to meet with any one here equal to her quality, she was not at all curious, but even contemptuous of any pedestrian who was not, like herself, walking for pleasure, but might probably be obliged to walk. He carried a long cricket-bag in his hand, and was in white flannels, which made a little brightening in the dimness of the evening, and had a light cap of a bright colour on his head. A well-made, manly figure, slim but strong, and a long swinging step clearing the intervening distance swiftly, made Patty think of some one who had been like that, who would not have let her, in other days, be alone if he could have helped it. She remembered very clearly who that was, and with a little shiver how she had last seen him, and the dance he had been to, and how the thought of that dance moved her to the depths. But this could not be Roger. He had always been fond of cricket—too fond, the village said—liking

that better than steady work. But to be dressed like this, in flannels, and a cap of a "colour," was not for common men like him; that was the dress gentlemen put on for the play which was their only work to so many. Indeed, Patty was close upon him before she saw that it was indeed Roger, who took off his cap when he saw her, and would have passed on with that respectful salutation had not Patty stopped almost without meaning it, in the start of recognition. "Is it you?" she said in her surprise, upon which Roger took off his cap again.

"Seems as if I'd risen in the world," he said, "but it's more seeming than fact. I've been playing for the county," he added, with scarcely concealed pride. "It don't do a man much good, perhaps, but we're pleased enough all the same."

"It's a long time since I have seen you," said Patty, scarcely knowing what she said. "I—I took you for one of the gentlemen."

"And it's a long time since I've seen you—and

I'd like to say that I'm sorry, Pa——, Mrs. Piercey, for all that's happened—and for the trouble, if it is a trouble, you're in now."

"It is no trouble," said Patty, hotly. "I'm going to defend my rights, if that's what you mean."

"Well, I hope that's what it is," said Roger, "but I don't like to hear of any one I care for beginning with the law. It just skins you alive and wastes good money that might be spent far better—bring you in a deal more pleasure, I mean."

"You don't know very much, Roger, about the pleasure money brings in!"

"Oh, don't I, Patty! Well, if one of us remembers the old days the other must, too. Cricketing about all over the place as I'm doing, runs through a good lot, I can tell you, if it didn't bring a little more in."

"Don't you do anything but cricket, nowadays?" she said.

"Not much; but it pays well enough," said Roger, pushing back his cap from his forehead.

The evening, it is true, was getting a little dim, though not dark; but didn't he look a gentleman! No one would have guessed he wasn't a gentleman, was the thought that passed through Patty's mind like a dart.

"And I live a lot among the swells, now," he said, "and I hear what they say; I don't want to offend you, Patty, far from it—but ain't it a bore living all by yourself in that big lonesome house, with all the deaths and things that have happened in it?"

"You forget it's my home," said Patty, drawing herself up.

"Well, is it your home? All right if it had been your husband's, or if there had been an heir; but I don't hold myself with a place going out of the family like that—that has been in it for hundreds of years. I don't like the thoughts of the Seven Thorns even going out o' the name of 'Ewitt. It's no concern of mine, but I don't."

"Perhaps you think I should go back there, out of my own place, and keep it up!"

"I don't say as I meant that," said Roger, turning his cap, which he had taken off, round and round in his hands, "but I wouldn't be the one to take it out of the family if it was me. I'd say, Look here now, what'll you give me? You be happy in your way, and I'll be happy in mine."

"Well, I shall take your advice, Mr. Pearson. I'll be happy in my own way. It's not yours, and never will be. But that don't matter, seeing we've nothing on earth to do with each other, and are in quite different ranks of life. I wish you good-night, and I hope the cricketing business will be a good one and pay, or else I might say, 'Mind, there's the winter coming on'—if a lady could take upon her to give advice to a sporting man."

"Patty," he cried, calling after her, "don't part with a fellow like this; I didn't mean to offend you—far from it. I only thought I'd warn you what folks said."

"Folks is fools for the most part," cried Patty fiercely, using a much-cited sentiment, which she had never heard of, by the light of nature, "and I don't want to hear what they say. Mr. Pearson, I wish you good-night."

"There! I've been and put my foot in it—I knew I should," Roger said. He stood, the image of despondency, in the middle of the moor, his white figure standing out against the western light as Patty turned at a sharp angle to go home. She could see him with the corner of her eye without looking at him. He stood there silent for a moment, and then dashed his fist into the air with a profane exclamation. "That's not what I meant at all," he said, and lifted his cricket-bag and sped away.

What was it that went out of the evening with him, when Patty, venturing to glance round, saw the landscape empty of the man who had offended her so deeply, who had ventured to blame her—her a lady so far above him—Mrs. Piercey of

Greyshott, while he was only a cricketer, an idle fellow about the country, no good, as even the village people said? But yet a dreariness settled down upon the world; night came on and that loneliness which seemed now Patty's fate. Well, she said to herself, what did she care? She had her fine estate, her name that was as good as the best, her grand house, as much money to spend as she chose, and nobody to dictate to her what she should do—no, nobody to dictate to her—nobody even to advise, to say, "That's right, Patty!" Her Aunt Patience did that, it was true, but then Aunt Patience's approval, save in the very extremity of having nobody else, did not count for much. She hurried in; but it was lonely, lonelier even than the moor—nobody to speak to, nobody to break the long row of chairs and sofas which were there with the intention of accommodating half the county, but now had nobody to sit down upon them but Patty's self, moving from one to another with a futile feeling of breaking the solitude. But nothing was

to be had to break that solitude except Aunt Patience. Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott rang the bell, and ordered the carriage to be sent at once to the village to fetch Miss Hewitt immediately, without a minute's delay! That she could do—send out her carriage, and her horses, and her secretly-swearing servants for any caprice at any moment. For Miss Hewitt! It was what might be called an anti-climax, if Patty had known what that meant. She did know what it meant deeply to the bottom of her heart, though she was not acquainted with the word. To go through all that she had gone through, to do all she had done, for the sake of having the company of Miss Hewitt and her sympathy and encouragement! could there be a greater drop of deepest downfall from the highest heights than this?

But the trial was coming on, and soon all England would be ringing with Patty's name and story and fortunes. She would have crowds of people to admire and wonder at her. She would

win her cause in the sight of all England. She would be the heroine of the day, in everybody's mouth. Surely there would be some compensation in that.

CHAPTER XLV.

I REFRAIN from attempting to describe the great trial Piercey *v.* Piercey, which made the whole country ring. It was, indeed, a *cause célèbre*, and may be found, no doubt, by every one who wishes to trace it, in the history of such notable romances which exists in the legal records. It was so managed by the exceedingly clever advocates whom Patty had been fortunate enough to secure, as to entertain the country, morning after morning, in the columns of the *Times*, by a living piece of family history, a household opened up and laid bare to every curious eye, which is, perhaps, the thing of all others which delights the British public (and all other publics) the most. Poor old Sir Giles, in his wheeled chair, with his backgammon board and

all his weaknesses, became as familiar a figure to the reader of the newspapers as anything in Dickens or Thackeray—more familiar even than Sir Pitt Crawley, because he reached a still larger circle of readers and was a real person, incontestable fact, and only buried the other day. England for the moment became as intimately acquainted with the Softy, as even the old labourers in the parlour at the Seven Thorns. The story, as it was unfolded by the prosecution, was one not favourable to the heroine—a girl out of a roadside tavern, who had married the half-witted son of the squire, who had almost forced her way into the house on the death of its mistress, who had contrived so to cajole the poor old gentleman that he gave himself up entirely to her influence, and finally left her his estates and everything of which he was possessed —leaving out even his old servants whom he had provided for in his previous will, and giving absolute power to the little adventuress. This was a story which did not conciliate the favour of

the public. But when it came to the pleadings on the other side, and Patty was revealed as a ministering angel, both to her husband and father-in-law, as having worked the greatest improvement in the one, so that it was hoped he would soon take his place among his country neighbours; and as having protected and solaced the failing days of the other, and been his only companion and consoler, a great change took place in the popular sentiment. It soon became apparent to the world that this little adventuress was one of those rare women who are never out of place in whatever class they may appear in, the lowest or the highest, and are always in their sphere doing good to everybody. The drama was unfolded with the greatest skill: even those "hopes" which it was not denied Sir Giles had greatly built upon, and the disappointment of which, when the young widow found herself deceived in her fond anticipations, was the cruelest blow of all. The women who were present shed tears almost without exception over poor Patty's delusion;

and that she should have implored the lawyer not to dispel that delusion, to let poor Sir Giles die happy, still believing it, was made to appear the most beautiful trait of character. And indeed, as a matter of fact, Patty had meant well in this particular, and it would have been highly to her credit had it been separated from all that came after. Dunning's testimony, which had been much built upon by the prosecution, was very much weakened by the account given of his various negligences; especially of the fact proved by the lady herself that he had accompanied his master to Lady Piercey's funeral, without providing himself with any restorative to administer to the old gentleman on an occasion of so much excitement and distress, and of such unusual fatigue. "I would not permit it even to be thought of, that he should attend my husband's funeral. It would have been too much for him," Patty said, with all the eloquence of her crape and her widow's cap to enhance what she said. But, indeed, I am here doing precisely what

I said I would not attempt to do—and I was not present at the trial to give the details with the confidence of an eye-witness. The consequence, however, was, as all the world knows, that the verdict was for the defendant, and that Patty came out triumphantly mistress of the field, and of Greyshott, and of all that old Sir Giles had committed to her hands.

A romance of real life! It was, indeed, a disappointment and loss to the whole country when the great Piercey case was over. Even old gentlemen who were supposed to care for nothing but politics and the price of stocks, threw down the *Times* with an angry exclamation that there was nothing in it, the first dull morning or two after that case was concluded. Thus Patty was a benefactor to her kind without any intention of being so. People were generally sorry for the Pierceys, who, there was no doubt, had a right to be disappointed and even angry to see their ancient patrimony thus swept away into the hands of a

stranger. For nobody entertained the slightest doubt that Patty would marry and set up a new family out of the ashes of the old. And why shouldn't she? the people cried who knew nothing about it. Was it not the very principle of the British constitution to be always taking in new blood to revive the old? Was not the very peerage constantly leavened by this process; new lords being made out of cotton and coals and beer and all the industries to give solidity to the lessening phalanx of the sons of the Crusaders? Old Sir Francis Piercey, who was the plaintiff, was well enough off to pay his costs, and he ought to be able at his age to reconcile himself to the loss! To be sure, there was his son, a very distinguished soldier. Well! he had better marry the young widow, everybody said, and settle the matter so.

The county people did not, however, take this view. They were wroth beyond expression on the subject of this intruder into their midst. Nobody had called upon her but Lady Hartmore, whose

indignation knew no bounds ; who had never forgiven her husband, and never would forgive him, she declared, for having betrayed her into that visit. "But to be sure I never should have known what the minx was if I had not seen her!" that lady said. Patty was completely tabooed on every side. Even the rector turned off the highroad when he saw her carriage approaching, and ran by an improvised path over the fields not to meet her. Wherever she might find companions or friends it was evidently not to be in her own district. Her old friends were servants in one great house or another, or the wives of cottagers and labourers ; and Patty was altogether unaware of their existence. When she drove about the county, as she did very much and often in the impulse of her triumph, her eyes met only faces which were very familiar but which she would not know, or faces glimpsed at afar off which would not know her. She was undisputed mistress of Greyshott, and all its revenues and privileges. All the neighbouring land belonged

to her, and almost every house in the village; but except to Miss Hewitt, her aunt, and the servants of the house, and, occasionally, some much-mistaken woman from one of the cottages, who felt emboldened to make a petition to the lady of Greyshott on the score of having been at school with her, Patty spoke to nobody, or rather had nobody to speak to, which is a better statement of the case.

With one large exception, however, so long as the trial lasted, when lawyers and lawyers' clerks had constant missions to Greyshott, and the distinguished barrister who won her cause for her, came over on a few days' visit. That visit was, in fact, though it was the greatest triumph and glory to Patty, one of the most terrible ordeals she had to go through. He was a most amusing visitor, with endless stories to tell and compliments to pay, and would have made almost any party, in any country house which had the good fortune to receive him, "go off," by his own unaided exertions. But it is to be doubted if this brilliant

orator and special pleader had ever in his life formed the whole of a country-house party, with a little, smart, under-bred person and a village spinster for his sole hosts. He was appalled, it must be allowed, and felt that a curious new light was thrown upon the story which he made into a romance of real life; but all the same, it need not be said, this gentleman exerted himself to make the three days "go off" as if the house had been full, and the Prime Minister among the guests. But to describe what this was to Patty would require something more than the modest store of words I have at my disposal. She was not so ignorant as Miss Hewitt, who enjoyed the good the gods had provided for her without *arrière pensée*, and began to laugh before the delighted guest had opened his lips. Patty knew that there should be people invited "to meet" a man so well known. She knew that there ought to have been a party in the house, or, at least, distinguished company to dinner. And she had nobody, not even the rector!

She did her best to invent reasons why So-and-so and So-and-so could not come, and made free use of the name of Lord Hartmore, who, she thought, with the instinct of her kind, had been made to give her up by his wife. She even made use of the fact that most people in the county were displeased with her on account of the trial, and because they wished the Pierceys to be still at Greyshott. "And so they are, in the person of much the most attractive member of the family," the great man said, who would have been still more amused by his position between these two ladies if he had not been in his own person something of a black sheep, and a little on the alert to see himself avoided and neglected. Patty was not aware that he would not have ventured to pay these compliments to another kind of hostess; but she suffered intently from the fact that she had nobody to invite to meet him, nobody who would come to her even for a night, to keep her guest in countenance. She demeaned herself so far as

to write to the rector begging of him to come. But the rector had another engagement and would not, or could not, consent. Poor Patty! She suffered in many ways from being thus, as it were, out of the bonds of all human society, but never so much as in that dreadful three days. He was (as she thought) old, and he was fat, and not at all well-looking, though he was so amusing; but he gave her to understand before he went away that he would not mind marrying Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott. And so did one of the solicitors who instructed him, the younger one, who was unmarried; and there was a head clerk, nothing more than a head clerk, who looked very much as if a similar proposal was on his lips. "Like his impudence!" Patty said, though she really knew nothing of the young man. Three proposals, or almost proposals of marriage, within a week or two! This pleased the natural mind of Patty of the Seven Thorns, but it gave Mrs. Piercey occasion to think. They were all concerned with securing

property for her, and assuring her in its possession, and they thought naturally that nobody had so good a right to help her take care of it. But this reasoning was not by any means agreeable to Patty, who, flattered at first, became exceedingly angry afterwards when she found herself treated so frankly as an appendage to her property.

"Of course I knew it was always like that as soon as you had a little money!" she said, indignantly.

"Not with 'im, Patty, not with 'im," said Miss Hewitt, upon whom the brilliant barrister had made a great impression.

"Him!" cried Patty, "a fat old man!"

"You can't have everything," said her aunt. "For my part I'd rather 'ave a man like that, that's such fine company, and as you never could be dull as long as 'e was there, than a bit of a cock robin with an 'andsome face, and nothing behind it!"

"If you are meaning my Gervase, Aunt Patience, I ——"

"Lord, I never thought o' your Gervase! Bless

us, 'e 'ad no 'andsome face, whatever else!" the old lady cried. She was sent home that evening in the carriage, and Patty, angry, indignant, desolate, remained altogether alone. It was hard to say which was worst, the dreadful consciousness of having "nobody to meet" a guest, or being without guests altogether. She walked up and down her solitary house, entering one room after another; all deserted and empty. The servants, as well-bred servants should, got out of the way when they heard her approaching, so that not even in the corridor upstairs did she see a housemaid, or in the hall below a shadow of butler or footman to break the sensation of solitude. To be sure, she knew where to find Jerningham seated in her light and pleasant chamber sewing; but Jerningham was somewhat unapproachable, occupied with her work, quite above idle gossip, and indisposed to entertain her mistress; for Jerningham flattered herself that she knew her place. What was Patty to do? The under-housemaid was a Greyshott girl who had been at school

with her; therefore it may be perceived how great was the necessity for remembering always who she was, and never relaxing her dignity. She might have gone abroad, which she was aware was a thing that was done with great success sometimes by ladies who could travel about with maid and footman, and no need to think of expense. But Patty felt that she could not consent to descend among the common herd in search of acquaintances, and that her grandeur was nothing to her unless it was acknowledged and enjoyed at home. And then the winter was coming on. Patty was not yet sufficiently educated to know that winter was precisely the time to go abroad. She knew nothing in the world but Greyshott, and it was only for applause and admiration at Greyshott that she really cared.

It was in these circumstances that the winter passed, the second winter only since Patty's marriage, which had lifted her so far above all her antecedents and old companions. It was a long and dreary winter, with much rain, and that dull and

depressing atmosphere of cloud, when heaven and earth is of the same colour, and there is not even the variety of frost and thaws to break the monotonous languor of the long dead dark weeks. Patty did not bate an inch of her grandeur either for her loneliness or for the aggravation of that loneliness which was in the great rooms, untenanted as they were. She did not take to the little cheerful morning-room in which Lady Piercey had been glad to spend the greater part of her life in such wintry weather. Patty dined alone in the great dining-room, which it was so difficult to light up, and she sat alone all the evening through in the great drawing-room, with all its white and gold, where her little figure, still all black from head to foot, was almost lost in a corner, and formed but a speck upon the brightness of the large vacant carpet, and lights that seemed to shine for their own pleasure. Poor Patty! She sat and thought of the last winter, which was melancholy enough, but not so bad as this: of old Sir Giles and his backgammon

board, and Dunning standing behind backs. It was not exciting, but it was "company" at least. She thought of herself sitting there, flattering the old gentleman about his play, smiling and beaming upon him, yet feeling so sick of it all; and of that night—that night! when Roger Pearson had been at the dance, and brought Gervase in from the moor, to be laid on the bed from which he was never to rise. Her mind did not dwell upon Gervase, but it is astonishing how often she thought upon that dance at which her rejected lover had been enjoying himself, while she sat playing backgammon with her father-in-law, and listening for her husband. What a contrast! The picture had been burned in upon her mind by the event connected with it, and now had much more effect than that event. She could almost see the rustic couples with their arms entwined, and the romping flirtations of the barn, and the smoky lamps hung about, so different, so different from the steady soft waxen lights which threw an unbroken illumination upon her solitary

head! It was bad then, but it was almost worse now, when she had no company at all, except Aunt Patience from time to time, as long as Mrs. Piercey could put up with her. And this was all—all! that her rise in the world had brought her! She had done nothing very bad to procure that rise. If Gervase had lived it would have been good for him that she had married him, she still felt sure, notwithstanding that in actual fact it had not done him much good; and it was good for Sir Giles to have had her society and ministrations in the end of his life. Everybody allowed that—even the hostile lawyer at the trial, even the sullen Dunning, who had occasion to dislike her if anybody had, who had lost his legacy and almost his character by her means. Even he had been instrumental in proving to the world how she had cheered and comforted the old man. And she had got her reward—everything but that title, which it was grievous to her to think of; which, perhaps, if she had got it—if Gervase had only had the sense to live six months

longer—would have made all the difference! She had got her reward, and this was what it had come to—a quietness in which you could hear a pin drop; a loneliness never broken by any voice except those of her servants, of whom she must not, and dared not, make friends. Poor Patty! once so cheerful, so admired and considered at the Seven Thorns, with her life so full of bustle and liveliness—this was all she had come to after her romance in real life.

I cannot help thinking that if there had been a lady at the rectory, this state of affairs would have been mended, and that a good mother, with her family to set out in the world, would have seen the advantage for her own children of doing her best to attract acquaintances and company to Greyshott. But the rector was only a man, and a timid one, fearing to break the bonds of convention, and his daughters were too young to take the matter into their own hands. They might have done it had Mrs. Piercey waited for a few years; but then Patty had no inclination to wait.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MRS. PIERCEY went to town after Easter, as she was aware everybody who respected themselves, who were in Society, or who had any money to spend, did. But, alas! she did not know how to manage this any more than to find the usual solace in country life. She was, indeed, still more helpless in town; for no doubt in the country, if she had been patient, there would at last have been found somebody who would have had courage to break the embargo, to defy Lord and Lady Hartmore and all the partisans of the old family, and to call upon the lady of Greyshott. But in town what could Patty do? She knew nobody but the distant cousins somewhere in the depths of Islington, to whom she had gone at the time of

her marriage, but whom she had taken care to forget the very existence of as soon as her need for them was over. Mrs. Piercey went to a fashionable hotel, and engaged a handsome set of rooms, and sat down and waited for happiness to come to her. She had her maid with her, the irreproachable Jerningham, who would not allow her mistress to demean herself by making a companion of her; and she had Robert, the footman, and her own coachman from Greyshott, and a new victoria in which to drive about—all the elements of happiness—poor Patty! and yet it would not come. She had permitted herself, by this time, to drop the weight of her mourning, and to blossom forth in grey and white; and she drove in the Park in the most beautiful costumes, with the old fat Greyshott horses, who were in themselves a certificate that she was somebody, no mushroom of a *parvenue*. So was the coachman, who was the real old Greyshott coachman, and (evidently) had been in the family for generations. She drove

steadily every day along the sacred promenade, and was seen of everybody, and discussed among various bands of onlookers, whose only occupation, like the Athenians, was that of seeing or hearing some new thing. Who was she? That she was not of the style of her horses and her coachman was apparent at a glance. Where had she got them? Was it an attempt on the part of some visitor from the ends of the earth to pose as a lady of established family? Was it, perhaps, a daring *coup* on the part of some person, not at all *comme il faut*, to attract the observation and curiosity of the world? Patty's little face, with its somewhat fast prettiness, half abashed, half impudent, shone out of its surroundings with a contradiction to all those suppositions. The Person would not have been at all abashed, but wholly impudent, or else quite assured and satisfied with herself; and in any case she would not have been alone. A stranger, above all, would not have been alone. There would have been a bevy of other

women with her, making merry over all the novelty about them, and this, probably, would have been the case had the other idea been correct. But who was this, with the face of a pretty housemaid and the horses of a respectable dowager? Some of the gentlemen in the park, who amused themselves with these speculations, would, no doubt, have managed to resolve their doubts on the subject had not Patty been, as much as Una, though she was so different a character, enveloped in an atmosphere of such unquestionable good behaviour and modesty as no instructed eye could mistake. Women, who are less instructed on such matters, may mistake; but not men, who have better means of knowing. Thus Patty did make a little commotion; but as she had no means of knowing of it, and no one to tell her, it did her no good in the world.

And she went a good many times to the theatre, and to the opera, though it bored her. But this was a great ordeal: to go into a box all alone,

and subject herself to the opera-glasses of the multitude. Patty did not mind it at first. She liked to be seen, and had no objection that people should look at her, and her diamonds; and there was a hope that it might lead to something in her mind. But how could it lead to anything? for she knew nobody who was likely to be seen at the opera. When she went home in the evening she could have cried for disappointment and mortification. Was this all? Was there never to be anything more than this? Was all her life to be spent thus in luxury and splendour; always alone?

At first she had dined in solitary state in her rooms, as she thought it right, in her position, to do. But when Patty heard that other people of equal pretensions—one of them the baronet's lady, whom it was her despair not to be—went down to the general dining-room for their meals, she was too happy to go there too, thinking she must, at least, make some acquaintance with the other

dwellers in the hotel. But things were not much better there, for Mrs. Piercey was established at a little table by herself in great state, but unutterable solitude, watching with a sick heart the groups about her—the people who were going to the theatre, or to such delights of balls and evening parties as Patty had never known. There was but one solitary person beside herself, and that was an old gentleman, with his napkin tucked into his buttonhole, who was absorbed by the *ménu* and evidently thought of nothing else. Patty watched the groups with hungry eyes—the men in their evening coats, with wide expanses of white; the ladies, who evidently intended to dress after this semi-public dinner. Oh, how she longed to belong to some one, to have some one belonging to her! And such a little thing, she thought, would do it: nothing more than an introduction, nothing beyond the advent of some one who knew her, who would say, "Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott," and the ice would be broken. But then

that some one who knew her, where was he or she to be found?

Alas! there came a moment when both he and she were found, and that was the worst of all. She was seated listlessly in her usual solitude, when she saw a pair of people who were taking their seats at a table not far off. They had their backs turned towards her, and yet they seemed familiar to Patty. They were both tall, the gentleman with a military air, the lady with a little bend in her head which Patty thought she knew. There was about them that indefinable air of being lately married which it is so very difficult to obliterate, though they did not look very young. The lady was quietly dressed, or rather she was in a dress which was the symbol of quiet—quakerly, or motherly, to our grandmothers: grey satin, but with such reflections and shadows in it, as has made it in our better instructed age one of the most perfectly decorative of fabrics. Patty, experienced by this time in the habits and customs

of the people she watched so wistfully, was of opinion that they were going to the opera. Who were they? She knew them—oh, certainly she knew them; and they evidently knew several of the groups about; and now at last Patty's opportunity had surely come.

I think by this time Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott had acquired a forlorn look, the consequence of her many disappointments. It is not pleasant to sit and watch people who are better off than we are, however philosophical and high-minded we may be; and Patty, it need not be said, was neither. Her mouth had got a little droop at the corners, her eyes a little fixity, as of staring and weariness in staring. She was too much dressed for the dining-room of a hotel, and she had very manifestly the air of being alone, and of being accustomed to be alone. I think that, as so often happens, Patty was on the eve of finding the acquaintance for whom her soul longed, at these very moments when her burden was about to become too much

for her to bear; and she certainly had attained recognition in the world outside, as was to be proved to her no later than to-night. Such coincidences are of frequent occurrence in human affairs. It had become known in the hotel to some kind people, who had watched her solitude as she watched their cheerful company, who she was; and the matron of the party had remembered how much that was good had been said of Patty on the trial, and how kind she had been to the old man who had left her all his money without any doing of hers. "Poor little thing! I shall certainly take an opportunity of speaking to her to-morrow," this lady was saying, as Patty watched with absorbed attention the other people. Indeed, the compassion of this good woman might have hastened her purpose and made her "speak" that very night, had not Patty been so bent upon those other people whom she was more and more sure she knew; and what a difference—what a difference in her life might that have made! But she never

knew—which was, perhaps, in the circumstances, a good thing.

It was while Patty's attention was called away perforce by the waiter who attended to her, that the other people at whom she had been gazing became aware of her presence. The gentleman had turned a bronzed face, full of the glow of warmer suns than ours, in her direction, and started visibly. He was a man whom the reader has seen habitually with another expression—that of perplexity and general discontent; a man with a temper, and with little patience, though capable of better things. He had apparently got to these better things now. His face was lighted up with happiness; he was bending over the little table, which, small as it was, seemed too much to separate them, to talk to his wife, with the air of a man who has so much and so many things to say, that he has not a minute to lose in the outpouring of his heart. She was full of response, if not perhaps so overflowing; but on her aspect,

too, there had come a wonderful change. Her beautiful grey satin gown was not more unlike the unfailing black which Mrs. Osborne always wore, than the poor relation of Greyshott was to Gerald Piercey's wife, Meg Piercey once again. It would be vain to enter upon all the preliminaries which brought about this happy conclusion. Margaret had many difficulties to get over, which to everybody else appeared fantastical enough. A second marriage is a thing which, in theory, few women like ; and to cease to belong solely to Osy, and to bear another name than his, though it was her own, was very painful to her. Yet these difficulties had all been got over, even if I had space to enter into them ; which, seeing that Patty is all this time waiting, dallying with her undesired dinner, and wondering who these people are whom she seems to know, would be uncalled for in the highest degree.

When the waiter came up to the solitary lady at the table, and Colonel Piercey turned his face

in that direction, he started and swore under his breath, "By Jove!" though he was not a man addicted to expletives. Then he said, "Meg! Meg!" under his breath; "who do you think is sitting behind you at that table? Don't turn round. Mrs. Piercey, as sure as life!"

"Mrs. Piercey?" She was bewildered for a moment. "There are so many Mrs. Pierceys. Whom do you mean?"

"One more than there used to be, for my salvation," the bridegroom said; and then added, with a laugh, "but no other like this one, Meg—Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott——"

"Patty!" cried Margaret, under her breath.

"If you dare to be so familiar with so great a lady—the heroine of the trial, poor Uncle Giles' good angel——"

"Oh, don't be bitter, Gerald! It is all over and done with; and who knows, if it had been otherwise——"

"Whether we should ever have come together?"

he said: "you know best, so far as that goes, my love; and if it might have been so, good luck to Greyshott, and I am glad we have not got it. Yes, there she is, the identical Patty; and none the better for her success, I should say, looking very much bored and rather pale."

"Who is with her?" asked Margaret.

"There is nobody with her that I can see. No, she is quite alone, and bored, as I told you; and in a diamond necklace," he said with a laugh.

"Alone, and with a diamond necklace, in the dining-room of a hotel!"

"Well, why not? To show it and herself, of course; and probably a much better way than any other in her power to show them."

"Oh, Gerald, don't be so merciless. She has got your inheritance; but still, it was really Uncle Giles' will, and she was kind to him—even old Dunning could not deny that. And if Gervase had lived——"

"It was as well he did not live, poor fellow.

for her as well as for himself, though I should certainly, myself, have preferred it; for then we should have had none of this fuss, either of anticipation or disappointment—and no trial, and no costs; and no useless baronetcy that brings in nothing."

"Don't say that; your father likes it, and so will you in your day."

"My father likes to be head of the family, and so shall I. We'll have our first quarrel, Meg, over that little hussy, then."

"Not our first quarrel by a great many," she said, letting her hand rest for a moment on his arm. "But don't call her names, Gerald: all alone in a hotel in London, in the middle of the season, without a creature to speak a word to her! And I heard she was perfectly alone all the winter at home. Lady Hartmore goes too far. She has made it a personal matter that nobody should call. Poor little Patty! Gerald——"

"Poor little Patty, indeed! who has cost us not

only Greyshott, but how many thousand pounds; who has made you poor, Meg."

"There is poor and poor. Poor in your way is not poor in mine. I am rich, whatever you may be. Is she still there—alone—Gerald, with that white little face?" Margaret had managed, furtively, to turn her head, still under shadow of the waiter, and get a glimpse of their supplanter.

"What does it matter if her face is white or not? She has chalked it, perhaps, as she might rouge it on another occasion, to play her part."

"You have no pity," said Margaret; "to me it is very sad to see a poor woman like that alone, trying to enjoy herself. I think, Gerald, I will——"

"Will what? You are capable of anything, Meg. I shall not be surprised at whatever you propose."

"Well, since you have so poor an opinion of me," she said with a smile, "I think I'll speak to her, Gerald."

"Do you remember that she turned you out of your home? that she insulted you so that it was with difficulty I kept my temper?"

"You never did keep your temper, dear," said Margaret with gentle impartiality, shaking her head; "and," she added with a smile, "you insulted me far worse than ever Patty did. Should I bear malice? I will say a word to her before we go."

When they rose, and when Patty saw who they were, the chalk which Colonel Piercey thought she was capable of using to play her part, yielded to a crimson so hot and vivid that its truth and reality were thoroughly proved. She half rose, too, then sat down again more determinedly than before.

"Mrs. Piercey," said Margaret, "we saw you, and I could not pass you without a word."

"You are very kind, I am sure, Margaret Osborne; but you could have left your table very well without coming near me."

"Yes, perhaps," said Margaret; "I should have said that, seeing you alone——"

"Oh, if I am alone it is my own fault!" cried Patty, with a heat of angry despair which almost took away her voice. Then it occurred to her that to show this passion was to lessen herself in the eyes of those to whom she most wished to appear happy and great. She forced her cry of rage into a little affected laugh. "I don't often come here," she said; "I dine generally in my own apartments. But to-day I expected friends who could not come, and so I thought I'd amuse myself by coming down here to see the wild beasts feed."

As she said this, her eyes fell accidentally upon the kind lady who had made up her mind to make the acquaintance of this forlorn little woman, and startled that amiable person so that she sat gazing open-mouthed and open-eyed.

"In that case I am afraid I am only intruding," said Margaret; "but I thought perhaps—

if you are alone here, I—or my husband," she added this with a sudden blush and smile, "might have been of some use——"

"Oh, your husband! I wish him joy, I am sure. So you stuck to him, though he hasn't got Greyshott? Well, he'll have the baronetcy, to be sure, when the old man dies—I hadn't thought of that—without a penny! You must have been dead set on him, to be sure."

And Patty, bursting with fury and despite, jumped up, almost oversetting the table, and with a wave of her hand as if dismissing a supplicant, but with none of her usual regard for her dignity and her dress in threading a crowd, hurried away.

"You got rather more than you looked for," cried Colonel Piercey, triumphant, as Margaret came back to him and hastily took his arm. He had not heard what passed.

"I suppose there was nothing else to be expected," Margaret said in a subdued voice.

Patty went to the opera that night, as she had intended, her heart almost bursting; for that she should have hoped to meet somebody who would introduce and help her, and then to find that somebody was Margaret Osborne, was almost more than she could bear; but soon she was soothed by perceiving that more opera-glasses were fixed on her than ever, and that the people in the boxes opposite, and in the stalls, were pointing her out to one another. She caught the sound of her own name as she sat well forward in her box, that her diamonds might be well seen and her own charms appreciated; and she almost forgot the indignity to which she had been, as she thought, subjected. But as she went out, poor Patty could not but hear some remarks which were not intended for her ear. "That was the woman," somebody said, "the heroine of the great case, Piercey *versus* Piercey; don't you remember? the woman who married an idiot, and then got his father to leave her all the property." "What

a horror!" said the lady addressed: "a barmaid, wasn't she? and the poor creature she married quite imbecile—and now to come and plant herself there in the front of a box. Does she think anybody will take any notice of her, I wonder?" "Impudent little face, but rather broken down—begins to see it won't pay," said another man.

Patty caught Robert, her footman, by the arm, and shrieked to him to take her out of this, or she should faint, which the crowd around took for an exclamation of real despair, and made way for the lady, to let her get to the air. And Patty left town next day.

CHAPTER XLVII.

SHE left town next day in a tempest of wrath and indignation, and something like despair. She said to herself that she would go home, where no one would dare to insult her. Home! where, indeed, there would be nobody to insult her, but nobody to care for her; to remark upon her even in that contemptuous way; to say a word even of reprobation. A strong sense of injustice was in her soul. I am strongly of opinion that when any of us commits a great sin, it immediately becomes the most natural, even normal thing in our own eyes; that we are convinced that most people have done the same, only have not been found out; and that the opinion of the world against it is either purely fictitious, a pretence of superior virtue, or

else the result of prejudice or personal hostility. Patty had not committed any great sin. She had sought her own aggrandisement, as most people do, but she had gained wealth and grandeur far above her hopes by nothing that could be called wrong; indeed, she had done her duty in the position in which Providence and her own exertions had placed her. It was not her business to look after the interests of the Piercey family, but to take gratefully what was given her, which she had the best of right to, because it had been given her. This was Patty's argument, and it would be difficult to find fault with it. And to think that the whole cruel world should turn upon her for that; all those gentlefolks whom she despised with the full force of democratic rage against people who supposed themselves her betters, yet felt to the bottom of her heart to be the only arbiters of social elevation and happiness, the only people about whose opinion she cared! She came back to Greyshott in a subdued transport of almost tragic passion. She would

seek them no more, neither their approval nor their company. She would go back to her own class, to the class from which she had sprung, who would neither scorn her nor patronise her, but fill Greyshott with admiring voices and adulation, and make her feel herself the greatest lady and the most beneficent. She called for Aunt Patience on her way from the station and carried her back to Greyshott. "You're going to stay this time," she said; "I mean to live in my own way, and have my old friends about me; and I don't care that," and Patty snapped her fingers, "for what the county may say.'

"The county couldn't say nothing against your having me with you, Patty—only right, everybody would say, and you so young, and men coming and going."

"Where are the men coming and going?" said Patty; "I see none of them. I daresay there would be plenty, though, if it wasn't for the women," she added, with a self-delusion dear to every woman upon whom society does not smile.

"You take your oath of that!" said Miss Hewitt, who was naturally of the same mind.

"But I mean to think of them no more," cried Patty; "the servants shall say 'not at home' to any of those ladies as shows their face here! I'll bear it no longer! If they don't like to call they can stay away,—what is it to me? But I'm going to see my old friends and give dinners and dances to them that will really enjoy it!" Patty cried.

Miss Hewitt looked very grave. "Who do you mean, Patty, by your old friends?" she said.

"Who should I mean but the Fletchers and the Simmonses and the Pearsons and the Smiths and the Higginbothams?" said Patty, running on till she was out of breath.

"Lord, Patty! you'd never think of that!" cried Miss Hewitt, horrified.

"Why shouldn't I?—they'd be thankful and they'd enjoy themselves; and I'd have folks of my own kind about me as good as anybody."

"Oh, Patty, Patty, has it come to that? But

you're in a temper and don't mean it," Aunt Patience cried.

It would, perhaps, have been better for this disinterested relation had she supported Patty in her new fancy, as undoubtedly it would have been glorious and delightful to herself to have posed before her own village associates as one of the mistresses of Greyshott. But Miss Hewitt had been influenced all her life by that desire for the society of the ladies and gentlemen which is so strong in the bosom of the democrat everywhere. She could not bear that Patty should demean herself by falling back upon "the rabble"; and many discussions ensued, in which the elder lady had the better of the argument. Patty's passionate desire to be revenged upon the people who had slighted her resolved itself at last into the heroic conception of such a fête for the tenants and peasantry as had never been known in the county before. Indeed, the county was not very forward in such matters; it was an old-fashioned, easy-going district, and new

ways and new education had made but small progress in it as yet. The squires and the gentry generally had not begun to feel that necessity for conciliating their poorer neighbours, with whom at present they dwelt in great amity—which has now become a habit of society. And the fame of the great proceedings at Greyshott travelled like fire and flame across the county. No expense was spared upon that wonderful fête. Patty knew exactly what her old friends and companions liked in the way of entertainment. She made a little speech at the dinner, which began the proceedings, to the effect that she had not invited any of the fine folks to walk about and watch them as if they were wild beasts feeding (using over again in a reverse sense the metaphor which she had already found so effectual), but preferred that they should feel that she was trusting them like friends and wished them to enjoy themselves. And to see Patty and Miss Hewitt walking about, sweeping the long trains of their dresses over the turf in the midst of these

revellers, with a graciousness and patronage which would have made Lady Hartmore open her eyes, was a sight indeed. No Princess Royal could have been more certain of her superior place than Patty on this supreme occasion, when, flying from the hateful aristocrats, who would not call upon her, she had intended to throw herself back again into the bosom of her own class. And Miss Hewitt looked a Grand Duchess at the least, and showed a benign interest in the villagers which no reigning lady could have surpassed. "Seven? have you really? and such fine children; and is this the youngest?" she said, pausing before a family group; to the awe of the parents, who had known old Patience Hewitt all their lives, and knew that she knew every detail of their little history; but this will show with what gusto and fine histrionic power she was able, though really almost an old woman, to take up and play her part. But had it not been the ideal and hope of her life?

There was, however, one person at the Greyshott

fête whom it was difficult to identify with the heroes of the village. When Patty saw approaching her across the greensward a well-knit manly figure in irreproachable flannels, with a striped cap of red and white on his head, a tie of the same colour, a fine white flannel shirt encircling with its spotless folded-down collar a throat burnt to a brilliant red-brown by the sun, her heart gave a jump with the sudden conviction that "a gentleman" had come, even though uninvited, to see her in her glory. It gave another jump, however, still more excited and tremulous, when this figure turned out to be Roger Pearson—not a gentleman indeed, but a famous personage all over England, the pride of the county, whose rise in the world was now fully known to her. She had seen him before, indeed, in this costume, but only in the dusk, when it was not so clearly apparent. How well it became him, and what a fine fellow he looked! handsome, free, independent, as different from all his rustic friends as Patty was from her old school-

fellows in their cotton dresses, but in how different a way ; for Roger, it was well known, was hand-and-glove with many of the greatest people of England, and yet quite at home in the village eleven which he had come to lead in the match which was one of the features of the day. Patty, though she was the lady of Greyshott, could not but feel a pang of delight and pride when he walked by her side through the crowd. He was the only one whom she could not patronise. She thought furtively that any one who saw them would think he was the young squire ; that was what he looked like—the master, as she was the lady. He had no need to put on those airs which Patty assumed. Nobody disputed his superiority, or even looked as if they felt themselves as good as him. And it seemed to be natural, as the afternoon went on, that he should find himself again and again by Patty's side, sometimes suggesting something new, sometimes offering his services to carry out her plans, sometimes begging that she

would rest and not wear herself out. "Go and sit down quiet a bit, and I'll look after 'em; I can see you're doing too much," he said. It was taking a great deal upon him, Miss Hewitt thought, but Patty liked it! She gave him commissions to do this and that for her, and looked on with the most unaccustomed warmth at her heart while he fulfilled them. Just like the young master! always traceable wherever he moved in the whiteness of his dress, that dress which the gentlemen wore and looked their best in; and nobody could have imagined that Roger Pearson was not a gentleman, to see him. "Well! and weren't there ways of making him one?" Patty thought to herself.

But, notwithstanding her indignant determination to throw herself back into the bosom of her own class, it was to Roger alone that she made any overtures of further intercourse. He stayed behind all the others when the troops of guests went away, and told her it was a real plucky thing to do, and had been a first-rate success. He looked,

indeed, like a gentleman, but he had not adopted the phraseology of the Vere de Veres; and perhaps Patty liked him all the better. She said, "Come and see me any day; come when you like," when he held her hand to say good-night; and she said it in an undertone, so that Aunt Patience might not hear.

"I will indeed," he said in the same tone, "the first vacant day I have——" Her breast swelled to see that he was a man much sought after, though this had not been her own fate.

But either he did not have a vacant day, or, what Patty's judgment quite approved, he did not mean to make himself cheap. And Patty fell into a worse depth of solitude than ever, notwithstanding the presence of Aunt Patience, to whom she had said in the rashness of her passion that she should henceforth stay always at Greyshott, but whom now she felt to be an additional burden when perpetually by her side. There had been a little quarrel between them after luncheon one day

in July, for they were both irritable by reason of that unbroken *tête-à-tête*, and of the fact that they had said ten or twelve times over everything they had to say; and Miss Hewitt had flounced off upstairs to her room, where, after her passion blew off, she had lain down on the sofa to take a nap, leaving Patty to unmitigated solitude. It was raining, and that made it more dreary than ever: rain in July, quiet, persistent, downpouring; bursting the flowers to pieces; scattering the leaves of the last roses on the ground; and injuring even those sturdy uninteresting geraniums which are the gardener's stand-by—is the dreariest of all rains. It is out of season, even when it is wanted for the country, as there is always some philosopher to tell us; and it is pitiless, pattering upon the trees, soaking the grass, spreading about us a remorseless curtain of grey. Patty, all alone, walked from window to window and saw nothing but the trees under the rain, and a little yellow river pouring across the path. She sat down and

took up the work with which Aunt Patience solaced the weary hours. It was the old-fashioned Berlin woolwork, which only old ladies do nowadays. She contrived to put it all wrong, and then she threw it down and went to the window again. And then she was aware of a figure coming up the avenue, a figure clothed in a glistening white mackintosh and under an umbrella. She could not see who it was, but something in the walk struck her as familiar. It looked like a gentleman, she said to herself; though, to be sure, in these days of equality, it might be only the draper's young man with patterns, or the lawyer's clerk. Patty felt that she would have been glad to see even the lawyer's clerk.

But when it was Roger Pearson that came into the room, what a difference that made at once! It was almost as if the sun had come out from behind the clouds for a moment, although he was not a gentleman, but only a professional cricketer. He was not dressed this time in his flannels, which

suited him best, but in a grey suit, which, however, was very presentable. Patty felt that if the first lady in the county was to choose this particular wet day to call, which was not likely, she would not need to blush for her visitor. And she was unfeignedly glad to see him in the desolation of her solitude. She could tell from the manner in which he looked at her that he was admiring her, and he could tell that she was admiring him, and what could two young people require more of each other? Roger told her quite frankly a great deal about himself. He acknowledged that he had been "a bit idle" in his earlier days, and liked play better than work; but that had all come in very useful, for such play was now his work, and he had a very pleasant life, going all over the country to cricket matches, and seeing everything that was going. "And all among the swells, too," he said, "which would please you."

"Indeed, you're mistaken altogether," said Patty. "Swells! I loathe the very name of them. Since

I've lived among 'em I know what they are; and a poorer, more cold, stuck-up, self-seeking set——"

"I don't make no such objections," said Roger, who, it has been said, took no trouble to use the language of gentlemen. "They're good fellows enough. I don't want no more of them than they're willing to give me—so we gets on first rate."

"They try to crush your spirit," cried Patty, flaming, "and then, perhaps, when they've got you well under their fist, they'll condescend to take a little notice. But none of that sort of thing for me!"

"Well!" said Roger, looking round him, "this is a fine sort of a place, with all these mirrors and gilt things; but I should have said you would have been more comfortable with a smaller house, and things more in our own way, like what we've been used to, both you and me."

"I have been used to this for a long time

now," said Patty, with spirit, "and it's my own house."

"Yes, I know," he said, "and it ain't for me to say anything, for I'm not a swell like these as you have such a high opinion of."

"I have no high opinion of them. I hate them!" cried Patty, with set teeth.

"Well, I've often thought," said Roger, "though I know I've no right to—but just in fancy don't you know—as Patty Hewitt of the Seven Thorns would have been a happier woman in the nice little 'ouse as I could give her now, and never harming nobody, than a grand lady like Mrs. Piercey, with so much trouble as you have had, and no real friends."

"How do you know," cried Patty, "that I have no friends?" and then, after a moment's struggle to keep her self-command, she burst into a violent storm of tears. "Oh, don't say anything to me!" she cried, "don't say anything to me! I haven't had a kind word from a soul, nor

known what it was to have an easy heart or a bit of pleasure, not since the night you came to the little door, Roger Pearson—no, nor long before."

There was a silence, broken only by her passionate sobs and the sound of the weeping which she could not control, until Roger moved from his chair and went up to the sofa on which she had thrown herself, hiding her tears and flushed face upon the cushions. He laid his hand upon her shoulder with a caressing touch, and said, softly, "Don't now, don't now, Patty dear. Don't cry, there's a love."

"And when you think all I've gone through," said Patty, among her sobs, "and how I've given up everything to do my duty! When you said to me that night you had been at a dance—Oh! and me never seeing a soul, never anything but waiting on them, and serving them, and nursing them, or playing nonsense games from morning to night! And then when the old gentleman died

and left me what I never asked him for, then everybody taking up against me as if I had committed a sin; and never one coming near me, never, never one, but Meg in London coming to speak out of charity, because I was alone. Yes, and I was alone," said Patty, raising herself up, drying her eyes hastily, with a nervous hand, "and I'll be alone all my life; but I'll never take charity as if I was some poor creature, from her or from him!"

"You needn't be alone a moment more than you like, Patty," said Roger. "I was always fond of you, you well know. You jilted me to marry *'im*, poor fellow, but I'll not say a word about that. You're not 'appy in this great 'ouse, and you know it, nor you'll never be. I'm not saying anything one way or another about them ladies and swells; maybe they might have been a little kinder and done no 'arm. But you're an interloper among them, you know you are; and I'm not one as 'olds with putting another man's nose

out of joint, or taking his 'ouse over 'is 'ead. I wouldn't, if it was a bit of a cottage, or your father's old place at the Seven Thorns; and no more would I here. There ain't no blessing on it, that's my opinion."

"I don't know, Roger Pearson, that your opinion was ever asked," Patty said.

"It wasn't asked; but you wouldn't cry like that before anybody but me, nor own as you were in trouble. Now, 'ere's my 'and, if you'll have it, Patty; I'll not come 'ere to sit down at another man's fireside, but I'll stand by you through thick and thin; and I'm making a pretty bit of money myself, and neither me nor you—we don't need to be beholdin' to nobody. Let's just set up a snug place of our own, and I'd like to see the man—the biggest swell in the world—or woman either, that would put a slight upon my wife."

"What!" said Patty, with a smile that was meant to be satirical, "give up Greyshott and

my position and all as I've struggled so hard for, for you, Roger Pearson? Why, who are you? nobody! a man as is a good cricketer; and that's the whole when all's said."

"Well," said Roger, good-humouredly, "it's not a great deal, perhaps, but it's always something; and it's still me if I never touched a bat. You wouldn't marry my cricketing any more than you'd marry his parliamenteering, or sporting, or what not, if you did get a swell; and you take my word, Patty, you'll never get on with a swell like you would do with me. We've been brought up the same, and we understand each other. I know how you're feeling, just exactly, my poor little girl: you'd like to be 'appy, and then pride comes in. You say, 'I've worked hard for it and I'll never give it up.'"

"If you mean I'll not give up being Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott, with the finest house in the county, to go to a cottage with you——"

"Don't now, don't," said Roger, protesting, yet

without excitement; "I never said a cottage, did I? What I said was a 'andsome 'ouse, with all the modern improvements and furnished to your fancy, instead of this old barrack of a place; and a spanking pair of 'osses, a deal better than them old fat beasts, as goes along like snails; and some more in the stable, a brougham, and a victoria, and a dogcart for me; that's my style. I don't call that love in a cottage. I call it love very well to do, with everything comfortable. Lord! if you like this better, this old place—full of ghosts and dead folks' pictures, I don't agree with your taste, my dear, and that's all I've got to say."

Patty looked at her matter-of-fact lover, raising her head high, preparing the sharpest speeches. She sat very upright, all the tears over, ready, quite ready, to give him his answer. But then there suddenly came over Patty a vision of the winter which was coming, the winter that would be just like the last—the monotonous, dreadful

days, the long, lingering, mortal nights, with Aunt Patience for her sole companion. And her thoughts leapt on before to the 'andsome 'ouse ; for being, as Roger said, of his kind, and understanding by nature what he meant, her imagination represented to her in a flash as of sunshine, that shining, brilliant, high-coloured house—with all the last improvements and the newest fashions, plate-glass windows, shining fresh paint which it would be a delight to keep like a new pin, everything new, clean, delightful ; carpets and curtains of her own choosing, costing a great deal of money, and of which she could say to every guest, "It's the best that money could buy," or "I gave so much a yard for it," or "Every window stands me in fifty pounds there as you see it." All this appeared to Patty in a flash of roseate colour. And the pair of spanking horses at the door, and a crowd of cricketing men, yes, and cricketing ladies ; and meetings in her own grounds, and great luncheon parties, and quantities of other young couples

thinking of nothing but their fun and their pleasure, the wives dressing against each other, the young men competing in their batting and bowling and in their horses and turn-outs, but all in the easiest, noisiest, friendly way, and all surrounding herself, Patty, with admiration and homage as the richest among them. Oh, what a contrast to grey old Greyshott, with its empty, echoing rooms and its dark solitude, and the pictures of dead people, as Roger said, and not a lively sight or sound, nothing but Jerningham and the other servants and Aunt Patience. To think of all that, and Roger added to it,—Roger, who sat looking at her so kindly, with his handsome good-humoured face, not hurrying her in her decision, looking as if he knew beforehand that she could not resist him and his offer of everything she liked best in the world.

All this came to Patty in a moment, as she sat with her sharp speeches all arrested on her lips. The pause she made was not long, but it was long

enough to show him that she had begun to think, and we all know that the woman who deliberates is lost; and it was in the nature of the practical-minded lover, who was not given to the sentimental, as it was also in Patty's nature, to carry things by a *coup de main*. He sprang up from the seat he had taken opposite to her, and suddenly, before she was aware, gave Patty a hearty kiss which seemed to sound through all the silent house.

"Don't you think any more about it," he said, holding her fast; "you jilted me before, but you're not going to jilt me again. I 'ave the 'ouse in my eye, and I know the jolly life we'll live in it: lots of company and lots of fun, and two folks that is fond of one another; that's better than living all alone—a little more grand, but no fun at all."

And to such a triumphant and convincing argument, which her heart and every faculty acknowledged, what could Patty reply?

CHAPTER XLVIII.

IT was only a few weeks after this that there appeared in the newspapers, which had all reported at such length the great trial of Piercey *versus* Piercey, a paragraph which perhaps caused as much commotion through the county as the news of any great public event for many years. Parliament had risen, and the papers were very thankful for a new sensation of any kind. The paragraph was to this effect:—

"Our readers have not forgotten the trial of Piercey *v.* Piercey, which unfolded so curious a page of family history, and roused so many comments through the whole English-speaking world. It is seldom that so many elements of human interest are collected in a single case, and the

effect it produced on the immense audience which followed its developments day by day was extraordinary. The public took sides, as on an affair of imperial importance, for and against the heroine, who, from the bar-room of a roadside inn, found herself elevated in a single year to the position of a considerable landowner, with an ancient historical house and a name well known in the annals of the country. How she attained these honours, whether by the most worthy and admirable means, by unquestionable self-devotion to her husband and father-in-law, or by undue influence, exercised first on a young man of feeble intellect, and afterwards on an old gentleman in his dotage, was the question debated in almost every sociable assembly.

"The partisans and opponents of this lady will have a new problem offered to them in the new and startling incident which is now announced as the climax of this story. Those who have all along believed in the disinterestedness of the young and charming Mrs. Piercey will be delighted to

hear that she has now presented herself again before the public, in the most romantic and attractive light by freely and of her own will resigning the Manor of Greyshott, to which a jury of her countrymen had decided her to be fully entitled, to the heirs-at-law of the late Sir Giles Piercey, together with all the old furniture, pictures, family plate, etc., contained in the manor house—a gift equally magnificent and unexpected. It is now stated that this has all along been Mrs. Piercey's intention, and that but for the trial, which put her at once on her defence, she would have made this magnanimous renunciation immediately after coming into the property. Her rights having been assailed, however, it is natural that a high-spirited young woman should have felt it her first duty to vindicate her character; and that she should now carry out her high-minded intention, after all the obloquy which it has been attempted to throw on her, and the base motives imputed to her, is a remarkable instance of

magnanimity which, indeed, we know nothing to equal. It is, indeed, heaping coals of fire on the heads of her accusers, for whom, however; it must be said that their irritation in finding themselves so unexpectedly deprived of the inheritance they had confidently expected, was natural and justifiable. It must be a satisfaction to all that a *cause célèbre* which attracted so much attention should end in such a fine act of restitution, and that an ancient family should thus be restored to their ancestral place. We are delighted to add that Mrs. Piercey, who still retains a fine fortune bequeathed to her by the love and gratitude of her father-in-law, whom she nursed with the greatest devotion till his death, is about to contract a second marriage with a gentleman very well known in the cricketing world."

"In the name of Heaven, what is the meaning of that?" cried old Sir Francis Piercey, who was a choleric old gentleman, flinging down the newspaper (which only arrived in the evening), and

turning a crimson countenance, flushed with astonishment and offence, to his son Gerald and his daughter-in-law Margaret, who had returned to their home in the north only a few days before. Sir Francis was a very peppery old man, and constantly thought, as do many heads of houses conscious of having grown a little hard of hearing, that nothing was told him, and that even in respect to the events most interesting to the family he was systematically kept in the dark.

"The meaning of what?" Margaret asked, without excitement. She had no newspaper, being quite content to wait for the news until the gentlemen had read everything and contemptuously flung down each his journal with the remark that there was nothing in it. Mrs. Gerald Piercey did not imagine there could ever be anything in the paper which could concern her or her belongings; and it was a quiet time in politics, when Parliament was up, and nothing very stirring to be expected She rose to put down by her father-in-law's side

his cup of tea; for though he was so fiery an old gentleman, he loved the little feminine attentions of which he had been for many years deprived.

"Let me see, Grandpapa," said Osy, coming to the front with the air of a man who could put all straight.

"By Jove!" cried Colonel Piercey, who had come to the same startling announcement in his paper. And the father and son for a moment sat bolt upright, staring at each other as if each supposed the other to be to blame.

"What is it?" said Margaret, beginning to be alarmed.

She was answered by the sudden opening of the door, and the entrance, announced by a servant quite unacquainted with him, who conferred upon him an incomprehensible name, of Mr. Pownceby, pale with excitement and tired with a journey. He scarcely took time for the ceremonious salutations which Sir Francis Piercey thought needful, and omitted altogether the "how-d'ye-do's" owing

to his old friends, Margaret and Gerald, but burst at once into the subject that possessed him. "Well, I can see you've seen it! Sharp work putting it in so soon; but it's all true."

"What is all true? We have something to do with its being false or true, I suppose?" cried Colonel Piercey, placing himself in a somewhat defiant attitude, in an Englishman's usual position of defence before the fire.

"What are you saying, sir? what are you saying? I am a little hard of hearing. I desire that all this should be explained to me immediately. You seem all to understand, but not a syllable has reached my ears."

"I assure you, Sir Francis," said Mr. Pownceby, "I started the first thing this morning. I have not let the grass grow under my feet. Her solicitors communicated with me only yesterday. It is sharp work getting it into the papers at once, very sharp work, but I suppose she wanted to get the honour and glory; and it is quite true. I

have the deed in my pocket in full form; for those solicitors of hers, if not endowed with just the best fame in the profession, are——"

"But you're going a great deal too fast, Pownceby," cried Colonel Gerald. "I don't see that either my father or I can accept anything from that woman's hand."

"The deed in full form, Sir Francis," said the lawyer, too wise to take any notice of so hotheaded a person, "restoring Greyshott and all that is in it to the lawful heir—yourself. I don't pretend to know what is her motive; but there it is all in black and white: and for once in a way I can't but say that I admire the woman, Sir Francis, and that she's got a perception of what is right in her, after all."

"God bless my soul!" was all Sir Francis said.

"But we can't take it from that woman, Pownceby! Why, what are you thinking of? Receive from her, a person we all despise, a gift like this! Why, the thing is impossible! It is

like her impertinence to offer it; and how you could think for a moment——"

Margaret, who had hastily taken up the paper and read the paragraph, here put it down again and laid her hand on her husband's arm. "You must wait," she said, "you must wait, Gerald, for what your father says."

"The woman of the trial?" said Sir Francis, getting it with difficulty into his head, "the baggage that married poor Gervase, and made a fool of his father—that woman!" He added briskly, turning to his son: "I was always against that trial, you know I was. Don't throw away good money after bad, I always said: let be; if we don't get it in the course of nature we'll never get it, was what I always said. You know I always said it. Those costs which you ran up in spite of me, almost broke my heart."

There was a pause, and then Colonel Piercey said with a half laugh, "We all know, father, that you did not like the costs."

"I said so!" said Sir Francis, "I was always against it. I thought the woman might turn out better than you supposed. A very remarkable thing, Mr. Pownceby, don't you think it's a very remarkable thing? after she had won her cause and had everything her own way. Do you recall to memory ever having heard of a similar incident? I never did in all my experience; a very extraordinary thing indeed!"

"No," said Mr. Pownceby, "no; I don't think I ever did hear anything like it. They generally stick to what they have got like grim death."

"I think that must be rather a remarkable woman," said Sir Francis; "I retract anything I may have been induced to say of her in a moment of annoyance. I consider she has acted very creditably, very — very — I may say nobly, Mr. Pownceby. I beg that I may never hear a word in her disparagement from any of you. I hope that we might all be capable of doing anything so- so—magnanimous and high-minded ourselves."

"But, father," cried Colonel Piercey, "we can't surely accept a gift like this from a woman we know nothing of—whom we've no esteem for—whom we've prosecuted—whom——"

"Not accept it, sir?" cried Sir Francis—"not accept a righteous restitution? I should like to know on what principle we could refuse it? If a man had taken your watch from you, would you refuse to take it if he brought it back? Why, what would that be but to discourage every good impulse? I shall certainly accept it. And I hope, Mr. Pownceby, that you will convey my thanks—yes, my thanks, and very high appreciation to this young lady. I think she is doing a very noble thing. Whether I benefited by it or not, I should think it a very noble thing. Don't be stingy in your praise, sir! It's noble to say you've been wrong—many haven't the strength of mind to do it. I'll drink her very good health at dinner. We'll have a toast, do you hear?"

"Yes, Grandpapa," cried Osy, always ready;

"and shall it be with what Cousin Colonel calls the honours? You give the name, and I'll stand up upon a chair and do the 'Hip, hip, hurrah!'"

Upon what rule it was that old Sir Francis, rather a severe old gentleman to most people, had become grandpapa to Osy, while Colonel Piercey remained only, as of old, Cousin Colonel, is too subtle a question to enter into; but it was so to the perfect satisfaction of the two persons chiefly involved. And thus for the second time Osy cheered for Patty with the delighted readiness of an unbiassed soul.

Mrs. Piercey left Greyshott shortly after this, having left everything in the most perfect good order, and all the servants in the house, without saying a word of any new arrangements, though I need not say they had all read that paragraph in the newspapers. She went to London, where she spent a few weeks very pleasantly, and ordered a great many new dresses. Here she dismissed Jerningham, who carried away with her a number

of black and white gowns, and the best recommendations. Patty plunged into pinks and blues with the zest of a person who has long been deprived of such indulgences, and the world learned by the newspapers that, on the 20th of August, Patience, widow of the late Gervase Piercey, Esq., of Greyshott, was married at St. George's, Hanover Square, to Roger Pearson, Esq., of Canterbury House. The happy pair went abroad for their honeymoon, but did not enjoy the Continent, only entering into full and perfect bliss when they returned to the glistening glories of their new house. There had been various storms between them before the question of Greyshott had been decided, and it had required all Roger's power and influence to carry his scheme to a successful conclusion. His determination not to sit down by another man's fireside, and to have nothing to say to the old house, which he declared gave him the shivers to look at, were answered by many a scornful request to take himself off

then, if he didn't like it, and leave it to those who did.

"That's just what I want—to leave it to those that like it: you don't, Patty, and never will!" cried the bold lover. "How do I know? Oh, I know! You've gone through a lot, and you think you'll have something for it, anyhow. Well, so you shall have something for it. Wait till you see the 'ouse that is just waiting till you say the word—ten times better an 'ouse, and folks all about us will be delighted to see you, and as much fun as you can set your face to!" Oh, how powerful and how sweet these arguments were! But to give Greyshott back was a bitter pill to Patty.

"I'll sell it, then," she said; "it'll bring in a deal of money;" and this was what Miss Hewitt, who was almost mad with opposition, advised, arguing and beseeching till the foam flew from her mouth.

But Roger was obstinate. He declared that he

would not be instrumental in taking any man's home from him. "Money's a different thing," he said. "One sovereign's just like another, but one 'ouse ain't like another." The telling argument, however, was one which Roger had the cleverness to pick up from a cricket reporter on a daily paper, to whom he had confided his romance.

"By George!" cried the journalist, "what a paragraph for my paper!" He said "par," no doubt, but Patty would not have understood what this meant. When she did take up the idea, and understood that her praises were to be sung and her generosity extolled in every paper, and that the Pierceys would be made to sing small before her, Patty was overcome at last. Her heart swelled as if it would burst with triumph and a sense of greatness when she read that paragraph. She felt it to be altogether just and true. If they had not prosecuted, there was no telling what magnanimity she might not have been equal to,

and she accepted the praise as one who had deserved it to the very utmost.

"They've been in it hundreds and hundreds of years," she said to the new friends to whom her bridegroom introduced her in London—among whom were several newspaper men, and one who insisted upon getting her portrait for an illustrated paper —"as we have been in the Seven Thorns. Being of an old family myself, I have always felt for them." This was reported in the little biographical notice which was appended to Mrs. Piercey's portrait in the illustrated paper, where it was also told that she had been known far and wide as the Lily of the Seven Thorns, and had been carried off by the Squire's son from many competitors. It made up for much, even for the fact, still bitter to her, that she had been cheated out of her title, and would never be Lady Piercey,—a loss and delusion which sometimes brought tears into her eyes long after she was Roger Pearson's wife.

But when Patty settled down in her own 'Andsome 'Ouse, it was soon proved that Roger had not said a word too much. The cricketing world rallied round him. He ceased to be a professional, and became a gentleman cricketer and a member of the M.C.C. The cricket pitch within the grounds of Canterbury House was admirable, and matches were played there, in which not only the honour of the county, but the honour of England, was involved. Patty gave cricket luncheons and even cricket dinners, to which the golden youth of England came gladly, and where even great ladies, watching the cricket for one side or another, were content to be entertained. Patty drove her two spanking horses over the county, calling at the best houses; while even Lady Hartmore, after the restitution as she called it, paid her a visit of ceremony, which Mrs. Roger Pearson, swelling with pride and triumph, never returned. Not to have returned Lady Hartmore's visit was almost as great

a distinction as to have received one from the Queen. And all the lesser ladies in the county envied Patty the strength of mind which made her capable of such a proof of independence.

Colonel Piercey and his wife became shortly afterwards the inhabitants of Greyshott, which suited Sir Francis better than to have his long-accustomed quiet permanently disturbed. "Though I'd like to keep the boy," he said. It cost a good deal to Colonel Piercey's pride, but it lay with his father to decide, and there was nothing more to say. They were not rich, for Greyshott was a difficult place to keep up on a limited income; but it was something, no doubt, after the shock of the restoration, to have the old house still.

And Patty flourishes and spreads like a green bay-tree. She is not so careful of etiquette, so anxious to be always correct and do what other ladies do. She is beginning to grow stout; her colour is high; her nursery is full; and she is,

beyond all question, a much happier woman than she ever could have been in Greyshott, even had Lady Hartmore called and all gone well—now that she and her husband live in continual jollity in their own 'Andsome 'Ouse.

THE END.

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