IN TRUST

THE STORY OF A LADY AND HER LOVER

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CHAPTER XXVI.

GOING AWAY.

But this was not the first time that Anne had been driven out of patience by the suggestions of her little sister. When Rose had gone away, she calmed down by degrees and gradually got back her self-possession. What did Rose know about this matter or any other matter in which serious things like the heart, like love and the larger concerns of life were involved? She knew about superficial things, having often a keen power of observation, Anne knew; but the other matters were too high for her. Her unawakened mind could not comprehend them. How could she

have found a way of seeing into Cosmo's heart which was denied to Anne? It was impossible; the only thing that could have made her believe in Rose's superior penetration was that, Anne felt, she did not herself understand Cosmo as she had thought she did, and was perplexed about his course of action, and anxious as to the motives which she could not believe to have been anything but fine and noble. Though his coming had brought her back to something of her original faith, yet she had been checked and chilled without admitting it to herself. All that we can conceive of perfection is, perhaps, what we would have done ourselves in certain circumstances, or, at least, what we would have wished to do, what we might have been capable of in the finest combination of motives and faculties; and whatsoever might be the glosses with which she explained his behaviour to herself, Anne knew very well that this was not how Cosmo had behaved. She could not think of his conduct as carrying out any ideal, and here accordingly was the point in which her mind was weak and subject to attack. But after a while she laughed,

or tried to laugh, at herself; 'as if Rose could know!' she said, and settled down to arrange her papers again, and finally to write to Cosmo, which was her way of working off her fright and returning to herself.

'Rose has been talking to me and advising me,' she wrote. 'She has been telling me what I ought to do. And the chief point of all is about you. She thinks, as we are both poor now, that I ought to release you from our engagement, and so "give us both another chance," as she says. It is wonderful the worldly wisdom that is in my little sister. She thinks that you and I could both use this "chance" to our own advantage, and find someone else who is well off as a fitter mate for our respective poverties. Is it the spirit of the time of which we all hear so much, that suggests wisdom like this even in the nursery? It makes me open my eyes and feel myself a fool. And she does it all in such innocence, with her dear little chin turned up, and everything about her so smooth and childlike; she suggests these villanies with the air of a good little girl saying her

lesson. I cannot be sure that it amused me, for you know I am always a little, as you say, *au grand sérieux*; but for you who have a sense of humour, I am afraid it would be very amusing. I wonder, if the people she advises for their good, took Rose at her word, whether she would be horrified? I hope and believe she would. And as for you, Cosmo, I trust you will let me know when you want to be freed from your engagement. I am afraid it would take that to convince me. I cannot think of you even, from any level but your own, and, as that is above mine, how could it be comprehensible to Rose? This calculation would want trigonometry (is not that the science?), altogether out of my power. Give me a hint from yourself, dear Cosmo, when that moment arrives. I shall know you have such a motive for it as will make it worthy of you.'

When she had written this she was relieved: though perhaps the letter might never be sent to its address. In this way her desk was full of scraps which she had written to Cosmo for the relief of her mind rather than the instruction of his. Per-

haps, if her confidence in him had been as perfect as she thought, she would have sent them all to him. They were all appeals to the ideal Cosmo who was her real lover, confidences in him, references to his understanding and sympathy, which never would have failed had he been what she thought. This had been the charm and delight of her first and earliest abandonment of heart and soul to her love. But as one crisis came after another, or rather since the last crisis came which had supplied such cruel tests, Anne had grown timid of letting all these out pourings reach his eyes; though she continued to write them all the same, and they relieved her own heart. When she had done this now, her mind regained its serenity. What a wonder was little Rose! Where had the child learned all that 'store of petty maxims,' all those suggestions of prudence? Anne smiled to herself with the indulgence which we all have for a child. Some people of a rough kind are amused by hearing blasphemies, oaths which have no meaning as said by her, come out of a child's lips. It was with something of the same

kind of feeling that Anne received her little sister's recommendations. They did not amuse her indeed, but yet impressed her as something ludicrous, less to be blamed than to be smiled at, not calling forth any real exercise of judgment, nor to be considered as things serious enough to be judged at all.

The packing up kept the house in commotion, and it was curious how little feeling there was, how little of the desolation of parting, the sense of breaking up a long-established home. The pleasure of freedom and expectations of a new life were great even with Mrs. Mountford: and Rose's little decorous sorrow had long ago worked itself out. 'Some natural tears she dropped, but wiped them soon.' And it did not give these ladies any great pang to leave Mount. They were not leaving it really, they said to themselves. So long as the furniture was there, which was Mrs. Mountford's, it was still their house, though the walls of it belonged to Heathcote—and then, if Heathcote 'came forward,' as Mrs. Mountford, at least, believed he would do——. Rose did not think anything at all about this. At

first, no doubt, it had appeared to her as rather a triumph, to win the affections of the heir of entail, and to have it in her power to assume the position of head of the house, as her mother had done. But, as the sniff of the freshening breeze came to her from the unseen seas on which she was about to launch forth, Rose began to feel more disdain than pleasure for such easy triumphs. Cousin Heathcote was handsome, but he was elderly—thirty-five! and she was only eighteen. No doubt there were finer things in the unknown than any she had yet caught sight of; and what was Mount? a mere simple country house, not half so grand as Meadowlands—that the possible possession of it in the future should so much please a rich girl with a good fortune and everything in her favour. Leaving home did not really count for much in her mind, as she made her little individual preparations. The future seemed her own, the past was not important one way or another. And having given her sister the benefit of her advice with such decision, she felt herself still more able to advise Keziah, who cried as she put

up Miss Rose's things. On the whole, perhaps, there was more fellowship between Keziah and Rose than the little maid felt with the more serious Anne, who was so much older than herself, though the same age.

'I would not have married Saymore if I had been you,' said Rose. 'You will never know anything more than Hunston all your life now, Keziah. You should have come with me into the world. At Mount, or in a little country place, how could you ever see anybody? You have had no choice at all —Jim, whom you never could have married, and now old Saymore. I suppose your aunt thinks it is a great thing for you—but I don't think it a great thing. If you had come with us, you might have done so much better. I wish you had consulted me——'

'So do I, Miss Rose,' said Keziah, dropping tears into the box, which, fortunately, contained only boots and shoes, and articles which would not mark. 'Oh! I wish I had talked to you at the very first! but I was distracted like, Miss Rose,

about poor Jim, and I couldn't think of anything else.'

'That was nonsense,' said Rose; 'that was always quite out of the question; how could you have married a poor labourer after having been used to live with us, and have every comfort? It would have killed you, Keziah; you were never very strong, you know; and only think! you that have had fires in your room, and nice luncheons three or four times a day, how could you ever live upon a bit of bacon and weak tea, like the women in the cottages? You never could have married him.'

'That is what aunt used to tell me,' said Keziah faintly; 'she said I should have been the first to repent; but then Miss Anne——'

'Oh, never mind Miss Anne—she is so romantic. She never thinks about bread and butter,' said Rose. 'Jim is out of the question, and there is no use thinking of him; but old Saymore is just as bad,' said the little oracle; 'I am not sure that he isn't the worst of the two.'

'Do you think so, Miss Rose?' said Keziah

wistfully. It was an ease to her mind to have her allegiance to Jim spoken of so lightly. Anne had treated it as a solemn matter, as if it were criminal to 'break it off;' whereas Keziah's feeling was that she had a full right to choose for herself in the matter. But old Saymore was a different question. If she could have had the Black Bull without him, no doubt it would have been much better. And now here was a rainbow glimmer of possible glories better even than the Black Bull passing over her path! She looked up with tears in her eyes. Something pricked her for her disloyalty to Miss Anne, but Miss Rose was 'more comforting like.' Perhaps this wiser counsellor would even yet see some solution to the question, so that poor old Saymore might be left out of it.'

'I think,' said Rose with decision, 'that suppose I had been engaged to anyone, when I left Mount, I should have given it up. I should have said, "I am going into the world. I don't know what may be best now; things will be so very different. Of course, I don't want to be disagreeable, but I must

do the best for myself." And anybody of sense would have seen it and consented to it,' said Rose. 'Of course you must always do the best you can for yourself.'

'Yes, Miss Rose,' said Keziah. This chimed with her own profoundest instincts. 'But then there's mother and the boys. Mother was to be in the kitchen, and Johnny in the stable, and little Tom bred up for a waiter. It was setting them all up in the world, aunt said.'

'All that may be very well,' said Rose. 'Of course it is always right to be kind to your mother and the rest. But remember that your first duty is always to yourself. And if you like to come with me, I am to have a maid all to myself, Keziah; and you would soon find someone better than old Saymore, if you wanted to marry. You may be very sure of that.'

With this Rose marched away, very certain that she had given the best of advice to the little maid. But Keziah remained doubtful, weeping freely into the trunk which held the boots and shoes. After

all there remained 'mother and the boys' to think of, who would not be bettered by any such means of doing the best for herself as Rose had pointed out. Keziah thought, perhaps it would be better after all to submit the question once more to Miss Anne, before her final decision was given forth.

The other servants were affected by the breaking up more in Keziah's way than with any dismal realisation in their own persons of a conclusion to this chapter of life. They had all 'characters' that would procure them new places wherever they went; for Mrs. Mountford had not tolerated any black sheep. And as for old Saymore, he was greatly elated by his approaching landlordship, and the marriage which he hoped was settled. He was not aware of Rose's interference, nor of the superior hopes which she had dangled before his bride. 'I don't need to say as I'm sorry to leave, sir,' Saymore said to Mr. Loseby, who settled his last bills; 'and sorry, very sorry, for the occasion. Master was a gentleman as seemed to have many years' life in him, and to be cut off like that is a lesson to us all. But the living has

to think of themselves, sir, when all's done as can be done to show respect for the dead. And I don't know as I could have had a finer opening. I will miss a deal as I've had here, Mr. Loseby. The young ladies I'll ever take the deepest interest in. I've seen 'em grow up, and it'll always be a 'appiness to see them, and you too, sir, as has always been most civil, at my 'otel. But though there's a deal to regret, there's something on the other side to be thankful for, and we're told as everything works together for the best.'

This was the idea very strong in the mind of the house. As the landlord of the Black Bull holds a higher position in the world than even the most trusted of butlers, so the position of Mrs. Cook, as henceforward housekeeper and virtual mistress of Mount, was more dignified than when she was only at the head of the kitchen: and Worth, if she did not gain in dignity, had at least the same compensation as her mistress, and looked forward to seeing the world, and having a great deal of variety in her life. They all said piously that everything worked

together for the best. So that poor Mr. Mountford was the cause of a great deal of gratification to his fellow-creatures without knowing or meaning it, when his horse put his foot into that rabbit-hole. The harm he did his favourite child scarcely counted as against the advantage he did to many of his dependents. Such are the compensations in death as in life.

But it was December before they got away. After all it turned out that 'mother and the boys' had more weight with Keziah than Rose's offer, and the promise of superior advantage in the future; and she was left in the cottage she came from, preparing her wedding things, and learning by daily experiment how impossible it would have been to content herself with a similar cottage, weak tea, bad butter, and fat bacon, instead of the liberal *régime* of the servants' hall, which Rose had freely and graphically described as meaning 'three or four nice luncheons a day.' The Mountfords finally departed with very little sentiment; everything was provided for, even the weekly wreath on the grave, and there was nothing

for anyone to reproach herself with. Anne, as usual, was the one who felt the separation most. She was going to Cosmo's constant society, and to the enjoyment of many things she had pined for all her life. Yet the visionary wrench, the total rending asunder of life and all that was implied in it, affected her more than she could say, more than, in the calm of the others, there seemed any reason for. She went out the day before for a long farewell walk, while Rose was still superintending her packing. Anne made a long round through the people in the village, glad that the women should cry, and that there should be some sign here at least of more natural sentiment—and into the Rectory, where she penetrated to the Rector's study, and was standing by him with her hand upon his arm before he was aware. 'I have come to say good-bye,' she said —looking at him with a smile, yet tears in her eyes.

The Rector rose to his feet hastily and took her into his arms. 'God bless you, my dear child! but you might have been sure I would have come to see

the last of you, to bid you farewell at the carriage door——'

'Yes,' said Anne, clinging to her old friend, 'but that is not like good-bye here, is it? where I have always been allowed to come to you, all my life.'

'And always shall!' cried the Rector, 'whenever you want me, howsoever I can be of any use to you!'

The Curate came in while they were still clinging to each other, talking, as people will do when their hearts are full, of one who was no longer there to be bidden good-bye to—the Rector's wife, for whom he went mourning always, and who had been fond of Anne. Thus she said her farewell both to the living and the dead. Charley walked solemnly by her side up to the park gates. He did not say much; his heart was as heavy as lead in his breast. 'I don't know how the world is to go on without you,' he said; 'but I suppose it will, all the same.'

'After a while it will not make much difference,' said Anne.

'I suppose nothing makes much difference after a while,' the Curate said; and at the park gates he

said good-bye. 'I shall be at the train to-morrow—but you don't want me to go to all the other places with you,' he said with a sigh; 'and it is of no use telling you, Anne, as my father did, that, night or day, I am at your service whenever you may want me—you know that.'

'Yes, I know it,' she said, giving him her hand; but she was glad that he left her free to visit some other sacred places alone.

Then, as he went back drearily to the parish in which lay all his duty, his work in the world, but which would be so melancholy with Mount shut up and silent, she went lightly over the frosty grass, which crackled under her feet, to the beeches, to visit them once more and think of her tryst under them. How different they were now! She remembered the soft air of summer, the full greenness of the foliage, the sounds of voices all charmed and sweet with the genial heat of August. How different now! Everything at her feet lay frost-bound; the naked branches overhead were white with rime. Nothing was stirring in the wintry world about save

the blue smoke from the house curling lazily far off through the anatomy of the leafless trees. This was where she had sat with Cosmo talking, as if talk would never have an end. As she stood reflecting over this with a certain sadness, not sure, though she should see Cosmo to-morrow, that she ever would talk again as she had talked then pouring forth the whole of her heart—Anne was aware of a step not far off crackling upon a fallen branch. She turned round hastily and saw Heathcote coming towards her. It was not a pleasant surprise.

'You are saying good-bye,' he said, 'and I am an intruder. Pardon me; I strayed this way by accident——'

'Never mind,' said Anne; 'yes, I am saying good-bye.'

'Which is the last word you should say, with my will.'

'Thanks, cousin Heathcote, you are very good. I know how kind you have been. If I seem to be ungrateful,' said Anne, 'it is not that I don't feel it, but only that my heart is full.'

'I know that,' he said, 'very well. I was not asking any gratitude. The only thing that I feel I have a right to do is to grumble, because everything was settled, everything! before I had a chance.'

'That is your joke,' said Anne, with a smile; and then, after a time, she added, 'Will you take me to the spot as far as you remember it, the very spot——'

'I know,' he said; and they went away solemnly side by side, away from that spot consecrated to love and all its hopeful memories, crossing together the crisp ice-bound grass. The old house rose up in front of them against the background of earth and sky, amid the clustering darkness of the leafless branches. It was all silent, nothing visible of the life within, except the blue smoke rising faintly through the air, which was so still. They said little as they went along by the great terrace and the lime avenue, avoiding the flower-garden, now so bare and brown. The winter's chill had paralysed everything. 'The old house will be still a little more sad to-morrow,' Heathcote said.

'I don't think it ought to be. You have not the affection for it which you might have had, had you known it better: but some time or other it will blossom for you and begin another life.'

He shook his head. 'May I bring Edward to see you in Park Lane? Edward is my other life,' he said, 'and you will see how little strength there is in that.'

'But, cousin Heathcote, you must not speak so. Why should you? You are young; life is all before a man at your age.'

'Who told you that?' he said with a smile. 'That is one of your feminine delusions. An old fellow of thirty-five, when he is an old fellow, is as old as Methuselah, Anne. He has seen everything and exhausted everything. This is the true age at which all is vanity. If he catches at a new interest and begins to hope for a renewal of his heart, something is sure to come in and stop him. He is frustrated and all his opportunities baulked as in my own case—or something else happens. I know

you think a great deal more of our privileges than they deserve.'

'We are taught to do so,' said Anne. 'We are taught that all our best time is when we are young, but that it is different with a man. A man, so to speak, never grows old.'

'One knows what that means. He is supposed to be able to marry at any age. And so he is—somebody. But, if you will reflect, few men want to marry in the abstract. They want to marry one individual person, who, so far as my experience goes, is very often, most generally I should say, not for them. Do you think it is a consolation for the man who wants to marry Ethelinda, that probably Walburgha might have him if he asked her? I don't see it. You see how severely historical I am in my names.'

'They are both Mountford names,' said Anne, 'but very severe—archæological, rather than historical.' And then they came out on the other side and were silent, coming to the broad stretch of the park on which Mr. Mountford's accident took place.

They walked along very silently with a sort of mournful fellowship between them. So far as this went there was nobody in the world with whom Anne could feel so much in common. His mind was full of melancholy recollections as he walked along the crisp and crackling grass. He seemed to see the quiet evening shadows, the lights in the windows, and to hear the tranquil voice of the father of the family pointing out the welcome which the old house seemed to give: and then the stumble, the fall, the cry; and the long long watch in the dark, so near help—the struggles of the horse—the stillness of the huddled heap which could scarcely be identified from the horse, in the fatal gloom. When they came to the spot they stood still, as over a grave. There were still some marks of the horse's frantic hoofs in the heavy grass.

'Was it long?' he said. 'The time seemed years to me—but I suppose it was not an hour.'

'They thought only about half-an-hour,' said Anne, in a low reverential voice.

'A few minutes were enough,' Heathcote said,

and again there was a silence. He took her hand, scarcely knowing what he did.

'We are almost strangers,' he said; 'but this one recollection will bind us together, will it not, for all our lives?'

Anne gave a soft pressure to his hand, partly in reply, partly in gratitude. Her eyes were full of tears, her voice choked. 'I hope he had no time to think,' she said.

'A moment, but no more. I feel sure that after that first cry, and one groan, there was no more.'

She put down her veil and wept silently as they went back to the house. Mrs. Mountford all the time was sitting with Rose in her bedroom watching Worth as she packed all the favourite knicknacks, which make a lady's chamber pretty and homelike. She liked to carry these trifles about, and she was interested and anxious about their careful packing. Thus it was only the daughter whom he had wronged who thought of the dead father on the last day which the family spent at Mount.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A NEW BEGINNING.

For people who are well off, not to say rich, and who have no prevailing anxieties to embitter their life, and who take an interest in what is going on around them, London is a pleasant place enough, even in December. And still more is Park Lane a pleasant place. To see the red wintry sunshine lighting up the misty expanse of the Park, the brisk pedestrians going to and fro under the bare trees, the carriages following each other along the broad road, the coveys of pretty children and neat nursemaids, and all the flood of prosperous life that flows along, leisurely in the morning, crowding in the afternoons, is very pleasant to the uninitiated. All the notable people that are to be found in London at that period, appearing now and then,

and a great many people who get lost to sight in the throngs of the season, but are more worth seeing than even those throngs, were pointed out to the ladies by the two cicerones who took in hand to enlighten their ignorance. The house they had was one of those small houses with large, ample, bow windows to the drawing-rooms, which give a sort of rustic, irregular simplicity to this street of the rich. Those people who are happy and well off and live in Park Lane must be happier and more well off than people anywhere else. They must be amused besides, which is no small addition to happiness. Even Anne felt that to sit at that window all day long would be a pleasant way of occupying a day. The misty distance, penetrated by the red rays of sunshine, was a kind of poem, relieved by the active novelty of the animated foreground, the busy passengers, the flood and high tide of life. How different from the prospect over the park at Mount, where Charley Ashley on the road, coming up from the Rectory, was something to look at, and an occasional friend with him the height of excitement. The

red rays made the mist brighter and brighter; the crowd increased; the carriages went faster; and then the sun waned and got low and went out in a bank of cloud, and the lamps were all lighted in the misty twilight, but still the crowd went on. The ladies sat at the window and were amused, as by a scene in a play; and then to think that 'all the pictures,' by which Anne meant the National Gallery, were within reach—and many another wonder, of which they had been able to snatch a hasty glance once a year, or not so often as once a year, but which was now daily at their hand: and even, last, but yet important, the shops behind all, in which everything that was interesting was to be found. Rose and her mother used to like, when they had nothing better and more important to buy, to go to the Japanese shop, and turn over the quaint articles there. Everything was new to them, as if they had come from the South Seas. But the newest of all was this power of doing something whenever they pleased, finding something to look at, something to hear, something to buy. The power of shopping is in itself an end-

less delight to country ladies. Nothing to do but to walk into a beautiful big place, with obsequious people ready to bring you whatever you might want, graceful young women putting on every variety of mantle to please you, bland men unfolding the prettiest stuffs, the most charming dresses. The amusement thus afforded was unending. Even Anne liked it, though she was so highflown. Very different from the misty walk through their own park to ask after some sick child, or buy postage stamps at the village post-office. This was about all that could be done at Mount. But London was endless in its variety. And then there was sight-seeing such as never could be managed when people came up to town only for a month in the season. Mr. Mountford indeed had been impatient at the mere idea that his family wanted to see St. Paul's and the Tower, like rustics come to town for a holiday. Now they were free to do all this with nobody to interfere.

And it was Cosmo who was their guide, philosopher and friend in this new career. He had

chosen their house for them, with which they were all so entirely pleased, and it was astonishing how often he found leisure to go with them here and there, explaining to them that his work was capable of being done chiefly in the morning, and that those afternoon hours were not good for much. 'Besides, you know the time of a briefless barrister is never of much importance,' he said, with a laugh. Rose was very curious on this point. She questioned him a great deal more closely than Anne would have done. 'Are you really a briefless barrister, Mr. Douglas? What is a briefless barrister? Does that mean that you have no work at all to do?' she said.

'Not very much. Sometimes I am junior with some great man who gets all the fees and all the reputation. Sometimes an honest, trustful individual, with a wrong to be redressed, comes to ask my advice. This happens now and then, just to keep me from giving in altogether. It is enough to swear by, that is about all,' he said.

'Then it is not enough to live on,' said Rose, pushing her inquiries to the verge of rudeness. But

Cosmo was not offended. He was indulgent to her curiosity of every kind.

'No, not near enough to live on. I get other little things to do, you know—sometimes I write a little for the newspapers—sometimes I have a report to write or an inquiry to conduct. And sometimes a kind lady, a friend to the poor, will ask me out to dinner,' he said, with a langh. They were sitting at dinner while this conversation was going on.

'But then, how could you——?' Rose began, then stopped short, and looked at her sister. 'I will ask you that afterwards,' she said.

'Now or afterwards, your interest does me honour, and I shall do my best to satisfy you,' said Cosmo, with a bow of mock submission. He was more light-hearted, Anne thought, than she had ever seen him before; and she was a little surprised by the amount of leisure he seemed to have. She had formed no idea of the easy life of the class of so-called poor men to which Cosmo belonged. According to her ideas they were all toiling, lying in wait for Fortune, working early and late, and letting no

opportunity slip. She could have understood the patience, the weariness, the obstinate struggle of such lives; but she could not understand how, being poor, they could get on so comfortably, and with so little strain, with leisure for everything that came in the way, and so many little luxuries. Anne was surprised by the fact that Cosmo could bestow his afternoons upon their little expeditions, and go to the club when he left them, and be present at all the theatres when anything of importance was going on, and altogether show so little trace of the pressure which she supposed his work could not fail to make upon him. He seemed indeed to have fewer claims upon his time than she herself had. Sometimes she was unable to go out with the others, having letters from Mr. Loseby to answer, or affairs of the estate to look after; but Cosmo's engagements were less pressing. How was it? she asked herself. Surely it was not in this way that men got to be Judges, Lord Chancellors—all those great posts which had been in Anne's mind since first she knew that her lover belonged to the profession of the law. That

he must be aspiring to these heights seemed to her inevitable—and especially now, when she had lost all her money, and there was no possible means of union for them, save in his success. But could success be won so easily? Was it by such simple means that men got to the top of the tree, or even reached as far as offices which were not the highest?

These questions began to meet and bewilder her very soon after their arrival, after the first pleasure of falling into easy constant intercourse with the man who loved her and whom she loved.

At first it had been but too pleasant to see him continually, to get acquainted with the new world in which they were living, through his means, and to admire his knowledge of everything—all the people and all their histories. But by-and-by Anne's mind began to get bewildered. She was only a woman and did not understand—nay, only a girl, and had no experience. Perhaps, it was possible men got through their work by such a tremendous effort of power that the strain could only be kept up

for a short period of time; perhaps Cosmo was one of those wonderful people who accomplish much without ever seeming to be employed at all; perhaps —and this she felt was the most likely guess—it was her ignorance that did not understand anything about the working of an accomplished mind, but expected everything to go on in the jog-trot round of labour which was all she understood. Happy are the women who are content to think that all is well which they are told is well—and who can believe in their own ignorance and be confident in the better knowledge of the higher beings with whom they are connected. Anne could not do this—she abode as in a city of refuge in her own ignorance, and trusted in that to the fullest extent of her powers—but still her mind was confused and bewildered. She could not make it out. At the same time, however, she was quite incapable of Rose's easy questioning. She could not take Cosmo to task for his leisure, and ask him how he was employing it. When she heard her little sister's interrogations she was half alarmed half horrified. Fools rush in—she did not say this

to herself, but something like it was in her thoughts.

After this particular dinner, however, Rose kept to her design very steadily. She beckoned Cosmo to come to her when he came upstairs. Rose's rise into importance since her father's death had been one of the most curious incidents in the family history. It was not that she encroached upon the sphere of Anne, who was supreme in the house as she had always been—almost more supreme now, as having the serious business in her hands; nor was she disobedient to her mother, who, on her side, was conscientiously anxious not to spoil the little heiress, or allow her head to be turned by her elevation. But Rose had risen somehow, no one could tell how. She was on the top of the wave—the successfulness of success was in her veins, exhilarating her, calling forth all her powers. Anne, though she had taken her own deposition with so much magnanimity, had yet been somewhat changed and subdued by it. The gentle imperiousness of her character, sympathetic yet naturally dominant, had been already

checked by these reverses. She had been stopped short in her life, and made to pause and ask of the world and the unseen those questions which, when once introduced into existence, make it impossible to go on with the same confidence and straightforward rapidity again. But little Rose was full of confidence and curiosity and faith in herself. She did not hesitate either in advising or questioning the people around her. She had told Anne what she ought to do—and now she meant to tell Cosmo. She had no doubt whatever as to her competence for it, and she liked the rôle.

'Come and sit here beside me,' she said. 'I am going to ask you a great many questions. Was that all true that you told me at dinner, or was it your fun? Please tell me in earnest this time. I want so very much to know.'

'It would have been poor fun; not much of a joke, I think. No, it was quite true.'

'All of it? About writing in the newspapers, and one person asking your advice once in a way? And about ladies asking you out to dinner?'

'Perhaps that would be a little too matter-of-fact. I have always had enough to pay for my dinner. Yes, I think I can say that much,' said Cosmo, with a laugh.

'But that does not make very much difference,' said Rose. 'Well, then, now I must ask you another question. How did you think, Mr. Douglas, that you could marry Anne?'

She spoke low, so that nobody else could hear, and looked him full in the face, with her seeming innocence. The question was so unexpected, and the questioner so unlike a person entitled to institute such examinations, that Cosmo was entirely taken by surprise. He gave an almost gasp of amazement and consternation, and though he was not easily put out, his countenance grew crimson.

'How did I think I could——? You put a very startling question. I always knew I was entirely unworthy,' he stammered out.

'But that isn't what I meant a bit. Anne is awfully superior,' said Rose. 'I always knew she was—but more than ever now. I am not asking you

how you ventured to ask her, or anything of that sort—but how did you think that you could marry—when you had only enough to be sure of paying for your own dinner? And I don't mean either just at first, for of course you thought she would be rich. But when you knew that papa was so angry, and that everything was so changed for her, how *could* you think you could go on with it? It is that that puzzles me so.'

Rose was seated in a low chair, busy with a piece of crewel work, from which she only raised her eyes now and then to look him in the face with that little matter-of-fact air, leaving him no loophole of sentiment to escape by. And he had taken another seat on a higher elevation, and had been stooping over her with a smile on his face, so altogether unsuspicious of any attack that he had actually no possibility of escape. Her half-childish look paralysed him: it was all he could do not to gape at her with open mouth of bewilderment and confusion. But her sepech was a long one, and gave him a little time to get up his courage.

'You are very right,' he said. 'I did not think you had so much judgment. How could I think of it—I cannot tell. It is presumption; it is wretched injustice to her—to think of dragging her down into my poverty.'

'But you don't seem a bit poor, Mr. Douglas; that is the funny thing—and you are not very busy or working very hard. I think it would all be very nice for you, and very comfortable. But I cannot see, for my part,' said the girl, tranquilly, 'what you would do with Anne.'

'Those are questions which we do not discuss——' he was going to say 'with little girls,' being angry; but he paused in time—'I mean which we can only discuss, Anne and I, between ourselves.'

'Oh, Anne! she would never mind!' said Rose, with a certain contempt.

'What is it that Anne would never mind?' said Mrs. Mountford. Anne was out of the room, and had not even seen this curious inquisition into the meaning of her betrothed.

'Nothing at all that is prudent, mamma. I was

asking Mr. Douglas how he ever thought he would be able to get married, living such an easy life.'

'Rose, are you out of your senses?' cried her mother, in alarm. 'You will not mind her, Mr. Douglas, she is only a child—and I am afraid she has been spoiled of late. Anne has always spoiled her: and since her dear papa has been gone, who kept us all right——'

Here Mrs. Mountford put her handkerchief lightly to her eyes. It was her tribute to the occasion. On the whole she was finding her life very pleasant, and the pressure of the cambric to her eyelids was the little easy blackmail to sorrow which she habitually paid.

'She asks very pertinent questions,' said Cosmo, getting up from the stool of repentance upon which he had been placed, with something between a smile and a sigh.

'She always had a great deal of sense, though she is such a child,' said her mother fondly; 'but, my darling, you must learn that you really cannot

be allowed to meddle with things that don't concern you. People always know their own affairs best.'

At this moment Anne came back. When the subject of a discussion suddenly enters the place in which it has been going on, it is strange how foolish everybody looks, and what a sense of wrong-doing is generally diffused in the atmosphere. They had been three together to talk, and she was but one. Cosmo, who, whatever he might do, or hesitate to do, had always the sense in him of what was best, the perception of moral beauty and ideal grace which the others wanted, looked at her as she came across the room with such compunctious tenderness in his eyes as the truest lover in existence could not have surpassed. He admired and loved her, it seemed to him, more than he ever did before. And Anne surprised this look of renewed and half-adoring love. It went through and through her like a sudden warm glow of sunshine, enveloping her in sudden warmth and consolation. What a wonderful glory, what a help and encouragement in life, to be loved like that! She smiled at him with the ten-

derest gratitude. Though there might be things in which he fell below the old ideal Cosmo, to whom all those scraps of letters in her desk had been addressed, still life had great gladness in it which had this Cosmo to fall back upon. She returned to that favourite expression, which sometimes lately she had refrained even from thinking of, and with a glance called him to her, which she had done very little of late. 'I want your advice about Mr. Loseby's letter,' she said. And thus the first result of Rose's cross-examination was to bring the two closer to each other. They went together into the inner room, where Anne had her writing-table and all her business papers, and where they sat and discussed Mr. Loseby's plans for the employment of money. 'I would rather, *far* rather, do something for the estate with it,' Anne said. 'Those cottages! my father would have consented to have them; and Rose always took an interest in them, almost as great an interest as I did. She will be so well off, what does it matter? Comfort to those poor people is of far more importance than a little additional

money in the bank, for that is what it comes to—not even money to spend, we have plenty of that.'

'You do not seem to think that all this should have been for yourself, Anne. Is it possible? It is more than I could have believed.'

'Dear Cosmo,' said Anne, apologetically, 'you know I have never known what it is to be poor. I don't understand it. I am intellectually convinced, you know, that I am a beggar, and Rose has everything; but otherwise it does not have the slightest effect upon me. I don't understand it. No, I am not a beggar. I have five hundred a year.'

'Till that little girl comes of age,' he said, with an accent of irritation which alarmed Anne. She laid her soft hand upon his to calm him.

'You like Rose well enough, Cosmo; you have been so kind to her, taking them everywhere. Don't be angry, it is not her fault.'

'No, it is my fault,' he said. 'I am at the bottom of all the mischief. It is I who have spoiled your life. She has been talking to me, that child, and with the most perfect reason. She says how

could I think of marrying Anne if I was so poor? She is quite right, my dearest; how could I think of marrying you, of throwing my shadow across your beautiful, bright, prosperous life?'

'For that matter,' said Anne, with a soft laugh, 'you did not, Cosmo—you only thought of loving me. You are like the father in the "Précieuses Ridicules," do you remember, who so shocked everybody by coming brutally to marriage at once. *That*, after all, has not so much to do with it. Scores of people have to wait for years and years. In the meantime the *pays de tendre* is very sweet; don't you think so?' she said, turning to him soft eyes which were swimming in a kind of dew of light, liquid brightness and happiness, like a glow of sunshine in them. What could Cosmo do or say? He protested that it was very sweet, but not enough. That nothing would be enough till he could carry her away to the home which should be hers and his, and where nobody would intermeddle. And Anne was as happy as if her lover, speaking so earnestly, had been trans-

formed at once into the hero and sage, high embodiment of man in all the nobleness of which man is capable, which it was the first necessity of her happiness that he should be.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HEATHCOTE'S CAREER.

HEATHCOTE MOUNTFORD went with his cousins to London, and when he had taken them to their house, returned to his chambers in the Albany. They were very nice rooms. I do not know why an unmarried man's lodging should be called chambers, but it does not make them at all different from other rooms which are not dignified by that name. They were very comfortable, but not very orderly, with numbers of books about, and a boot or two now and then straying where it had no right to be, but also with the necessary curiosities and prettinesses which are now part of the existence of every well-bred person, though these were not shown off to the full advantage, but lost among a good deal of litter scattered here and there. He was not a man

who put his best foot foremost in any way, but let his treasures lie about, and permitted his own capacities and high qualities to go to rust under the outside covering of indifference and do-nothingness. It had never been necessary to him to do anything. He had very little ambition, and whatever zeal for enjoyment had been in his life, had been satisfied and was over. He had wandered over a great part of the earth, and noticed many things in a languid way, and then he had come home and gone to his chambers, and, unpacking the treasures which, like everybody else, he had taken some trouble to 'pick up' here and there, suffered them to lie about among all sorts of trifling things. He had Edward to care for, his younger brother, who made a rush upon him now and then, from school first, and then from Sandhurst, always wanting money, and much indulgence for his peccadilloes and stupidities: but no one else who took any interest in himself or his possessions: and Edward liked a cigar far better than a bronze, and among all his brother's possessions, except bank notes and stray sovereigns, or an occasional cheque when he

had been more extravagant than usual, cared for nothing but the French novels, which Heathcote picked up too, not because he liked them much, but because everybody did so—and Edward liked them because they were supposed to be so wrong. Edward was not on the whole an attractive boy. He had a great many tastes and a great many friends who were far from agreeable to his brother, but he was the only real 'object in life' to Heathcote, who petted him much and lectured him as little as was possible. There seemed to be scarcely any other point at which his own contemplative, inactive existence touched the practical necessities of life.

He came back to London with the idea that he would be very glad to return again to the quiet of his chambers, where nothing ever happened. He said to himself that excursions into the outer world, where something was always happening, were a mistake. He had but stepped out of his hermitage without thinking, once in a way, to pay a visit which, after all, was a duty visit, when a whole tragedy came straightway about his ears—accident,

death, sorrow, injustice, a heroine, and a cruel father, and all the materials of a full-blown romance. How glad he would be, he thought, to get into his hermitage again! Within its quiet centre there was everything a man wanted—books, an occasional cigar, an easy chair (when it was clear from papers and general literature) for a friend to sit in. But when he did get back, he was not so certain of its advantages: no doubt it was everything that could be desired—but yet, it was a hermitage, and the outlook from the windows was not cheerful. If Park Lane was brighter than the view across the park at Mount, the Albany, with its half-monastic shade, like a bit of a male *béguinage*, was less bright. He sat at his window, vaguely looking out —a thing he had never had the slightest inclination to do before—and felt an indescribable sense of the emptiness of his existence. Nor was this only because he had got used to the new charms of household life, and liked a house with women in it, as he had suggested to himself—not even that—it was an influence more subtle. He took Edward with him to

Park Lane, and presented that hero, who did not understand his new relations. He thought Rose was 'very jolly,' but Anne alarmed him. And the ladies were not very favourably moved towards Edward. Heathcote had hoped that his young brother might be captivated by them, and that this might very possibly be the making of him: as the friends of an unsatisfactory young man are always so ready to hope. But the result did not justify his expectation. 'If the little 'un were by herself, without those two old fogeys, she might, perhaps, be fun,' Edward thought, and then he gave his brother a description of the favourite Bet Bouncer of his predilections. This attempt having failed, Heathcote for his part did not fall into mere aimless fluttering about the house in Park Lane as for a time he had been tempted to do. It was not the mere charm of female society which had moved him. Life had laid hold upon him on various sides, and he could not escape into his shell, as of old. Just as Cosmo Douglas had felt, underneath all the external gratifications of his life, the consciousness

that everybody was asking, 'What Douglases does he belong to?' so Heathcote, in the stillness of his chambers, was conscious that his neighbours were saying, 'He is Mountford of Mount.' As a matter of fact very few people knew anything about Mount —but it is hard even for the wisest to understand how matters which so deeply concern themselves should be utterly unimportant to the rest of the world. And by-and-by many voices seemed to wake up round him, and discuss him on all sides. 'He has a very nice old place in the country, and a bit of an entailed estate—nothing very great, but lands that have been in the family for generations. Why doesn't he go and look after it?' He did not know if those words were really said by any one, yet he seemed to hear them circling about his head, coming like labels in an old print out of the mouths of the men at his club. 'Why doesn't he look after his estate? Is there nothing to be done on his property that he stays on, leading this idle life here?' It was even an object of surprise to his friends that he had not taken the good of the shooting or invited

any one to share it. He seemed to himself to be hunted out of his snug corner. The Albany was made unbearable to him. He held out as long as the ladies remained in Park Lane, but when they were gone he could not stand it any longer—not, he represented to himself, that it was on their account he remained in London. But there was a certain duty in the matter, which restrained him from doing as he pleased while they were at hand and might require his aid. They never did in the least require his aid—they were perfectly well off, with plenty of means, and servants, and carriages, and unbounded facilities for doing all they wanted. But when they went away, as they did in February, he found out, what he had been suspecting for some time, that London was one vast and howling wilderness, that the Albany was a hideous travesty of monasticism, fit only for men without souls, and lives without duties; and that when a man has anything that can be called his natural business in life, it is the right thing that he should do it. Therefore, to the astonishment and disgust of Edward, who liked to

have his brother's chambers to come to when he 'ran up to town'—a thing less difficult then than in these days of stricter discipline—Heathcote Mountford turned his back upon his club and his hermitage, and startled the parish out of its wits by arriving suddenly on a rainy day in February at the dreary habitation which exercised a spell upon him, the house of his ancestors, the local habitation to which in future his life must belong, whether he liked it or not.

And certainly its first aspect was far from a cheerful one. The cook, now housekeeper, had made ready for him hastily, preparing for him the best bedroom, the room where Mr. Mountford, now distinguished as the old Squire, had lain in state, and the library where he had lived through his life. It was all very chilly when he arrived, a dampness clinging to the unoccupied house, and a white mist in all the hollows of the park. He could not help wondering if it was quite safe, or if the humid chill which met him when he entered was not the very thing to make a solitary inhabitant ill, and end

his untimely visit in a fever. They did their very best for him in the house. Large fires were lighted, and the little dinner, which was served in a corner of the dining-room, was as dainty as the means of the place would allow. But it would be difficult to imagine anything more dreary than the first evening. He sat among ghosts, thinking he heard Mr. Mountford's step, scarcely capable of restraining his imagination: seeing that spare figure seated in his usual chair, or coming in, with a characteristic half-suspicious inspecting look he had, at the door. The few lamps that were in working order were insufficient to light the place. The passages were all black as night, the windows, when he glanced out at them behind the curtains, showing nothing but a universal blackness, not even the sky or the trees. But if the trees were not visible, they were audible, the wind sighing through them, the rain pattering—a wild concert going on in the gloom. And when the rain ceased it was almost worse. Then there came silence, suspicious and ghostly, broken by a sudden dropping now and then from some overcharged ever-

green, the beating of a bough against a window, the hoot of the owl in the woods. After he had swallowed his dinner Heathcote got a book, and sat himself down solemnly to read it. But when he had read a page he stopped to listen to the quiet, and it chilled him over again. The sound of footsteps over the stone pavements, the distant clang of a hansom driving up, the occasional voices that passed his window, all the noises of town, would have been delightful to him: but instead here he was at Mount, all alone, with miles of park separating him from any living creature, except the maids and outdoor man who had been left in charge.

Next morning it was fine, which mended matters a little. Fine! he said to himself with a little shiver. But he buttoned up his great-coat and went out, bent upon doing his duty. He went to the Rectory first, feeling that at least this would be an oasis in the desert, and found the clergy sitting in two different rooms, over two sermons, which was not a cheerful sight. The Rector was writing his with the calm fluency of thirty years of use and

wont; but poor Charley was biting his pen over his manuscript with an incapacity which every successive Sunday seemed to increase rather than diminish. 'My father, he has got into the way of it,' the Curate said in a tone which was half admiring, half despairing. Charley did not feel sure that he himself would ever get into the way of it. He had to take the afternoon service when the audience was a very dispiriting one: even Miss Fanny Woodhead did not come in the afternoon, and the organ was played by the schoolmaster, and the hymns were lugubrious beyond description. As the days began to grow longer, and the winter chill to take ever a deeper and deeper hold, the Curate had felt the mournfulness of the position close round him. When Mount was shut up there was nobody to speak to, nobody to refer to, no variety in his life. A house with only two men in it, in the depths of the country, with no near neighbours, and not a very violent strain of work, and no special relief of interesting pursuits, is seldom a cheerful house. When Charley looked up from his heavy studies and

saw Heathcote, he almost upset his table in his jump of delighted welcome. Then there succeeded a moment of alarm. 'Are they all well?—nothing has happened?' he cried, in sudden panic. 'Nothing at all,' Heathcote said, 'except what concerns myself.' And it amused the stranger to see how relieved his host was by this assurance, and how cheerfully he drew that other chair to the fire to discuss the business which only concerned so secondary a person. Charley, however, was as sympathetic as heart could desire, and ready to be interested in everything. He understood and applauded the new Squire's sentiments in respect to his property and his new responsibilities. 'It is quite true,' the Curate said with a very grave face, 'that it makes the greatest difference to everybody. When Mount is shut up the very sky has less light in it,' said the good fellow, growing poetical. Heathcote had a comprehension of the feeling in his own person which he could not have believed in a little while ago, but he could scarcely help laughing, which was inhuman, at the profound depression in

Charley Ashley's face, and which showed in every line of his large, limp figure. His countenance itself was several inches longer than it had been in brighter days.

'I am afraid,' said Heathcote, with a smile, 'that so much opening of Mount as my arrival will make, will not put very much light into the sky.'

'And it is not only the company and the comfort,' said the Curate, 'we feel that dreadfully, my father and I—but there is more than that. If any one was ill in the village, there was somebody down directly from Mount with beef-tea and wine and whatever was wanted; and if any one was in trouble, it was always a consolation to tell it to the young ladies, and to hear what they thought. The farmers could not do anything tyrannical, nor the agents be hard upon a tenant—nor any one,' cried Charley, with enthusiasm, 'maltreat any one else. There was always a court of appeal at Mount.'

'My dear fellow,' said Heathcote, 'you are thinking of a patriarchal age—you are thinking of some-

thing quite obsolete, unmodern, destructive of all political economy.'

'*That* for political economy!' said the Curate, snapping his fingers; his spirits were rising—even to have some one to grumble to was a consolation. 'Political anything is very much out of place in a little country parish. What do our poor labourers know about it? They have so very little at the best of times, how are they to go on when they are ill or in trouble, without some one to give them a lift?'

'Then they should have more for their work, Ashley. I am afraid it is demoralising that they should be so dependent upon a Squire's house.'

'Who is to give them more?' cried the Curate, hotly. 'The farmers have not got so very much themselves; and I never said they were dependent; they are not dependent—they are comfortable enough as a matter of fact. Look at the cottages, you will see how respectable they all are. There is no real distress in our parish—thanks,' he added, veering

round very innocently and unconsciously to the other side of the circle, 'to Mount.'

'We need not argue the point,' said Heathcote, amused. 'I am as sorry as you can be that the ladies will not retain possession. What is it to me? I am not rich enough to do all I would, and I don't know the people as they did. They will never look up to me as they did to my predecessors. I hope my cousins will return at all events in summer. All the same,' he added, laughing, 'I am quite illogical'—like you, he would have said, but forbore. 'I want them to come back, and yet I feel this infection of duty that you speak of. It seems to me that it must be my business to live here henceforward—though I confess to you I think it will be very dismal, and I don't know what I shall do.'

'It will be dismal,' said the Curate; his face had lighted up for a moment, then rapidly clouded over again. '*I* don't know what you will do. You that have been always used to a luxurious town life——'

'Not so luxurious—and not so exclusively town,' Heathcote ventured to interpose, feeling a

whimsical annoyance at this repetition of his own thoughts.

'——And who don't know the people, nor understand what to do, and what not to do—it takes a long apprenticeship,' said Charley, very gravely. 'You see, an injudicious liberality would be very bad for them—it would pauperise instead of elevating. It is not everybody that knows what is good and what is bad in help. People unaccustomed to the kind of life do more harm than good.'

'You don't give me very much encouragement to settle down on my property and learn how to be a patriarch in my turn,' said Mountford, with a laugh.

'No, I don't,' said the Curate, his face growing longer and longer. The presence of Heathcote Mountford at Mount had smiled upon him for a moment. It would be better than nothing; it would imply some companionship, sympathy more or less, some one to take a walk with occasionally, or to have a talk with, not exclusively parochial; but when the Curate reflected that Heathcote at Mount would

altogether do away with the likelihood of 'the family' coming back—that they could not rent the house for the summer, which was a hope he had clung to, if the present owner of it was in possession—Charley at once perceived that the immediate pleasure of a neighbour would be a fatal advantage, and with honest simplicity applied himself to the task of subduing his visitor's new-born enthusiasm. 'You see,' he said, 'it's quite different making a new beginning, knowing nothing about it, from having been born here, and acquainted with the people all your life.'

'Everybody must have known, however,' said Heathcote, slightly piqued, 'that the property would change hands some time or other, and that great alterations must be made.'

'Oh yes, everybody knew that,' said the Curate, with deadly seriousness; 'but, you see, when you say a thing must happen some time, you never know when it will happen, and it is always a shock when it comes. The old Squire was a hearty man, not at all old for his years. He was not so old as my

father, and I hope *he* has a great deal of work left in him yet. And then it was all so sudden; none of us had been able to familiarise ourselves even with the idea that you were going to succeed, when in a moment it was all over, and you *had* succeeded. I don't mean to say that we are not very glad to have you,' said Charley, with a dubious smile, suddenly perceiving the equivocal civility of all he had been saying; 'it is a great deal better than we could have expected. Knowing them and liking them, you can have so much more sympathy with us about them. And as you wish them to come back, if that is possible——'

'Certainly, I do wish them to come back—if it is possible,' said Heathcote, but his countenance, too, grew somewhat long. He would have liked for himself a warmer reception, perhaps. And when he went to see Mr. Ashley, though his welcome was very warm, and though the Rector was absolutely gleeful over his arrival, and confided to him instantly half a dozen matters in which it would be well that he should interest himself at once, still it was not very

long before 'they' recurred also to the old man's mind as the chief object of interest. Why are they going abroad? it would be far better if they would come home,' said the Rector, who afterwards apologised, however, with anxious humility. 'I beg your pardon—I beg your pardon with all my heart. I forgot actually that Mount had changed hands. Of course, of course, it is quite natural that they should go abroad. They have no home, so to speak, till they have made up their mind to choose one, and I always think that is one of the hardest things in the world to do. It is a blessing we do not appreciate, Mr. Mountford, to have our home chosen for us and settled beyond our power to change——'

'I don't think Mrs. Mountford dislikes the power of choice,' said Heathcote; 'but so far as I am concerned, you know I should be very thankful if they would continue to occupy their old home.'

'I know, I know. You have spoken most kindly, most generously, exactly as I could have wished you to speak,' said the Rector, patting Heathcote on the shoulder, as if he had been a good boy. Then he

took hold of his arm and drew him towards the window, and looked into his eyes. 'It is a delicate question,' he said, 'I know it is a delicate question: but you've been in town, and no doubt you have heard all about it. What is going to happen about Anne?'

'Nothing that I know of,' Heathcote replied briefly. 'Nothing has been said to me.'

'Tchk, tchk, tchk!' said the Rector, with that particular action of the tongue upon the palate, which is so usual an expression of bother, or annoyance, or regret, and so little reducible into words. He shook his head. 'I don't understand these sort of shilly-shally doings,' he said; 'they would have been incomprehensible when I was a young man.'

The same question was repeated by Mr. Loseby, whom next day Heathcote went to see, driving over to Hunston in the Rector's little carriage, with the sober old horse, which was in itself almost a member of the clerical profession. Mr. Loseby received him with open arms, and much commended the interest which he was showing in his property. 'But Mount

will be a dreary place to live in all by yourself,' he said. 'If I were you I would take up my abode at the Rectory, at least till you can have your establishment set on a proper footing. And now that is settled,' said the lawyer (though nothing was settled), 'tell me all about Anne.'

'I know nothing to tell you,' said Heathcote. 'Mr. Douglas is always there——'

'Mr. Douglas is always there! but there is nothing to tell, nothing settled; what does the fellow mean? Do you suppose she is going to forego every advantage, and go dragging on for years to suit his convenience? If you tell me so——'

'But I don't tell you so,' cried Heathcote; 'I tell you nothing—I don't know anything. In short, if you don't mind, I'd rather not discuss the question. I begin to be of your opinion, that I was a fool not to turn up a year sooner. There was nothing to keep me that I am aware of; I might as well have come sooner as later; but I don't know that any one is to be blamed for that.'

'Ah!' said the old lawyer, rubbing his hands,

'what a settlement that would have made! Anne would have kept her money, and little Rose her proper place and a pretty little fortune, just like herself —and probably would have married William Ashley, a very good sort of young fellow. There would have been some pleasure in arranging a settlement like that. I remember when I drew out the papers for her mother's marriage—that was the salvation of the Mountfords—they were sliding downhill as fast as they could before that; but Miss Roper, who was the first Mrs. St. John Mountford, set all straight. You get the advantage of it more or less, Mr. Heathcote, though the connection is so distant. Even your part of the property is in a very different condition from what it was when I remember it first. And if you had—not been a fool—but had come in time and tried your chance—— Ah! however, I dare say if it had been so, something would have come in the way all the same; you would not have fancied each other, or something would have happened. But if that fellow thinks that he is to blow hot and cold with Anne——'

'I don't like the mere suggestion. Pardon me,' said Heathcote, 'I am sure you mean nothing but love and tenderness to my cousin: but I cannot have such a thing suggested. Whatever happens to Anne Mountford, there will be nothing derogatory to her dignity; nothing beneath her own fine character, I am sure of that.'

'I accept the reproof,' said Mr. Loseby, with more twinkle than usual in his spectacles, but less power of vision through them. 'I accept the reproof. What was all heaven and earth about, Heathcote Mountford, that you were left dawdling about that wearisome Vanity Fair that you call the world, instead of coming here a year since, when you were wanted? If there is one thing more than another that wants explaining it is the matrimonial mismanagement of this world. It's no angel that has the care of that, I'll answer for it!' cried the little man with comic indignation. And then he took off his spectacles and wiped them, and grasped Heathcote Mountford by the hand and entreated him to stay to dinner, which, indeed, the recluse of Mount was by no means unwilling to do.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHARLEY INTERFERES.

HEATHCOTE MOUNTFORD, however, notwithstanding the dullness and the dismal weather, and all the imperfections of the incomplete household, continued at Mount. The long blanks of country life, nothing happening from the arrival of one post to another, no stir of life about, only the unbroken stillness of the rain or the sunshine, the good or bad weather, the one tempting him out, the other keeping him within, were all novelties, though of the heavy kind, and gave him a kind of amused-spectator consciousness of the tedium, rather than any suffering from it. He was not so easily affected as many people would be by the circumstances of external life, and knowing that he could at any moment go back to his den at the Albany, he took the much deeper seclu-

sion of Mount as a sort of 'retreat,' in which he could look out upon the before and after, and if he sometimes 'pined for what was not,' yet could do it unenviously and unbitterly, wondering at rather than objecting to the strange misses and blunders of life. Mr. Loseby, who had tutored Anne in her duties, did the same for Heathcote, showing him by what means he could 'take an interest' in the dwellers upon his land, so as to be of some use to them. And he rode about the country with the land-agent, and became aware, and became proud as he became aware, of the character of his own possessions, of the old farmhouses, older than Mount itself, and the old cottages, toppling to their ruin, among which were many that Anne had doomed. Wherever he went he heard of what Miss Anne had done, and settled to do. The women in the condemned cottages told him the improvements she had promised, and he, in most cases, readily undertook to carry out these promises, notwithstanding his want of means. 'They're doing it at Lilford, where Miss Anne has been and given her orders,' said the women. 'I

don't know why there should be differences made. We're as good every bit as the Lilford folks.' 'But you have not got Miss Anne,' said Heathcote. And then there would be an outburst of lamentations, interrupted by anxious questioning. 'Why haven't we got Miss Anne?—is it true as all the money has been left away from her?' Heathcote had a great many questions of this kind to answer, and soon began to feel that he himself was the supposed culprit to whom the estate had been 'left away.' 'I am supposed to be your supplanter,' he wrote to Anne herself, 'and I *feel* your deputy doing your work for you. Dear Lady of Mount, send me your orders. I will carry them out to the best of my ability. I am poor, and not at all clever about the needs of the estate, but I think, don't you think? that the great Mr. Bulstrode, who is so good as to be my agent, is something of a bully, and does not by any means do his spiriting gently. What do you think? You are not an ignoramus, like me.' This letter Anne answered very fully, and it produced a correspondence between them which was a great

pleasure to Heathcote, and not only a pleasure, but in some respects a help, too. She approved greatly of his assumption of his natural duties upon his own shoulders, and kindly encouraged him 'not to mind' the bullying of the agent, the boorishness of Farmer Rawlins, and the complaints of the Spriggs. In this matter of the estate Anne felt the advantage of her experience. She wrote to him in a semi-maternal way, understanding that the information she had to give placed her in a position of superiority, while she gave it, at least. Heathcote was infinitely amused by these pretensions; he liked to be schooled by her, and made her very humble replies; but the burden of all his graver thoughts was still that regret expressed by Mr. Loseby, Why, why had he not made his appearance a year before? But now it was too late.

Thus the winter went on. The Mountfords had gone abroad. They had been in all the places where English families go while their crape is still fresh, to Paris and Cannes, and into Italy, trying, as Mrs. Mountford said, 'the effect of a little change.' And

they all liked it, it is needless to deny. They were so unaccustomed to use their wings that the mere feeling of the first flight, the wild freedom and sense of boundless action and power over themselves filled them with pleasure. They were not to come back till the summer was nearly over, going to Switzerland for the hot weather, when Italy became too warm. They had not intended, when they set out, to stay so long, but indeed it was nearly a year from the period of Mr. Mountford's death when they came home. They did not return to Park Lane, nor to any other settled abode, but went to one of the many hotels near Heathcote's chambers, to rest for a few days before they settled what they were to do for the autumn; for it was Mrs. Mountford's desire to go 'abroad' again for the winter, staying only some three months at home. When the little world about Mount heard of this, they were agitated by various feelings—desire to get them back alternating in the minds of the good people with indignation at the idea of their renewed wanderings, which were all put down to the frivolity of Mrs. Mountford; and a

continually growing wonder and consternation as to the future of Anne. 'She has no right to keep a poor man hanging on so long, when there can be no possible reason for it; when it would really be an advantage for her to have someone to fall back upon,' Miss Woodhead said, in righteous indignation over her friend's extraordinary conduct—extraordinary as she thought it. 'Rose has her mother to go with her. And I think poor Mr. Douglas is being treated very badly for my part. They ought to come home here, and stay for the three months, and get the marriage over, among their own people.' Fanny Woodhead was considered through all the three adjacent parishes to be a person of great judgment, and the Rector, for one, was very much impressed with this suggestion. 'I think Fanny's idea should be acted upon. I think it certainly should be acted on,' he said. 'The year's mourning for her father will be over, if that is what they are waiting for—and look at all the correspondence she has, and the trouble. She wants somebody to help her. Someone should certainly suggest to Anne that it would

be a right thing to follow Fanny Woodhead's advice.'

Heathcote, who, though he had allowed himself a month of the season, was back again in Mount, with a modest household gathered round him, and every indication of a man 'settling down,' concurred in this counsel, so far as to write, urging very warmly that Mount should be their head-quarters while they remained in England. Mr. Loseby was of opinion that the match was one which never would come off at all, an idea which moved several bosoms with an unusual tremor. There was a great deal of agitation altogether on the subject among the little circle, which felt that the concerns of the Mountfords were more or less concerns of their own; and when it was known that Charley Ashley, who was absent on his yearly holiday, was to see the ladies on his way through London, there was a general impression that something would come of it—that he would be able to set their duty before them, or to expedite the settlement of affairs in one way or another. The Curate himself said nothing to any-

one, but he had a very serious purpose in his mind. He it was who had introduced these two to each other; his friendship had been the link which had connected Douglas—so far as affairs had yet gone, very disastrously—with the woman who had been the adoration of poor Charley's own life. He had resigned her, having neither hopes nor rights to resign, to his friend, with a generous abandonment, and had been loyal to Cosmo as to Anne, though at the cost of no little suffering to himself. But, if it were possible that Anne herself was being neglected, then Charley felt that he had a right to a word in the matter. He was experimenting sadly in French seaside amusements with his brother at Boulogne, when the ladies returned to England. Charley and Willie were neither of them great in French. They had begun by thinking all the humours of the bathing place 'fun,' and laughing mightily at the men in their bathing dresses, and feeling scandalised at their presence among the ladies; but, after a few days, they had become very much bored, and felt the draw-

back of having 'nothing to do;' so that, when they heard that the Mountfords had crossed the Channel and were in London, the two young men made haste to follow. It was the end of July when everybody was rushing out of town, and only a small sprinkling of semi-fashionable persons were to be seen in the scorched and baked parks. The Mountfords were understood to be in town only for a few days. It was all that any lady who respected herself could imagine possible at this time of the year.

'I suppose they'll be changed,' Willie said to his brother, as they made their way to the hotel. 'I have never seen them since all these changes came about; that is, I have never seen Rose. I suppose Rose won't be Rose now, to me at least. It is rather funny that such a tremendous change should come about between two times of seeing a person whom you have known all your life.' By 'rather funny' Willie meant something much the reverse of amusing: but that is the way of English youth. He, too, had entertained his little dreams, which had been of a more substantial character than his

brother's; for Willie was destined for the bar, and had, or believed himself to have, chances much superior to those of a country clergyman. And according to the original disposition of Mr. St. John Mountford's affairs, a rising young fellow at the bar, with Willie Ashley's hopes and connections, would have been no very bad match for little Rose. This it was that made him feel it was 'funny.' But still his heart was not gone together in one great sweep out of his breast, like Charley's. And he went to see his old friends with a little quickening of his pulse, yet a composed determination 'to see if it was any use.' If it seemed to him that there was still an opening, Willie was not afraid of Rose's fortune, and did not hesitate to form ulterior plans; and he stood on this great vantage ground that, if he found it was not 'any use,' he had no intention of breaking his heart.

When they went in, however, to the hotel sitting-room in which the Mountfords were, they found Rose and her mother with their bonnets on, ready to go out, and there were but a few minutes for conver-

sation. Rose was grown and developed so that her old adorer scarcely recognised her for the first minute. She was in a white dress, profusely trimmed with black, and made in a fashion to which the young men were unaccustomed, the latest Parisian fashion, which they did not understand, indeed, but which roused all their English conservatism of feeling, as much as if they had understood it. 'Oh, how nice of you to come to see us!' Rose cried. 'Are you really passing through London, and were you at Boulogne when we came through? I never could have imagined you in France, either the one or the other. How did you get on with the talking? You could not have any fun in a place unless you understood what people were saying. Mamma, I don't think we ought to wait for Mr. Douglas; it is getting so late.'

'Here is Mr. Douglas,' said Mrs. Mountford; 'he is always punctual. Anne is not going with us; she has so much to do—there is quite a packet of letters from Mr. Loseby. If you would rather be let off going with us, Mr. Douglas, you have only

to say so; I am sure we can do very well by ourselves.'

But at this suggestion Rose pouted, a change of expression which was not lost upon the anxious spectators.

'I came for the express purpose of going with you,' said Cosmo; 'why should I be turned off now?'

'Oh, I only thought that because of Anne——; but of course you will see Anne after. Will you all, like good people, come back and dine, as we are going out now? No, Charley, I will not, indeed, take any refusal. I want to hear all about Mount, dear Mount—and what Heathcote Mountford is doing. Anne wishes us to go to Hunston; but I don't know that I should like to be so near without being at Mount.'

'Is Anne too busy to see us now? I should just like to say how d'you do.'

'Oh, if you will wait a little, I don't doubt that you will see her. But I am sure you will excuse us now, as we had fixed to go out. We shall see you

this evening. Mind you are here by seven o'clock,' cried Mrs. Mountford, shaking her fingers at them in an airy way which she had learned 'abroad.' And Rose said, as they went out, 'Yes, do come, I want to hear all about Mount.' About two minutes after they left the room Anne came in. She had not turned into a spider or wasp, like Rose in her Paris costume, but she was much changed. She no longer carried her head high, but had got a habit of bowing it slightly, which made a curious difference in her appearance. She was like a tall flower bent by the winds, bowing before them; she was more pale than she used to be; and to Charley it seemed that there was an inquiry in her eyes, which first cast one glance round, as if asking something, before they turned with a little gleam of pleasure to the strangers.

'You here?' Anne said. 'How glad I am to see you! When did you come, and where are you staying? I am so sorry that mamma and Rose have gone out; but you must come back and see them: or will you wait? They will soon be back;'

and once more she threw a glance round, investigating—as if some one might be hiding somewhere, Willie said. But his brother knew better. Charley felt that there was the bewilderment of wonder in her eyes, and felt that it must be a new experience to her that Cosmo should not wait to see her. For a moment the light seemed to fade in her face, then came back: and she sat down and talked with a subdued sweetness that went to their hearts. 'Not to Mount,' she said; 'Heathcote is very kind, but I don't think I will go to Mount. To Hunston rather —where we can see everybody all the same.'

'What is the matter with Anne?' Willie Ashley asked, wondering, when they came away. 'It can't be because she has lost her money. She has no more spirit left in her. She has not a laugh left in her. What is the cause of it all?' But the Curate made no answer. He set his teeth, and he said not a word. There was very little to be got out of him all that day. He went gloomily about with his brother, turning Willie's holiday into a somewhat poor sort of merry-making. And when they

went to dinner with the Mountfords at night, Charley's usual taciturnity was so much aggravated that he scarcely could be said to talk at all. But the dinner was gay enough. Rose, it seemed to young Ashley, who had his private reasons for being critical, 'kept it up' with Douglas in a way which was not at all pleasant. They had been together all the afternoon, and had all sorts of little recollections in common. Anne was much less subdued than in the morning, and talked like her old self, yet with a difference. It was when the party broke up, however, that Willie Ashley felt himself most ill-used. He was left entirely out in the cold by his brother, who said to him briefly, 'I am going home with Douglas,' and threw him on his own devices. If it had not been that some faint guess crossed the younger brother's mind as to Charley's meaning, he would have felt himself very badly used.

The Curate put his arm within his friend's. It was somewhat against the grain, for he did not feel so amicable as he looked. 'I am coming back with you,' he said. 'We have not had a talk for so long.

I want to know what you've been after all this long while.'

'Very glad of a talk,' said Douglas, but neither was he quite as much gratified as he professed to be; 'but as for coming back with me, I don't know where that is to be, for I am going to the club.'

'I'll walk with you there,' said Charley. However, after this announcement Cosmo changed his mind: he saw that there was gravity in the Curate's intentions, and turned his steps towards his rooms. He had not been expected there, and the lamp was not lighted, nor anything ready for him; and there was a little stumbling in the dark and ringing of bells before they got settled comfortably to their *tête-à-tête*. Charley seated himself in a chair by the table while this was going on, and when lights came he was discovered there as in a scene in a theatre, heavy and dark in his black clothes, and the pale desperation with which he was addressing himself to his task.

'Douglas,' he said, 'for a long time I have wanted to speak to you——'

'Speak away,' said the other; 'but have a pipe to assist your utterance, Charley. You never could talk without your pipe.'

The Curate put away the offered luxury with a determined hand. How much easier, how much pleasanter it would have been to accept it, to veil his purpose with the friendly nothings of conversation, and thus perhaps delude his friend into disclosures without affronting him by a solemn demand! That would have been very well had Charley had any confidence in his own powers—but he had not, and he put the temptation away from him. 'No, thank you, Douglas,' he said, 'what I want to say is something which you may think very interfering and impertinent. Do you remember a year ago when you were at the Rectory and we had a talk—one very wet night?'

'Perfectly. You were sulky because you thought I had cut you out; but you always were the best of fellows, Charley——'

'Don't talk of it like that. You might have taken my life blood from me after that, and I

shouldn't have minded. That's a figure of speech. I mean that I gave up to you then what wasn't mine to give, what you had got without any help from me. You know what I mean. If you think I didn't mind, that was a mistake. A great many things have happened since then, and some things have not happened that looked as if they ought to have done so. You made use of me after that, and I was glad enough to be of use. I want to ask you one question now, Douglas. I don't say that you'll like to be questioned by me——'

'No,' said Cosmo, 'a man does not like to be questioned by another man who has no particular right to interfere: for I don't pretend not to understand what you mean.'

'No: you can't but understand what I mean. All of us, down about Mount, take a great interest —there's never a meeting in the county of any kind but questions are always asked. As for my father, he is excited on the subject. He cannot keep quiet. Will you tell me for his satisfaction and my own, what is going to come of it? is anything going

to come of it? I think that, as old friends, and mixed up as I have been all through, I have a right to inquire.'

'You mean,' said Cosmo, coolly knocking a pipe upon the mantelpiece with his back turned to the questioner, whose voice was broken with emotion, and who was grasping the table nervously all the while he spoke—'you mean, is marriage going to come of it? at least, I suppose that is what you mean.'

The Curate replied by a sort of inarticulate gurgle in his throat, an assent which excitement prevented from forming itself into words.

'Well!' said the other. He took his time to everything he did, filled the pipe aforesaid, lighted it with various long-drawn puffs, and finally seated himself at the opposite side of the dark fireplace, over which the candles on the mantelpiece threw an additional shadow. 'Well! it is no such simple matter as you seem to think.'

'I never said it was a simple matter; and yet when one thinks that there are other men,' cried

the Curate, with momentary vehemence, 'who would give their heads——'

Douglas replied to this outburst with a momentary laugh, which, if he had but known it, as nearly gave him over to punishment as any foolish step he ever took in his life. Fortunately for him it was very short, and in reality more a laugh of excitement than of mirth.

'Oh, there's more than one, is there?' he said. 'Look here, Charley, I might refuse point-blank to answer your question. I should have a perfect right. It is not the sort of thing that one man asks another in a general way.'

The Curate did not make any reply, and after a moment Douglas continued—

'But I won't. I understand your motives, if you don't understand mine. You think I am shilly-shallying, that I ought to fulfil my engagement, that I am keeping Anne hanging on.'

'Don't name any names,' cried Ashley, hoarsely.

'I don't know how I can give you an answer without naming names: but I'll try to please you.

Look here, it is not such an easy matter, plain-sailing and straightforward as you think. When I formed that engagement I was—well, just what I am now—a poor devil of a barrister, not long called, with very little money, and not much to do. But, then, *she* was rich. Did you make a remark?'

Charley had stirred unconsciously, with a movement of indignant fury, which he was unable altogether to restrain. But he made no answer, and Douglas continued with a quickened and somewhat excited tone—

'I hope you don't suppose that I mean to say that had anything to do with the engagement. Stop! yes, it had. I should not have ventured to say a word about my feelings to a poor girl. I should have taken myself off as soon as they became too much for me. I don't hide the truth from you, and I am not ashamed of it. To thrust myself and her into trouble on my present income is what I never would have thought of. Well, you know all that happened as well as I do. I entreated her not to be rash, I begged her to throw me over, not so

much as to think of me when her father objected. She paid no attention. I don't blame her——'

'Blame her!'

'Those were the words I used. I don't blame her. She knew nothing about poverty. She was not afraid of it: it was rather a sort of excitement to her, as they say a revolution was to the French princesses. She laughed at it, and defied her father. If you think I liked that, or encouraged that, it is a mistake; but what could I do? And what am I to do now? Can I bring her here, do you think? What can I do with her? I am not well enough off to marry. I should never have dreamt of such a thing on my own account. If you could show me a way out of it, I should be very thankful. As for working one's self into fame and fortune and all that kind of thing, you know a little what mere romance it is. Some fellows do it; but they don't marry to begin with. I am almost glad you interviewed me to get this all out. What am I to do? I know no more than you can tell me. I have got the character of playing fast and loose, of behaving

badly to a girl whom I love and respect; for I do love and respect her, mind you, whatever you and your belongings may think or say.'

'You could not well help yourself, so far as I can see,' said the Curate hotly.

'That is all you know. If you were in my place and knew the false position into which I have been brought, the expectations I have been supposed to raise, the reluctance I have seemed to show in carrying them out—by Jove! if you could only feel as I do all the miseries of my position, unable to stir a step one way or another——'

'I know men who would give their heads to stand in your position——'

'And what would they do in it?' asked Douglas, pulling ineffectually at the pipe, which had long gone out. 'Say yourself, for example; you are totally different—you have got your house and your settled income, and you know what is before you.'

'I can't discuss it in this way. Do you imagine that I have as much to spend, to use your own argument,' cried the Curate, 'as you have here?'

'It is quite different,' Douglas said. Then he added, with a sort of dogged determination, 'I am getting on. I think I am getting the ball at my foot; but to marry at present would be destruction —and to her still more than to me.'

'Then the short and the long is——'

'The short and the long is exactly what I have told you. You may tell her yourself, if you please. Whatever love in a cottage may be, love in chambers is impossible. With her fortune we could have married, and it would have helped me on. Without it, such a thing would be madness, ruin to me and to her too.'

Charley rose up, stumbling to his feet. 'This is all you have got to say?' he said.

'Yes, that is all I have got to say; and, to tell the truth, I think it is wonderfully good of me to say it, and not to show you politely to the door; but we are old friends, and you are her old friend——'

'Good-night, Douglas,' the Curate said, abruptly. He did not offer his friend his hand, but went out bewildered, stumbling down the stairs and out at the

door. This was what he had yielded up all his hopes (but he never had any hopes) for! this was what Anne had selected out of the world. He did not go back to his hotel, but took a long walk round and round the parks in the dismal lamplight, seeing many a dismal scene. It was almost morning when his brother, utterly surprised and alarmed, heard him come in at last.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RECTOR SATISFIED.

'No, I did not get any satisfaction; I can't say that he gave me any satisfaction,' the Curate said.

He had put down his pipe out of deference to his father, who had come into the little den inhabited by Charley the morning after his return. Mr. Ashley's own study was a refined and comfortable place, as became the study of a dignified clergyman; but his son had a little three-cornered room, full of pipes and papers, the despair of every housemaid that ever came into the house. Charley had felt himself more than usually that morning in need of the solace that his pipe could give. He had returned home late the evening before, and he had already had great discussions with his brother Willie as to Rose Mountford, whom Willie on a second

interview had pronounced 'just as nice as ever,' but whom the elder had begun to regard with absolute disgust. Willie had gone off to Hunston to execute a commission which in reality was from Anne, and which the Curate had thought might have been committed to himself—to inquire into the resources of the 'Black Bull,' where old Saymore had now for some time been landlord, and to find out whether the whole party could be accommodated there. The Curate had lighted his pipe when his brother went off on this mission. He wanted it, poor fellow! He sat by the open window with a book upon the ledge, smoking out into the garden; the view was limited, a hedgerow or two in the distance, breaking the flatness of the fields, a big old walnut tree in front shutting in one side, a clump of evergreens on the other. What he was reading was only a railway novel picked up in mere listlessness; he pitched it away into a large untidy waste-paper basket, and put down his pipe when his father came in. The Rector had not been used in his youth to such disorderly ways, and he did not like smoke.

'No, sir, no satisfaction; the reverse of that—and yet, perhaps, there is something to be said too on his side,' the Curate said.

'Something on his side! I don't know what you mean,' cried his father. 'When I was a young fellow, to behave in this sort of way was disgrace to an honourable man. That is to say, no honourable man would have been guilty of it. Your word was your word, and at any cost it had to be kept.'

'Father,' said Charley with unusual energy, 'it seems to me that the most unbearable point of all this is—that you and I should venture to talk of any fellow, confound him! keeping his word and behaving honourably to—— That's what I can't put up with, for my part.'

'You are quite right,' said the Rector, abashed for the moment. And then he added, pettishly, 'but what can we do? We must use the common words, even though Anne is the subject. Charley, there is nobody so near a brother to her as you are, nor a father as I.'

'Yes, I suppose I'm like a brother,' the Curate said with a sigh.

'Then tell me exactly what this fellow said.'

Mr. Ashley was wound up for immediate action. Perhaps the increased tedium of life since the departure of 'the family' from Mount had made him more willing, now when it seemed to have come to a climax, for an excitement of any kind.

'It isn't what she has a right to,' said the Curate, painfully impartial when he had told his tale. 'She —ought to be received like a blessing wherever she goes. We know that better than anyone: but I don't say that Douglas doesn't know it too——'

'Don't let me hear the fellow's name!'

'That's very true, sir,' said the Curate; 'but, after all, when you come to think of it! Perhaps, now-a-days, with all our artificial arrangements, you know—— At least, that's what people say. He'd be bringing her to poverty to please himself. He'd be taking her out of her own sphere. She doesn't know what poverty means, that's what he says— and she laughs at it. How can he bring her into

trouble which she doesn't understand—that's what he says.'

'He's a fool, and a coward, and an idiot, and perhaps a knave, for anything I can tell!' cried the Rector in distinct volleys. Then he cried sharply with staccato distinctness, 'I shall go to town to-night.'

'To town! to-night? I don't see what *you* could do, sir!' said the Curate, slightly wounded, with an injured emphasis on the pronoun, as much as to say, if *I* could not do anything, how should you? But the Rector shook off this protest with a gesture of impatience, and went away, leaving no further ground for remonstrance. It was a great surprise to the village generally to hear that he was going away. Willie Ashley heard of it before he could get back from Hunston; and Heathcote Mountford in the depths of the library which, the only part of the house he had interfered with, he was now busy transforming. 'The Rector is going to London!' 'It has something to do with Anne and her affairs, take my word for it!' cried Fanny Wood-

head, who was so clear-sighted, 'and high time that somebody should interfere!'

The Rector got in very late, which, as everybody knows, is the drawback of that afternoon train. You get in so late that it is almost like a night journey; and he was not so early next morning as was common to him. There was no reason why he should be early. He sent a note to Anne as soon as he was up to ask her to see him privately, and about eleven o'clock sallied forth on his mission. Mr. Ashley had come to town not as a peacemaker, but, as it were, with a sword of indignation in his hand. He was half angry with the peaceful sunshine and the soft warmth of the morning. It was not yet hot in the shady streets, and little carts of flowers were being driven about, and all the vulgar sounds softened by the genial air. London was out of town, and there was an air of grateful languor about everything; few carriages about the street, but perpetual cabs loaded with luggage—pleasure and health for those who were going away, a little more room and rest for those who were remaining.

But the Rector was not in a humour to see the best side of anything. He marched along angrily, encouraging himself to be remorseless, not to mind what Anne might say, but if she pleaded for her lover, if she clung to the fellow, determining to have no mercy upon her. The best of women were such fools in this respect. They would not be righted by their friends; they would prefer to suffer, and defend a worthless fellow, so to speak, to the last drop of their blood. But all the same, though the Rector was so angry and so determined, he was also a little afraid. He did not know how Anne would take his interference. She was not the sort of girl whom the oldest friend could dictate to—to whom he could say 'Do this,' with any confidence that she would do it. His breath came quick and his heart beat now that the moment approached, but 'There is nobody so near a father to her as I am,' he said to himself, and this gave him courage. Anne received him in a little sitting-room which was reserved to herself. She was sitting there among her papers waiting for him, and when he entered came

forward quickly, holding out her hands, with some anxiety in her face. 'Something has happened?' she said, she too with a little catching of her breath.

'No—nothing, my dear, nothing to alarm you; I mean really nothing at all, Anne—only I wanted to speak to you——'

She put him into a comfortable chair, and drew her own close to him, smiling, though still a little pale. 'Then it is all pleasure,' she said, 'if it is not to be pain. What a long time it is since I have seen you! but we are going to Hunston, where we shall be quite within reach. All the same you look anxious, dear Mr. Ashley—you were going to speak to me——'

'About your own affairs, my dear child,' he said.

'Ah!' a flush came over her face, then she grew paler than before. 'Now I know why you look so anxious,' she said, with a faint smile. 'If it is only about me, however, we will face it steadily, whatever it is——'

'Anne,' cried the Rector, taking both her hands

in his—'Anne, my dear child! I have loved you as if you had been my own all your life.'

She thanked him with her eyes, in which there was the ghost of a melancholy smile, but did not speak.

'And I can't bear to see you slighted, my dear. You *are* slighted, Anne, you whom we all think too good for a king. It has been growing more and more intolerable to me as the months have gone by. I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it any longer. I have come to say to yourself that it is not possible, that it must not go on, that it cannot be.'

Anne gave his hands which held hers a quick pressure. 'Thank you,' she said, 'dear Mr. Ashley, for coming to *me*. If you had gone to anyone else I could not have borne it: but say whatever you will to me.'

Then he got up, his excitement growing. 'Anne, this man stands aloof. Possessing your love, my dear, and your promise, he has—not claimed either one or the other. He has let you go abroad, he has let you come home, he is letting you leave

London without coming to any decision or taking the place he ought to take by your side. Anne, hear me out; you have a difficult position, my dear; you have a great deal to do; it would be an advantage to you to have someone to act for you, to stand by you, to help you.'

'So far as that goes,' she said with a pained smile —'no: I don't think there is very much need of that.'

'Listen to me, my dear. Rose has her mother; she does not want your personal care, so that is no excuse; and all that you have to do makes it more expedient that you should have help and support. None of us but would give you that help and support, oh! so gladly, Anne! But there is one whom you have chosen, by means of whom it is that you are in this position—and he holds back. He does not rush to your side imprudently, impatiently, as he ought. What sort of a man is it that thinks of prudence in such circumstances? He lets you stand alone and work alone: and he is letting you go away, leave the place where he is, without settling your

future, without coming to any conclusion—without even a time indicated. Oh, I have no patience with it—I cannot away with it!' said the Rector, throwing up his arms, 'it is more than I can put up with. And that you should be subjected to this, Anne!'

Perhaps she had never been subjected to so hard an ordeal as now. She sat with her hands tightly clasped on the table, her lips painfully smiling, a dark dew of pain in her eyes—hearing her own humiliation, her downfall from the heights of worship and service where she had been placed all her life by those who loved her, recounted like a well-known history. She thought it had been all secret to herself, that nobody had known of the wondering discoveries, the bitter findings out, the confusion of all her ideas, as one thing after another became clear to her. It was not all clear to her yet; she had found out some things, but not all. And that all should be clear as daylight to others, to the friends who she had hoped knew nothing about it! this knowledge transfixed Anne like a sword. Fiery

arrows had struck into her before, winged and blazing, but now it was all one great burning scorching wound. She held her hands clasped tight to keep herself still. She would not writhe at least upon the sword that was through her, she said to herself, and upon her mouth there was the little contortion of a smile. Was it to try and make it credible that she did not believe what he was saying, or that she did not feel it, that she kept that smile?—or had it got frozen upon her lips so that the ghost could not pass away?

When he stopped at last, half frightened by his own vehemence, and alarmed at her calm, Anne was some time without making any reply. At last she said, speaking with some difficulty, her lips being dry: 'Mr. Ashley, some of what you say is true.'

'Some—oh, my dear, my dear, it is all true—don't lay that flattering unction to your soul. Once you have looked at it calmly, dispassionately——'

Here Anne broke forth into a little laugh, which made Mr. Ashley hold out his hands in eager deprecation, 'Oh, don't, my darling, don't, don't!'

'No,' she said, 'no, no—I will not laugh—that would be too much. Am I so dispassionate, do you think? Able to judge calmly, though the case is my own——'

'Yes, Anne,' cried the old Rector; his feelings were too much for him—he broke down and sobbed like a woman. 'Yes, my beautiful Anne, my dearest child! you are capable of it—you are capable of everything that is heroic. Would I have ventured to come to you but for that? You are capable of everything, my dear.'

Anne waited a little longer, quite silently, holding her hands clasped tight. One thing she was not capable of, and that was to stand up. Whatever else she might be able to do, she could not do that. She said under her breath, 'Wait for a moment,' and then, when she had got command of herself, rose slowly and went to the table on which her papers were. There she hesitated, taking a letter out of the blotting-book—but after a moment's pause brought it to him. 'I did not think I should ever show—a letter—to a third person,' she said with

confused utterance. Then she went back to her table, and sat down and began to move with her hands among the papers, taking up one and laying down another. The Rector threw himself into the nearest chair and began to read.

'Dear Cosmo,—You will think it strange to get a long letter from me, when we met this morning; and yet, perhaps, you will not think it strange—you will know.

'In the first place let me say that there are a great many things which it will not be needful to put on paper, which you and I will understand without words. We understand—that things have not been lately as they were some time ago. It is nobody's fault; things change—that is all about it. One does not always feel the same, and we must be thankful that there is no absolute necessity that we should feel the same; we have still the full freedom of our lives, both I and you.

'This being the case, I think I should say to you that it seems to me we have made a mistake. You

would naturally have a delicacy in saying it, but women have a privilege in this respect, and therefore I can take the initiative. We were too hasty, I fear; or else there were circumstances existing then which do not exist now, and which made the bond between us more practicable, more easily to be realised. This is where it fails now. It may be just the same in idea, but it has ceased to be possible to bring anything practicable out of it; the effort would involve much, more than we are willing to give, perhaps more—I speak brutally, as the French say—than it is worth.

'In these uncertainties I put it to you whether it would not be better for us in great friendship and regret to shake hands and—part? It is not a pleasant word, but there are things which are much less pleasant than any word can be, and those we must avoid at all hazards. I do not think that your present life and my present life could amalgamate anyhow—could they? And the future is so hazy, so doubtful, with so little in it that we can rely upon—the possibilities might alter, in our favour, or against

us, but no one can tell, and most probably any change would be disadvantageous. On the other hand, your life, as at present arranged, suits you very well, and my life suits me. There seems no reason why we should make ourselves uncomfortable, is there? by continuing, at the cost of much inconvenience, to contemplate changes which we do not very much desire, and which would be a very doubtful advantage if they were made.

'This being the case—and I think, however unwilling you may be to admit it, to start with, that if you ask yourself deep down in the depths of your heart, you will find that the same doubts and questions, which have been agitating my mind, have been in yours, too—and that there is only one answer to them—don't you think my suggestion is the best? Probably it will not be pleasant to either of us. There will be the talk and the wonderings of our friends, but what do these matter?—and what is far worse, a great crying out of our own recollections and imaginations against such a severance—but these, *I feel sure*, lie all on the surface, and if we are

brave and decide upon it at once, will last as short a time as—most other feelings last in this world.

'If you agree with me, send me just three words to say so—or six, or indeed any number of words—but don't let us enter into explanations. Without anything more said, we both understand.

'Your true friend in all circumstances,

'ANNE.'

There are some names which are regal in their mere simplicity of a few letters. This signature seemed like Anne Princess, or Anne Queen to the eyes of the old man who read it. He sat with the letter in his hands for some time after he had read to the end, not able to trust his voice or even his old eyes by any sudden movement. The writer all this time sat at her table moving about the papers. Some of the business letters which were lying there she read over. One little note she wrote a confused reply to, which had to be torn up afterwards. She waited—but not with any tremor—with a still sort of aching deep down in her heart, which seemed to

answer instead of beating. How is it that there is so often actual pain and heaviness where the heart lies, to justify all our metaphorical references to it? The brain does not ache when our hearts are sore; and yet they say our brains are all we have to feel with. Why should it be so true, so true, to say that one's heart is heavy? Anne asked herself this question vaguely as she sat so quietly moving about her papers. Her head was as clear as yours or mine, but her heart—which, poor thing, means nothing but a bit of hydraulic machinery, and was pumping away just as usual—lay heavy in her bosom like a lump of lead.

'My dear child, my dear child!' the old Rector said at length, rising up hastily and stumbling towards her, his eyes dim with tears, not seeing his way. The circumstances were far too serious for his usual exclamation of 'God bless my soul!' which, being such a good wish, was more cheerful than the occasion required.

'Do you think that is sufficient?' said Anne, with a faint smile. 'You see I am not igno-

rant of — the foundations. Do you think that will do?'

'My dear, my dear!' Mr. Ashley said. He did not seem capable of saying any more.

With that Anne, feeling very like a woman at the stake—as if she were tied to her chair, at least, and found the ropes, though they cut her, some support—took the letter out of his hand and put it into an envelope, and directed it very steadily to 'Cosmo Douglas, Esq., Middle Temple.' 'There, that is over,' she said. The ropes were cutting, but certainly they were a support. The papers before her were all mixed up and swimming about, but yet she could see the envelope—four-square—an accomplished thing, settled and done with; as perhaps she thought her life too also was.

'Anne,' said the old Rector, in his trembling voice, 'my dear! I know one far more worthy of you, who would give all the world to know that he might hope——'

She put out one hand and pushed herself away from the table. The giddiness went off, and the

papers again became perceptible before her. You don't suppose that I—want anything to do with any man?' she said, with an indignant break in her voice.

'No, my dear; of course you do not. It would not be in nature if you did not scorn and turn from—— But, Anne,' said the old Rector, 'life will go on, do what you will to stand still. You cannot stand still, whatever you do. You will have to walk the same path as those that have gone before you. You need never marry at all, you will say. But after a while, when time has had its usual effect, and your grief is calmed and your mind matured, you will do like others that have gone before you. Do not scorn what I say. You are only twenty-two when all is done, and life is long, and the path is very dreary when you walk by yourself and there is no one with you on the way.'

Anne did not say anything. It was her policy and her safety not to say anything. She had come to herself. But the past time had been one of great struggle and trial, and she was worn out by it. After

a while Mr. Ashley came to see that the words of wisdom he was speaking fell upon deaf ears. He talked a great deal, and there was much wisdom and experience and the soundest good sense in what he said, only it dropped half-way, as it were, on the wing, on the way to her, and never got to Anne.

He went away much subdued, just as a servant from the hotel came to get the letters for the post. Then the Rector left Anne, and went to the other part of the house to pay his respects to the other ladies. They had been out all the morning, and now had come back to luncheon.

'Mr. Douglas is always so good,' Mrs. Mountford said. 'Fortunately it is the long vacation; but I suppose you know that; and he can give us almost all his time, which is so good of him. It was only the afternoons in the winter that we could have. And he tells Rose everything. I tell her Mr. Douglas is more use to her than any governess she ever had.'

'Is Anne never of your parties?' the Rector said.

'Oh, Anne! she is always busy about something, or else she says she is busy. I am sure she need not shut herself up as she does. I wish you would speak to her. You are an old friend, and always had a great influence over Anne. She is getting really morose—quite morose—if you will take my opinion,' said Mrs. Mountford. Rose was almost as emphatic. 'I don't know what she has against me. I cannot seal myself up as she does, can I, Mr. Ashley? No, she will never come with us. It is so tiresome; but I suppose when we are in the country, which she is always so fond of, that things will change.'

Just then Anne came into the room softly, in her usual guise. Mr. Ashley looked at her half in alarm. She had managed to dismiss from her voice and manner every vestige of agitation. What practice she must have had, the Rector said to himself, to be able to do it.

'I hope you have had a pleasant morning,' she said. She did not avoid Cosmo, but gave him her hand as simply as to the rest. She addressed him little, but still did not hesitate to address him, and

once the Rector perceived her looking at him unawares with eyes full of the deepest compassion. Why was she so pitiful? Cosmo did not seem to like the look. He was wistful and anxious. Already there was something, a warning of evil, in the air.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FALLEN FROM HER HIGH ESTATE.

THE 'Black Bull' at Hunston is one of those old inns which have been superseded, wherever it is practicable, by new ones, and which are in consequence eagerly resorted to by enlightened persons, wherever they are to be found; but there was nobody in Hunston, beyond the ordinary little country-town visitors, to appreciate its comfortable old rooms, old furniture, and old ways. When there was a county ball, the county people who had daughters engaged rooms in it occasionally, and the officers coming from Scarlett-town filled up all the corners. But county balls were rare occurrences, and there had not been yet under the *régime* of old Saymore a single instance of exceptional gaiety or fulness. So that, though it was highly respectable, and the position

of landlord one of ease and dignity, the profits had been as yet limited. Saymore himself, however, in the spotless perfection of costume which he had so long kept up at Mount, and with his turn for artistic arrangements, and general humble following of the 'fads' of his young ladies, was in himself a model of a master for a Queen Anne house (though not in the least what the prototype of that character would have been), and was in a fair way to make his house everything which a house of that period ought to be. And though Keziah, in the most fashionable of nineteenth-century dresses, was a decided anachronism, yet her little face was pleasant to the travellers arriving hot and dusty on an August evening, and finding in those two well-known figures a something of home which went to their hearts. To see Saymore at the carriage door made Mrs. Mountford put her handkerchief to her eyes, a practice which she had given up for at least six months past. And, to compare small things with great, when Keziah showed them to their rooms, notwithstanding the pride of proprietorship with which she led the

way, the sight of Anne and Rose had a still greater effect upon little Mrs. Saymore; Rose especially, in her Paris dress, with a waist like nothing at all—whereas to see Keziah, such a figure! She cried, then dried her tears, and recollected the proud advances in experience and dignity she had made, and her responsibilities as head of a house, and all her plate and linen, and her hopes: so much had she gone through, while with them everything was just the same: thus pride on one side in her own second chapter of life, and envy on the other of the freedom of their untouched lives produced a great commotion in her. 'Mr. Saymore and me, we thought this would be the nicest for Miss Anne, and I put you here, Miss Rose, next to your mamma. Oh, yes, I am very comfortable. I have everything as I wish for. Mr. Saymore don't deny me nothing—he'd buy me twice as many things as I want, if I'd let him. How nice you look, Miss Rose, just the same, only nicer; and such style! Is that the last fashion? It makes her look just nothing at all, don't it, Miss Anne? Oh, when we was all at Mount, how we'd

have copied it, and twisted it, and changed it to look something the same, and not the least the same—but I've got to dress up to forty and look as old as I can now.'

Saymore came into the sitting-room after them with his best bow, and that noiseless step, and those ingratiating manners which had made him the best of butlers. 'I have nothing to find fault with, ma'am,' he said. 'I've been very well received, very well received. Gentlemen as remembered me at Mount has been very kind. Mr. Loseby, he has many a little luncheon here. "I'll not bother my old housekeeper," he says, when he has gentlemen come sudden. "I'll just step over to my old friend Saymore. Saymore knows how to send up a nice little lunch, and he knows a good glass of wine when he sees it." That's exactly what Mr. Loseby said, no more than three days ago. But business is quiet,' Saymore added. 'I don't complain, but things is quiet; we'd be the better, ma'am, of a little more stir here.'

'But I hope you find everything comfortable—at

home, Saymore?' said his former mistress. 'You know I always told you it was an experiment. I hope you find everything comfortable at home.'

'Meaning Mrs. Saymore, ma'am?' replied the landlord of the 'Black Bull,' with dignity. 'I'm very glad to say as she have given me and everybody great satisfaction. She is young, but that is a fault, as I made so bold as to observe to you, ma'am, on a previous occasion, a fault as is sure to mend. I've never repented what I did when I married. She's as nice as possible downstairs, but never too nice—giving herself no airs: but keeping her own place. She's given me every satisfaction,' said Saymore, with much solemnity. In the meantime Keziah was giving her report on the other side of the question, upstairs.

'No, Miss Anne. I can't say as I've repented. Oh, no, I've never repented. Mr. Saymore is very much respected in Hunston—and there's never a day that he don't bring me something, a ribbon or a new collar, or a story book if he can't think of nothing else. It *was* a little disappointing when

mother was found not to do in the kitchen. You see, Miss Anne, we want the best of cooking when strangers come, and mother, she was old-fashioned. She's never forgiven me, though it wasn't my fault. And Tommy, he was too mischievous for a waiter. We gave him a good long try, but Mr. Saymore was obliged at last to send him away. Mother says she don't see what it's done for her, more than if I had stayed at Mount—but I'm very comfortable myself, Miss Anne,' said Keziah, with a curtsey and a tear.

'I am very glad to hear it: and I hope you'll be still happier by-and-by,' said Anne, retiring to the room which was to be hers, and which opened from the little sitting-room in which they were standing. Rose remained behind for further talk and gossip. And when all the news was told Keziah returned to her admiration of the fashion of Rose's gown.

'Are they all made like that now, in Paris? Oh, dear, I always thought when you went to France I'd go too. I always thought of Paris. But it wasn't to be.'

'You see, Keziah, you liked Saymore best,' said

Rose, fixing her mischievous eyes upon Keziah's face, who smiled a little sheepish smile, and made a little half-pathetic appeal with her eyes, but did not disown the suggestion, which flattered her vanity if not her affection.

'You are as blooming as a rose, Miss—as you always was,' said Keziah, 'but what's Miss Anne been a-doing to herself? She's like a white marble image in a church; I never saw her that pale.'

'Hush!' cried Rose, in a whisper, pointing to the door behind them, by which Anne had disappeared; and then she came close to the questioner, with much pantomime and mystery. 'Don't say a word, Keziah. It is all broken off. She has thrown the gentleman over. Hush, for heaven's sake, don't say a word!'

'You don't mean it, Miss Rose. Broken off! Mr. Dou——'

Rose put her hand on the little landlady's mouth. 'She must not hear we are talking of her. She would never forgive me. And besides, I don't know —it is only a guess; but I am quite, quite sure.'

Keziah threw up her hands and her eyes. 'All broken off—thrown the gentleman over! Is there someone else?' she whispered, trembling, thinking with mingled trouble and complacency of her own experiences in this kind, and of her unquestioned superiority nowadays to the lover whom she had thrown over—the unfortunate Jim.

'No, no, no,' said Rose, making her mouth into a circle, and shaking her head. No other! No richer, better, more desirable lover! This was a thing that Keziah did not understand. Her face grew pale with wonder, even with awe. To jilt a gentleman for your own advancement in life, that might be comprehensible—but to do it to your own damage, and have cheeks like snowflakes in consequence—that was a thing she could not make out. It made her own position, with which she was already satisfied, feel twice as advantageous and comfortable; even though her marriage had not turned out so well for mother and the boys as Keziah had once hoped.

Mr. Loseby came across the street, humming a

little tune, to join them at dinner. He was shining from top to toe in his newest black suit, all shining, from his little varnished shoes to his bald head, and with the lights reflected in his spectacles. It was a great day for the lawyer, who was fond of both the girls, and who had an indulgent amity, mingled with contempt, for Mrs. Mountford herself, such as men so often entertain for their friends' wives. He was triumphant in their arrival, besides, and very anxious to secure that they should return to the neighbourhood and settle among their old friends. He, too, however, after his first greetings were over, was checked in his rejoicings by the paleness of his favourite. 'What have you been doing to Anne?' were, after his salutations, the first words he said.

'If anything has been done to her, it is her own doing,' said Mrs. Mountford, with a little indignation.

'Nothing has been done to me,' said Anne, with a smile. 'I hear that I am pale, though I don't notice it. It is all your letters, Mr. Loseby, and the

business you give me. I have to let mamma and Rose go to their dissipations by themselves.'

'Our dissipations! You do not suppose I have had spirits for much dissipation,' said Mrs. Mountford, now fully reminded of her position as a widow, and with her usual high sense of duty, determined to live up to it. She pressed her handkerchief upon her eyelids once more, after the fashion she had dropped. 'But it is true that I have tried to go out a little,' she added, 'more than I should have done at home—for Rose's sake.'

'You were quite right,' said the lawyer; 'the young ones cannot feel as we do, they cannot be expected to go on in our groove. And Rose is blooming like her name. But I don't like the looks of Anne. Have I been giving you so much business to do? But then, you see, I expected that you would have Mr. Douglas close at hand, to help you. Indeed, my only wonder was——'

Here Mr. Loseby broke off, and had a fit of coughing, in which the rest of the words were lost. He had surprised a little stir in the party, a furtive

interchange of looks between Mrs. Mountford and Rose. And this roused the alarm of the sympathetic friend of the family, who, indeed, had wondered much—as he had begun to say—

'No,' said Anne, with a smile, 'you know I was always a person of independent mind. I always liked to do my work myself. Besides, Mr. Douglas has his own occupations, and the chief part of the time we have been away.'

'To be sure,' said Mr. Loseby. He was much startled by the consciousness which seemed to pervade the party, though nothing more was said. Mrs. Mountford became engrossed with her dress, which had caught in something; and Rose, though generally very determined in her curiosity, watched Anne, the spectator perceived, from under her eyelids. Mr. Loseby took no notice externally. 'That's how it always happens,' he said cheerfully; 'with the best will in the world we always find that our own business is as much as we can get through. I have found out that to my humiliation a hundred times in my life.'

'These questions about the leases are the most difficult,' said Anne, steadily. 'I suppose the old tenants are not always the best.'

'My dear, I hope in these bad times we may get tenants at all, old or new,' said the old lawyer. And then he plunged into the distresses of the country, the complaints of the farmers, the troubles of the labourers, the still greater trials of the landlord. 'Your cousin Heathcote has made I don't know how much reduction. I am not at all sure that he is right. It is a dreadfully bad precedent for other landlords. And for himself he simply can't afford it. But I cannot get him to hear reason. "What does it matter to me?" he says, "I have always enough to live on, and those that till the land have the best right to any advantage they can get out of it." What can you say to a man that thinks like that? I tell him he is a fool for his pains; but it is I who am a fool for mine, for he takes no notice though I talk myself hoarse.'

'Indeed, I think it is very unjustifiable conduct,' said Mrs. Mountford. 'He should think of

those who are to come after him. A man has no right to act in that way as if he stood by himself. He ought to marry and settle down. I am sure I hope he will have heirs of his own, and not leave the succession to that horrid little Edward. To think of a creature like that in Mount would be more than I could bear.'

'I doubt if Heathcote will ever marry; not unless he gets the one woman— But we don't all get *that* even when we are most lucky,' said the old lawyer, briskly. 'He is crotchety, crotchety, full of his own ideas: but a fine fellow all the same.'

'Does he want to marry more than one woman?' cried Rose, opening great eyes, 'and you talk of it quite coolly, as if it was not anything very dreadful; but of course he can't, he would be hanged or something. Edward is not so bad as mamma says. He is silly; but, then, they are mostly silly.' She had begun to feel that she was a person of experience, and justified in letting loose her opinion. All this time it seemed to Mr. Loseby that Anne was going through her part like a woman on the stage. She

was very quiet; but she seemed to insist with herself upon noticing everything, listening to all that was said, giving her assent or objection. In former times she had not been at all so particular, but let the others chatter with a gentle indifference to what they were saying. She seemed to attend to everything, the table, and the minutiæ of the dinner, letting nothing escape her to-night.

'I think Heathcote is right,' she said; 'Edward will not live to succeed him; and, if he does not marry, why should he save money, and pinch others now, on behalf of a future that may never come? What happens if there is no heir to an entail? Could not it all be eaten up, all consumed, reabsorbed into the country, as it were, by the one who is last?'

'Nonsense, Anne. He has no right to be the last. No one has any right to be the last. To let an old family die down,' cried Mrs. Mountford, 'it is a disgrace. What would dear papa have said? When I remember what a life they all led me because I did not have a boy—as if it had been my

fault! I am sure if all the hair off my head, or everything I cared for in my wardrobe, or anything in the world I had, could have made Rose a boy, I would have sacrificed it. I must say that if Heathcote does not marry I shall think I have been very badly used: though, indeed, his might all be girls too,' she added, half hopefully, half distressed. 'Anyhow, the trial ought to be made.' Notwithstanding the danger to the estate, it would have been a little consolation to Mrs. Mountford if Heathcote on marrying had been found incapable, he also, of procuring anything more than girls from Fate.

'When an heir of entail fails——' Mr. Loseby began, not unwilling to expound a point on which he was an authority; but Rose broke in and interrupted him, never having had any wholesome fear of her seniors before her eyes. Rose wanted to know what was going to be done now they were here; if they were to stay all the autumn in the 'Black Bull;' if they were to take a house anywhere; and generally what they were to do. This gave Mr. Loseby occasion to produce his scheme. There was

an old house upon the property which had not been entailed, which Mr. Mountford had bought with his first wife's money, and which was now the inheritance of Rose. It had been suffered to fall out of repair, but it was still an inhabitable house. 'You know it, Anne,' the lawyer said; 'it would be an amusement to you all to put it in order. A great deal could be done in a week or two. I am told there is no amusement like furnishing, and you might make a pretty place of it.' The idea, however, was not taken up with very much enthusiasm.

'In all probability,' Mrs. Mountford said, 'we shall go abroad again for the winter. The girls like it, and it is very pleasant, when one can, to escape from the cold.'

The discussion of this subject filled the rest of the evening. Mr. Loseby was very anxious on his side. He declared that it did not bind them to anything; that to have a house, a *pied-à-terre*, 'even were it only to put on your cards,' was always an advantage. After much argument it was decided at last that the house at Lilford, an old Dower-house,

and bearing that picturesque name, should be looked at before any conclusion was come to; and with this Mr. Loseby took his leave. Anne had taken her full share in the discussion. She had shown all the energy that her *rôle* required. She had put in suggestions of practical weight with a leaning to the Dower-house, and had even expressed a little enthusiasm about that last popular plaything—a house to furnish—which nowadays has become the pleasantest of pastimes. 'It shall be Morris-ey, but not too Morris-ey,' she had said, with a smile, still in perfect fulfilment of her *rôle*. But to see Anne playing at being Anne had a wonderful effect upon her old friend. Her stepmother and sister, being with her perpetually, did not perhaps so readily suspect the fine histrionic effort that was going on by their side. It was a fine performance; but such a performance is apt to make the enlightened beholder's heart ache. When he had taken his leave of the other ladies—early, as they were tired, or supposed it right to be tired, with their journey—Anne followed Mr. Loseby out of the room. She asked him to come into another

close by. 'I have something to say to you,' she said, with a faint smile. Mr. Loseby, like the old Rector, was very fond of Anne. He had seen her grow up from her infancy. He had played with her when she was a child, and carried her sugar-plums in his coat pockets. And he had no children of his own to distract his attention from his favourite. It troubled him sadly to see signs of trouble about this young creature whom he loved.

'What is it, Anne? What is it, my dear? Something has happened?' he said.

'No, nothing of consequence. That is not true,' she said, hurriedly; 'it is something, and something of consequence. I have not said anything about it to them. They suspect, that is all; and it does not matter to them; but I want to tell you. Mr. Loseby, you were talking to-night of Mr. Douglas. It is about Mr. Douglas I want to speak to you.'

He looked at her very anxiously, taking her hand into his. 'Are you going to be married?'

Anne laughed. She was playing Anne more than

ever; but, on the whole, very successfully. 'Oh no,' she said, 'quite the reverse——'

'Anne! do you mean that he has—that you have—that it is broken off?'

'The last form is the best,' she said. 'It is all a little confused just yet. I can't tell if he has, or if I have. But yes—I must do him justice: it is certainly not his doing. I am wholly responsible myself. It has come to an end.'

She looked into his face wistfully, evidently fearing what he would say, deprecating, entreating. If only nothing might be said! And Mr. Loseby was confounded. He had not been kept up like the others to the course of affairs.

'Anne, you strike me dumb. You take away my breath. What! he whom you have sacrificed everything for: he who has cost you all you have in the world? If it is a caprice, my dear girl, it is a caprice utterly incomprehensible; a caprice I cannot understand.'

'That is exactly how to call it,' she said, eagerly: 'a caprice, an unpardonable caprice. If Rose had

done it, I should have whipped her, I believe; but it is I, the serious Anne, the sensible one, that have done it. This is all there is to say. I found myself out, fortunately, before it was too late. And I wanted you to know.'

In this speech her powers almost failed her. She forgot her part. She played not Anne, but some one else, some perfectly artificial character, which her audience was not acquainted with, and Mr. Loseby was startled. He pushed away his spectacles, and contracted his brows, and looked at her with his keen, short-sighted eyes, which, when they could see anything, saw very clearly. But with all his gazing he could not make the mystery out. She faced him now, after that one little failure, with Anne's very look and tone, a slight, fugitive, somewhat tremulous smile about her mouth, her eyes wistful, deprecating blame; but always very pale: that was the worst of it, that was the thing least like herself.

'After losing,' said the lawyer slowly, 'everything you had in the world for his sake.'

'Yes,' Anne said, with desperate composure, 'it

is ridiculous, is it not? Perhaps it was a little to have my own way, Mr. Loseby. Nobody can tell how subtle one's mind is till one has been tried. My father defied me, and I suppose I would not give in; I was very obstinate. It is inconceivable what a girl will do. And then we are all obstinate, we Mountfords. I have heard you say so a hundred times; pig-headed, was not that the word you used?'

'Most probably it was the word I used. Oh yes, I know you are obstinate. Your father was like an old mule; but you, you—I declare to you I do not understand it, Anne.'

'Nor do I myself,' she said, with another small laugh, a very small laugh, for Anne's strength was going. 'Can any one understand what another does, or even what they do themselves? But it is so; that is all that there is to say.'

Mr. Loseby walked about the room in his distress. He thrust up his spectacles till they formed two gleaming globes on the shining firmament of his baldness. Sometimes he thrust his hands behind him under his coat tails, sometimes clasped them

in front of him, wringing their plump joints. 'Sacrificed everything for it,' he said, 'made yourself a beggar! and now to go and throw it all up. Oh, I can't understand it, I can't understand it! there's more in this than meets the eye.'

Anne did not speak—truth to tell, she could not—she was past all histrionic effort. She propped herself up against the arm of the sofa, close to which she was standing, and endured, there being nothing more that she could do.

'Why—why,' cried Mr. Loseby, 'child, couldn't you have known your own mind? A fine property! It was bad enough, however you chose to look at it, but at least one thought there was something to set off against the loss; now it's all loss, no compensation at all. It's enough to bring your father back from his grave. And I wish there was something that would,' said the little lawyer vehemently; 'I only wish there was something that would. Shouldn't I have that idiotical will changed as fast as pen could go to paper! Why, there's no reason for it now, there's no excuse for it. Oh, don't speak to me,

I can't contain myself! I tell you what, Anne,' he cried, turning upon her, seizing one of the hands with which she was propping herself up, and wringing it in his own, 'there's one thing you can do, and only one thing, to make me forgive you all the trouble you have brought upon yourself; and that is to marry, straight off, your cousin, Heathcote Mountford, the best fellow that ever breathed.'

'I am afraid,' said Anne faintly, 'I cannot gratify you in that, Mr. Loseby.' She dropped away from him and from her support, and sank upon the first chair. Fortunately he was so much excited himself, that he failed to give the same attention to her looks.

'That would make up for much,' he said; 'that would cover a multitude of sins.'

Anne scarcely knew when he went away, but he did leave her at last seated there, not venturing to move. The room was swimming about her, dark, bare, half lighted, with its old painted walls. The prints hung upon them seemed to be moving round her, as if they were the decorations of a cabin at sea.

She had got through her crisis very stoutly, without, she thought, betraying herself to anybody. She said to herself vaguely, always with a half-smile, as being her own spectator, and more or less interested in the manner in which she acquitted herself, that every spasm would probably be a little less violent, as she had heard was the case in fevers. And, on the whole, the spasm like this, which prostrated her entirely, and left her blind and dumb for a minute or two to come to herself by degrees, was less wearing than the interval of dead calm and pain that came between. This it was that took the blood from her cheeks. She sat still for a few minutes in the old-fashioned arm-chair, held up by its hard yet comforting support, with her back turned to the table and her face to the half-open door. The very meaninglessness of her position, thus reversed from all use and wont, gave a forlorn completeness to her desolation—turned away from the table, turned away from everything that was convenient and natural; her fortune given away for the sake of her love, her love sacrificed for no reason at all, the heavens and the

earth all misplaced and turning round. When Anne came to herself the half-smile was still upon her lip with which she had been regarding herself, cast off on all sides, without compensation—losing everything. Fate seemed to stand opposite to her, and the world and life, in which, so far as appearance went, she had made such shipwreck. She raised herself up a little in her chair and confronted them all. Whatever they might do, she would not be crushed, she would not be destroyed. The smile came more strongly to the curves of her mouth, losing its pitiful droop. Looking at herself again, it was ludicrous; no wonder Mr. Loseby was confounded. Ludicrous—that was the only word. To sacrifice everything for one thing: to have stood against the world, against her father, against everybody, for Cosmo: and then by-and-by to be softly detached from Cosmo, by Cosmo himself, and allowed to drift, having lost everything, having nothing. Ludicrous—that was what it was. She gave a little laugh in the pang of revival. A touch with a red-hot iron might be as good as anything to stimulate

failing forces and string loose nerves. Ice does it — a plunge into an icy stream. Thus she mused, getting confused in her thoughts. In the meantime Rose and Mrs. Mountford were whispering with grave faces. 'Is it a quarrel, or is it for good? I hope you hadn't anything to do with it,' said the mother, much troubled. 'How should I have anything to do with it?' said innocent Rose; 'but, all the same, I am sure it is for good.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

ROSE ON HER DEFENCE.

All the country was stirred by the news of the return of the Mountfords, and the knowledge that they were, of all places in the world, at the 'Black Bull' at Hunston, which was the strangest place to go to, some people thought, though others were of opinion that Anne Mountford 'showed her sense' by taking the party there. It was Anne who got the credit of all the family arrangements, and sometimes without fully deserving it. Lady Meadowlands and Fanny Woodhead, though at the opposite ends of the social scale, both concurred in the opinion that it was the best thing they could have done. Why not go back to Mount? some people said, since it was well known that the bachelor cousin had put the house at their disposal, and the furniture there still belonged to

Mrs. Mountford. But how could Anne go to Mount, both these ladies asked, when it was clear as daylight that Heathcote Mountford, the new master, was as much in love with her as a man could be? Very silly of him, no doubt, and she engaged: but oh dear, oh dear, Fanny Woodhead cried, what a waste of good material that all these people should be in love with Anne! why should they all be in love with Anne, when it was clear she could not marry more than one of them? Lady Meadowlands took a higher view, as was natural, being altogether unaffected by the competition which is so hard upon unmarried ladies in the country. She said it was a thousand pities that Anne had not seen Heathcote Mountford, a very good-looking man, and one with all his wits about him, and with a great deal of conversation, before she had been carried away with the tattle of *that* Mr. Douglas, who had no looks and no family, and was only the first man (not a clergyman) whom she had ever seen. In this particular, it will be observed, her ladyship agreed with Mr. Loseby, who had so often lamented over the lateness of

Heathcote's arrival on the field. All these good people ordered their carriages to drive to Hunston and call at the 'Black Bull.' The Miss Woodheads went in their little pony cart, and Lady Meadowlands in a fine London carriage, her town chariot, which was only taken out on great occasions: and the Rector was driven in by Charley very soberly in the vehicle which the younger son of the family, with all the impertinence of Oxford, profanely called a shandrydan. With each successive visitor Anne's looks were, above all things, the most interesting subject. 'I think it suits her,' Lady Meadowlands said thoughtfully—which was a matter the others did not take into consideration. 'Don't you think so, Mr. Mountford?' she said with deliberate cruelty to Heathcote, who rode back part of the way by her carriage door. 'I am not a judge,' he said; 'I have a great deal of family feeling. I think most things suit my cousin Anne. If she were flushed and florid, most likely I should think the same.'

'And you would be perfectly right,' said the first

lady in the county. 'Whatever she does, you'd have her do so ever. You and I are of the same opinion, Mr. Mountford; but if I were you I would not leave a stone unturned to get her back to Mount.' 'If will would do it!' he said. 'Will can do everything,' cried the great lady, waving her hand to him as she turned the corner. He stood still and gazed after her, shaking his head, while the beautiful bays devoured the way.

The most agitating of all these visitors to Anne were the Ashleys, who knew more about her, she felt, than all the rest put together. The Rector came in with an elaborately unconcerned countenance, paying his respects to the stepmother and commending the bloom of Rose—but, as soon as he could get an opportunity, came back to Anne and took her by the arm, as was his usual way. 'Did you send it?' he said in her ear, leading her toward the further window. It was a large broad bow-window with round sashes and old-fashioned panes, looking down the High Street of Hunston. They did not look at each other, but looked out upon the street as

they stood there, the old man holding the girl close to him with his arm through hers.

'Yes—I sent it—that very day——'

'And he sent you an answer?'

A tremor ran through Anne's frame which the Rector was very sensible of; but he did not spare her, though he pitied her.

'I—suppose so: there was a letter; it is all over now, if that is what you mean. Don't talk about it any more.'

Mr. Ashley held her close by the arm, which he caressed with the pressure of his own. 'He took it, then, quietly—he did not make any resistance?' he said.

'Mr. Ashley,' said Anne, with a shiver running over her, 'don't let us talk of it any more.'

'As you please, as you please, my dear,' said the old man; but it was with reluctance that he let her go; he had a hundred questions to ask. He wanted to have satisfied himself about Cosmo, why he had done it, how he had done it, and everything about it. The Rector was confused. He remembered the

letter to Cosmo, which she had given him to read, and which had bewildered him at the time by its apparent calm. And yet now she seemed to mind! he did not understand it. He wanted to hear everything about it, but she would not let him ask. His questions, which he was not permitted to give vent to, lay heavy upon his heart as he went back. 'She would not open her mind to me,' he said to Charley. 'Whatever has happened, it must have been a comfort to her to open her mind. That is what is making her so pale. To shut it all up in her own heart cannot be good for her. But she would not open her mind to me.'

'It would have been difficult to do it with all those people present,' the Curate said, and this gave his father a little consolation. For his own part, Charley had never been so out of spirits. So long as she was happy, what did it matter? he had said so often to himself. And now she was no longer happy, and there was nothing any one could do to make her so. He for one had to stand by and consent to it, that Anne should suffer. To suffer himself would

have been a hundred times more easy, but he could not do anything. He could not punish the man who had been at the bottom of it all. He could not even permit himself the gratification of telling that fellow what he thought of him. He must be dumb and inactive, whatever happened, for Anne's sake. While the good Rector told out his regrets and disappointment, and distress because of Anne's silence, and certainty that to open her heart would do her good, the Curate was wondering sadly over this one among the enigmas of life. He himself, and Heathcote Mountford, either of them, would have given half they had (all they had in the world, Charley put it) to be permitted to be Anne's companion and comforter through the world. But Anne did not want either of them. She wanted Cosmo, who would not risk his own comfort by taking the hand she held out to him, or sacrifice a scrap of his own life for hers. How strange it was, and yet so common—to be met with everywhere. And nobody could do anything to mend it. He scarcely ventured to allow, when he was in his parish, that there were a great

many things of this kind which it was impossible to him to understand: he had to be very sure that everything that befell his poor people was 'for their good;' but in the recesses of his own bosom he allowed himself more latitude. He did not see how this, for instance, could be for any one's good. But there is very little consolation in such a view, even less than in the other way of looking at things. And he was very 'low,' sad to the bottom of his good heart. He had not said anything to Anne. He had only ventured to press her hand, perhaps a little more warmly than usual, and he had felt, poor fellow, that for that silent sympathy she had not been grateful. She had drawn her hand away impatiently; she had refused to meet his eye. She had not wanted any of his sympathy. Perhaps it was natural, but it was a little hard to bear.

Rose had her own grievances while all this was going on. If her sister, worked into high irritation by the questions and significant looks to which she had been exposed, had found it almost intolerable to live through the succession of visits, and to meet

everybody with genial indifference, and give an account of all they had been doing, and all that they were about to do—Rose was much displeased, for her part, to find herself set down again out of the importance to which she had attained, and made into the little girl of old, the young sister, the nobody whom no one cared to notice particularly while Anne was by. It was not Rose's fault, certainly, that her father had made that will which changed the positions of herself and her sister: but Lady Meadowlands, for one, had always treated her as if it was her fault. Even that, however, was less disrespectful than the indifference of the others, who made no account of her at all, and to whom she was still little Rose, her sister's shadow—nothing at all to speak of in her own person. They did not even notice her dress, which she herself thought a masterpiece, and which was certainly such a work of art as had never been seen in Hunston before. And when all these people went away, Rose, for her part, sought Mrs. Keziah, who was always ready to admire. She was so condescending that she went downstairs

to the parlour in which old Saymore and his young wife spent most of their lives, and went in for a talk. It was a thing Rose was fond of doing, to visit her humble friends and dependants in their own habitations. But there were a great many reasons why she should do what she liked in Saymore's house: first, because she was one of 'his young ladies' whom he had taken care of all their lives; second, because she was an important member of the party who were bringing success and prosperity to Saymore's house. She was queen of all that was in the 'Black Bull.' Miss Anne might be first in Saymore's allegiance, as was the case with all the old friends of the family; but, on the other hand, Anne was not a person to skip about through the house and come in for a talk to the parlour, as Rose did lightly, with no excuse at all. 'I am so sick of all those people,' she cried; 'I wish they would not all come and be sympathetic; I don't want any one to be sympathetic! Besides, it is such a long, long time since. One must have found some way of living, some way of keeping on, since then. I wish they would not

be so awfully sorry for us. I don't think now that even mamma is so sorry for herself.'

'Your mamma is a Christian, Miss Rose,' said old Saymore, getting up, though with a little reluctance, from his comfortable arm-chair as she came in. 'She knows that what can't be cured must be endured; but, at the same time, it is a great pleasure and an honour to see all the carriages of the gentry round my door. I know for certain, Miss Rose, that Lady Meadowlands never takes out that carriage for anybody below a title, which shows the opinion she has of our family. Your papa was wonderfully respected in the county. It was a great loss; a loss to everything. There is not a gentleman left like him for the trouble he used to take at Quarter Sessions and all that. It was a dreadful loss to the county, not to speak of his family. And a young man, comparatively speaking,' said Saymore, with a respectful sigh.

'Poor dear papa! I am sure I felt it as much as any one—at the time,' said Rose; 'don't you remember, Keziah, how awful that week was? I did

nothing but cry; but for a young man, Saymore, you know that is nonsense. He was not the least young; he was as old, as old——'

Here Rose stopped and looked at him, conscious that the words she had intended to say were, perhaps, not quite such as her companions would like to hear. Keziah was sitting by, sewing. She might have taken it amiss if her young mistress had held up this new husband of hers as a Methuselah. Rose looked from one to the other, confused, yet hardly able to keep from laughing. And probably old Saymore divined what she was going to say.

'Not old, Miss Rose,' he said, with the steady pertinacity which had always been one of his characteristics; 'a gentleman in the very prime of life. When you've lived virtuous and sober, saving your presence, Miss, and never done nothing to wear yourself out, sixty is nothing but the prime of life. Young fools, as has nothing but their youth to recommend them, may say different, but from them as has a right to give an opinion, you'll never hear nothing else said. He was as healthy a man, your

late dear papa, as ever I wish to see; and as hearty, and as full of life. And all his wits about him, Miss. I signed a document not longer than the very last day before he was taken—me and John Gardiner—and he was as clear as any judge, that's what he was. "It's not my will," he said to me, "Saymore—or you couldn't sign, as you're one of the legatees; for a bit of a thing like this it don't matter." I never see him more joky nor more pleasant, Miss Rose. He wasn't joky not in his ordinary, but that day he was poking his fun at you all the time. "It's a small bit of a thing to want witnessing, ain't it?" he said; "and it's not a new will, for you couldn't witness that, being both legatees."'

Rose was a good deal startled by this speech. Suddenly there came before her a vision of the sealed-up packet in Anne's desk—the seals of which she had been so anxious to break. 'What a funny thing that he should have made you sign a paper!' she said.

'Bless you, they're always having papers to sign,' said Saymore; 'sometimes it's one thing, sometimes

it's another. A deal of money is a deal of trouble, Miss Rose. You don't know that as yet, seeing as you've got Miss Anne to do everything for you.'

'I shan't always have Miss Anne,' Rose said, not knowing well what were the words she used; her mind was away, busy in other ways, very busy in other thoughts. She had always been curious, as she said to herself, from the first moment she saw that packet. What was in it? could it be the paper that Saymore signed? Could it be?—but Rose did not know what to think.

'When you have not got Miss Anne, you'll have a gentleman,' Saymore said. 'We ain't in no sort of doubt about that, Miss Rose, Keziah and me. There are ladies as always gets their gentleman, whatever happens; and one like you, cut out by nature, and a deal of money besides—there's not no question about that. The thing will be as you'll have too many to choose from. It's a deal of responsibility for a young creature at your age.'

'I will come and ask your advice, Saymore,' said

Rose, her head still busy about other things. 'Keziah asked my advice, you know.'

'Did she, Miss Rose? Then I hope as you'll never repent the good advice you gave her,' said old Saymore, drawing himself up and putting out his chest, as is the manner of man when he plumes himself. Rose looked at him with eyes of supreme ridicule, and even his little wife gave a glance up from her sewing with a strong inclination to titter; but he did not perceive this, which was fortunate. Neither had Saymore any idea that the advice the young lady had given had ever been against him. 'And you might do worse,' he added, 'than consult me. Servants see many a thing that other folks don't notice. You take my word, Miss Rose, there's nowhere that you'll hear the truth of a gentleman's temper and his goings on, better than in the servants' hall.'

'I wonder if it was a law paper that had to have two witnesses?' said Rose, irrelevantly. 'I wonder if it was something about the estate? Anne never has anything to sign that wants witnesses; was it a

big paper, like one of Mr. Loseby's? I should so like to know what it was.'

'It wasn't his will; that is all I can tell you, Miss Rose. How joky he was, to be sure, that day! I may say it was the last time as I ever saw master in life. It was before they started—him and Mr. Heathcote, for their ride. He never was better in his life than that afternoon when they started. I helped him on with his great-coat myself. He wouldn't have his heavy coat that he always wore when he was driving. "The other one, Saymore," he said, "the other one; I ain't a rheumatic old fogey like you," master said. Queer how it all comes back upon me! I think I can see him, standing as it might be there, Miss Rose, helping him on with his coat; and to think as he was carried back insensible and never opened his lips more!'

Rose was awed in spite of herself; and Keziah wiped her eyes. 'He spoke to me that day more than he had done for ever so long,' she said. 'I met him in the long corridor, and I was that frightened I didn't know what to do; but he stopped

as kind as possible. "Is that you, little Keziah?' he said. "How is the mother getting on and the children?" Mother was *that* pleased when I told her. She cried, and we all cried. Oh, I don't wonder as it is a trial to come back, losing a kind father like that and your nice 'ome!'

Now this was the kind of sympathy which Rose had particularly announced she did not wish to receive. She did not in the least regret 'her nice 'ome,' but looked back upon Mount with unfeigned relief to have escaped from the dull old world of its surroundings. But she was a little touched by these reminiscences of her father, and a great curiosity was excited within her upon other matters. She herself was a very different person from the little girl—the second daughter, altogether subject and dependent—which she had been on that fatal day. She looked back upon it with awe, but without any longing that it should be undone and everything restored to its previous order. If Mr. Mountford could come back, and everything be as before, the change would not be a comfortable one for Rose. No change, she

thought, would be pleasant. What could papa mean, signing papers on that very last day? What did he want witnesses for, after his will was signed and all done? Rose did not know what to think of it. Perhaps, indeed, it was true, as old Saymore said, that gentlemen always had papers to sign; but it was odd, all the same. She went away with her head full of it upstairs to the room where her mother and sister were sitting. They were both a little languid, sitting at different ends of the room. Mrs. Mountford had been making much use of her handkerchief, and it was a little damp after so many hours. She had felt that if she were not really crying she ought to be. To see all the old people and hear so many words of welcome, and regret that things were not as they used to be, had moved her. She was seated in this subdued state, feeling that she ought to be very much affected. She felt, indeed, that she ought not to be able to eat any dinner—that she ought to be good for nothing but bed. However, it was summer, when it is more difficult to retire there. Mrs. Mountford made great use of her handkerchief.

Anne was seated in the bow-window, looking out upon the few passengers of the High Street. In reality she did not see them; but this was her outside aspect. Her book was upon her knees. She had given herself up to her own thoughts, and these, it was evident, were not over-bright. Rose's coming in was a relief to both, for, happily, Rose was not given to thinking. On most occasions she occupied herself with what was before her, and took no trouble about what might lie beneath.

'Isn't it time to dress for dinner?' Rose said.

'To be sure,' cried Mrs. Mountford gratefully. To make a movement of any kind was a good thing; 'it must be time to dress for dinner. One feels quite out here, with no bell to tell us what to do. I suppose it wouldn't do for Saymore, with other people in the house, to ring a dressing-bell. One is lost without a dressing-bell,' the good lady said. She had her work and her wools all scattered about, though in the emotion of the moment she had not been working. Now she gathered them all in her

arms, and, with much content that the afternoon was over, went away.

'Do you ever have things to sign that want witnesses, Anne?'

'No,' said Anne, looking up surprised. 'Why do you ask? Sometimes a lease, or something of that sort,' she said.

'Then perhaps it was a lease,' said Rose to herself. She did not utter this audibly, or give any clue to her thoughts, except the 'Oh, nothing,' which is a girl's usual answer when she is asked what she means. And then they all went to dress for dinner, and nothing more could be said.

Nothing more was said that night. As soon as it was dusk, Mrs. Mountford retired to her room. It had been a fatiguing day, and everything had been brought back, she said. Certainly her handkerchief was quite damp. Worth was very sympathetic as she put her mistress to bed.

'Strangers is safest,' Worth said; 'I always did say so. There's no need to keep up before them, and nothing to be pushed back upon you.

Trouble is always nigh enough, without being forced back.'

And Rose, too, went to bed early. She had a great deal of her mother in her. She recognised the advantage of getting rid of herself, if not in any more pleasant way, then in that. But she could not sleep when she wished, which is quite a different thing from going to bed. She seemed to see as plainly as possible, dangling before her, with all its red seals, the packet which was to be opened on her twenty-first birthday. Why shouldn't it be opened now? What could it matter to any one, and especially to papa, whether it was read now or two years hence? Rose was nineteen; from nineteen is not a long step to one-and-twenty. And what if that packet contained the paper that Saymore had witnessed? She had told Anne she ought to open it. She had almost opened it herself while Anne looked on. If she only could get at it now!

Next morning a remarkable event occurred. Anne drove out with Mr. Loseby to see the Dower-house at Lilford, and report upon it. The old

lawyer was very proud as she took her seat by him in his high phaeton.

'I hope everybody will see us,' he said. 'I should like all the people in the county to see Queen Anne Mountford in the old solicitor's shay. I know some young fellows that would give their ears to be me, baldness and all. Every dog has his day, and some of us have to wait till we are very old dogs before we get it.'

'Remember, Anne,' said Mrs. Mountford, 'that if it is the least damp I will have nothing to do with it.'

Rose watched from the old bow-window with the round panes to see them drive away. She waved her hand to Anne, but she was scarcely conscious what she was doing, her heart beat so much. She sent her maid out to match some ribbon, which she knew would take a long time to match, and then Rose made a general survey of the rooms. They all opened off a square vestibule, or, more correctly, an antechamber. She went through her mother's first, carelessly, as if looking for something; then through

her own; and only went to Anne's as the last. Her heart beat high, but she had no feeling that she was going to do anything that was wrong. How could it be wrong? to read a letter a little earlier than the time appointed for reading it. If there had been anything to say that Rose was not to read it at all, then it might have been wrong; but what could it possibly matter whether it was read now or in two years? To be sure, it was not addressed to Rose, but what of that? Except Cosmo's letters, which of course were exceptional, being love-letters, all correspondence of the family was in common—and especially, of all things in the world, a letter from poor papa! But nevertheless Rose's heart beat as she went into Anne's room. The despatch-box generally stood by the writing-table, open, with all its contents ready for reference. The lid was shut down to-day, which gave her a great fright. But it was not locked, as she had feared. She got down on her knees before it and peeped in. There was the little drawer in which it had been placed, a drawer scarcely big enough to contain it. The red seals crackled as she

took it out with trembling hands. One bit of the wax came off of itself. Had Anne been taking a peep too, though she would not permit Rose to do so? No; there was no abrasion of the paper, no break of the seal. Rose suddenly remembered that the very seal her father had used was at this moment on her mother's desk. She got up hastily to get it, but then, remembering, took out the packet and carried it with her. She could lock the door of her own room, but not of Anne's, and it would not do to scatter scraps of the red wax about Anne's room and betray herself. She carried it away stealthily as a mouse, whisking out and in of the doors. Her cheeks were flushed, her hands trembling. Now, whatever it was, in a minute more she would know all about it. Never in her life had Rose's little being been in such a commotion. Not when her father's will was read; not when *that* gentleman at Cannes made her her first proposal; for at neither of these moments had there been any alarm in her mind for what was coming. The others might have suffered, perhaps, but not she.

Mrs. Mountford complained afterwards that she had not seen Rose all day. 'Where is Rose?' Anne asked when she came back full of the Dower-house, and anxious to recommend it to all concerned. After inquiries everywhere it was found that Rose was lying down in her room with a bad headache. She had made the maid, when she returned from her fruitless quest for the ribbon, which could not be matched, draw down the blinds: and there she lay in great state, just as Mrs. Mountford herself did in similar circumstances. Anne, who went up to see her, came down with a half-smile on her lips.

'She says it is like one of your headaches, mamma; and she will keep still till dinner.'

'That is the best thing she can do,' said Mrs. Mountford. 'If she can get a little sleep she will be all right.'

Secretly it must be allowed that Anne was more amused than alarmed by her little sister's indisposition. Mrs. Mountford had been subject to such retirements as long as any one could remember; and Rose's get-up was a very careful imitation of her

mother's—eau de Cologne and water on a chair beside her sofa, a wet handkerchief spread upon her head, her hair let down and streaming on the pillow.

'Don't let any one take any notice,' she said in a faint little voice. 'If I am let alone I shall soon be better.'

'Nobody shall meddle with you,' said Anne, half laughing. And then she retired downstairs to discuss the house with Mrs. Mountford, who was only half an authority when Rose was not by.

But if any one could have known the thoughts that were going on under the wet handkerchief and the dishevelled locks! Rose's head was aching, not with fever, but with thinking. She had adopted this expedient to gain time, because she could not make up her mind what to do. The packet resealed, though with considerably more expenditure of wax than the original, was safely returned to the despatch-box. But Rose had been so startled by the information she had received that further action had become impossible to her. What was she to do? She was not going to sit down under

that, not going to submit to it, and live on for two years knowing all about it. How could she do that? This was a drawback that she had not foreseen: information clandestinely obtained is always a dreadful burden to carry about. How was she to live for two years knowing *that*, and pretending not to know it? Never before in her life had the current of thought run so hot in her little brain. What was she to do? Was there nothing she could do? She lay still for some minutes after Anne had left her. To be in such a dilemma, and not to be able to tell anybody—not to ask anybody's advice! She thought once of rushing to Keziah, putting the case to her as of some one else. But how could Keziah tell her what to do? At last a sudden gleam of suggestion shot through Rose's brain; she sprang half up on her sofa, forgetting the headache. At this period she was in a kind of irresponsible unmoral condition, not aware that she meant any harm, thinking only of defending herself from a danger which she had just discovered, which nobody else knew. She must defend herself. If a robber is after you in the dark,

and you strike out wildly and hurt some one who is on your side, who is trying to defend you—is that your fault? Self-defence was the first thing, the only thing, that occurred to Rose. After it came into her mind in the sole way in which it was possible she took no time to think, but rushed at it, and did it without a moment's pause. She wrote a letter, composing it hurriedly, but with great care. It was not long, but it meant a great deal. It was addressed, as Anne's letter, which was also of so much importance, had been addressed, to 'Cosmo Douglas, Esq., Middle Temple.' What could little Rose be writing to Cosmo Douglas about? She slid it into her pocket when, still very much flushed and excited, she went down to dinner, and carried it about with her till quite late in the evening, when, meeting Saymore with the bag which he was about to send off to the post office, she stopped him on the stairs, and put it in with her own hand.

This was the history of Rose's day—the day when she had that feverish attack which alarmed all the inhabitants of the 'Black Bull' She herself always

said it was nothing, and happily it came to nothing. But who could prevent a mother from being alarmed, when her child suddenly appeared with cheeks so flushed, and a pulse that was positively racing, Mrs. Mountford said. However, fortunately, as the patient herself always predicted, a night's rest set it all right.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MAN OF THE PERIOD.

THERE is in human nature an injustice towards those who do wrong, those who are the sinners and agents of woe in this world, which balances a good deal of the success of wickedness. There are plenty of wicked persons who flourish like the green bay tree, and receive to all appearance no recompense for their evil ways. But, on the other hand, when a man fails to conduct himself as he ought to do, from cowardice, from an undue regard to prudential motives—from, as often happens, an overweening regard for the world's opinion—that world repays him pitilessly with contempt and neglect, and makes no allowance for all the pangs which he suffers, and for all the struggles in his soul. Cosmo Douglas has had hard measure in these pages, where, as we have pretended,

his character was understood. But even in understanding it, we have dealt, we are aware and confess, hardly with this nineteenth-century man, who had done nothing more than all the canons of his age declared it his duty to do. He erred, perhaps, in loving Anne, and in telling her so at first; for he ought to have taken it into consideration that he would not be allowed to marry her, notwithstanding the bias towards the romantic side of such questions which the world professes in words. But then he was led astray by another wave of popular opinion, that which declares with much apparent reason that the race of cruel fathers is as extinct as the dodo, and that no girl is ever really prevented, if she chooses to stick to him, from marrying 'the man of her heart.' Cosmo had believed this devoutly till he was forced by events to take up a different opinion; and from that moment every impartial observer must allow that he acted up to the highest tenets of the modern creed. As soon as he perceived that it was really likely that Anne would be deprived of her fortune in consequence of her adherence to

him, he did everything a man could do, within the limits permitted to a gentleman of the period, to induce her to decide for her own advantage and against himself. He could not say in so many words, 'You must keep your fortune, and throw me over; I shall not mind it.' But he as near said it as a person of perfectly good manners could do. It is not for a man to take the initiative in such a case, because women, always more foolish than men, are very likely to be piqued on the side of their generosity, and to hold all the more strenuously to a self-denying lover, the more he does *not* wish to bind them. In this point his position was very difficult, very delicate, as any one may perceive; and when, in spite of all his remonstrances, and hints, and suggestions, Anne's sacrifice was accomplished, and she was actually cast off by her angry father, with no fortune, and nothing to recompense her but the attachment of a barrister without occupation, and an empty engagement to him, which it was impossible in present circumstances to carry out, it would be difficult to imagine anything more embarrassing than his

position. She had made this sacrifice, which he did not wish, for him; had insisted on making it, notwithstanding all that he could venture to say; and now of course looked to him for gratitude, for requital, and an impassioned sense of all that she had done and relinquished for him, notwithstanding that it was the very last thing in his mind that she should relinquish anything for him. What was he to do?

If the man was exasperated, was there much wonder? He could no more, according to his tenets, throw her over than he could marry her. Both were alike impossible. It was strictly according to the laws of society that a man should decline to marry when he had nothing to marry upon; but it was not consistent with those laws (at least according to the interpretation of them accepted by men of Cosmo's type) that he should throw the lady over as soon as she had lost her fortune. Here accordingly arose a dilemma out of which it was impossible to come unharmed. Cosmo's very heart was impaled upon these forks. What could he do? He could not marry

upon nothing, and bring his wife down to the position of a household drudge, which was all, so far as he knew, that would be practicable. For Anne's sake this was out of the question. Neither could he say to her honestly, 'You are poor and I am poor, and we cannot marry.' What could he do? He was blamed, blamed brutally, and without consideration, by most of the people round; people like the Ashleys, for instance, who would have plunged into the situation and made something of it one way or another, and never would have found out what its characteristic difficulties were. But to Cosmo those difficulties filled up the whole horizon. What was he to do? How was he to do it? To plunge himself and Anne into all the horrors of a penniless marriage was impossible, simply impossible; and to separate himself from her was equally out of the question. If the reader will contemplate the position on all sides, he will, I am sure, be brought to see that, taking into account the manner of man Cosmo was, and his circumstances, and all about him, the way in which he did behave, perplexedly keeping up

his relations with her family, showing himself as useful as possible, but keeping off all too-familiar consultations, all plans and projects for the future, was really the only way open to him. He was not romantic, he was not regardless of consequences; being a man of his time how could he make himself so? and what else could he do?

When he received one day quite suddenly, without any preparation, that letter which Anne had given to Mr. Ashley to read, it came upon him like a thunderbolt. I cannot take upon me to say that after the first shock he was surprised by it or found it unnatural; he did not experience any of these feelings. On the contrary, it was, so far as I know, after, as has been said, the first shock, a relief to his mind. It showed him that Anne, too, had perceived the situation and accepted it. He was startled by her clear-sightedness, but it gained his approbation as the most sensible and seemly step which she could have taken. But, all the same, it hurt him acutely, and made him tingle with injured pride and shame. It does not come within the code of man-

hood, which is of longer existence than the nineteenth century, that a woman should have it in her power to speak so. It gave him an acute pang. It penetrated him with a sense of shame; it made him feel somehow, to the bottom of his heart, that he was an inferior kind of man, and that Anne knew it. It was all according to the canons of the situation, just as a sensible woman should have behaved; just as his own proceedings were all that a sensible man could do; but it hurt him all the same. The letter, with that calm of tone which he suspected to mean contempt, seemed to him to have been fired into him with some sharp twangling arrow; where it struck it burnt and smarted, making him small in his own esteem, petty and miserable; notwithstanding which he had to reply to it 'in the same spirit in which it was written'—to use a phrase which was also of his time. He did this, keeping up appearances, pretending to Anne that he did not perceive the sentiments which her letter veiled, but accepted it as the most natural thing in the world. It may be as well to give here the letter which he wrote in reply:—

'Dearest Anne,—Your letter has indeed been a surprise to me of the most dolorous kind.

'Yes, I understand. There is no need, as you say, for explanations—six words, or six hundred, would not be enough to say what I should have to say, if I began. But I will not. I refrain from vexing you with protestations, from troubling you with remonstrances. Circumstances are against me so heavily, so overwhelmingly, that nothing I could say would appear like anything but folly in the face of that which alone I can do. I am helpless—and you are clear-sighted, and perceive the evils of this long suspense, without allowing your clearer judgment to be flattered, as mine has been, by the foolishness of hope.

'What then can I say? If I must, I accept your decision. This is the sole ground on which it can be put. I will not bind you against your will—that is out of the question, that is the one thing that is impossible. I will never give up hope that some change may come in the circumstances or in your resolution, till—something happens to show me that

no change can come. Till then, I do not call myself your friend, for that would be folly. I am more than your friend, or I am nothing—but I will sign myself yours, as you are, without any doubt, the woman whom I will always love, and admire, and reverence, beyond any woman in the world.

'COSMO DOUGLAS.'

And this was all quite true. He did love and admire her more than any one in the world. It was the curse of his training that he knew what was best when he saw it, and desired that: though often men of his kind take up with the worst after, and are contented enough. But Anne was still his type of perfection—she was beautiful to him, and sweet and delightful—but she was not possible. Is not that more than any beauty or delight? And yet, notwithstanding the acute pangs which he suffered, I don't suppose one individual out of a hundred who reads this history will be sorry for Cosmo. They will be sorry for Anne, who does not want their sorrow half so much.

He had a very melancholy time after the Mountfords went away. He had not accepted any invitations for August, being, indeed, in a very unsettled mind, and not knowing what might be required of him. He stayed in his chambers, alone with many thoughts. They were gone, and Anne had gone out of his life. It was a poor sort of life when he looked at it now, with the light of her gone, yet showing, at the point where she departed, what manner of existence it had been and was: very poor, barren, unsatisfactory—yet the only kind of life that was possible. In the solitude of these early August days he had abundance of time to think it over. He seemed to be able to take it in his hand, to look at it as a spectator might. The quintessence of life in one way, all that was best in the world made tributary to is perfection—and yet how poor a business! And though he was young, it was all he would ever come to. He was not of the stuff, he said to himself, of which great men are made. Sooner or later, no doubt, he would come to a certain success. He would get some appointment; he would have more to live

upon; but this would not alter his life. If Anne had kept her fortune, that might have altered it; or if he could in any way become rich, and go after her and bring her back while still there was time. But, short of that, he saw no way to make it different. She was right enough, it was impossible; there was nothing else to be said. Yet while he arrived at this conclusion he felt within himself to the bottom of his heart what a paltry conclusion it was. A man who was worth his salt would have acted otherwise; would have shown himself not the slave but the master of circumstances. Such men were in the backwoods, in the Australian bush, where the primitive qualities were all in all, and the graces of existence were not known. Out of the colonies, however, Cosmo believed that his own was about the best known type of man, and what he did, most men, at least in society, would have done. But he did not feel proud of himself.

The Mountfords had not been away a week when he received another letter which made his heart jump, though that organ was under very good

control, and did not give him the same trouble that hearts less experienced so often give to their possessors. The post-mark, Hunston, was in itself exciting, and there was in Rose's feeble handwriting that general resemblance to her sister's which so often exists in a family. He held it in his hand and looked at it with a bewildered sense that perhaps his chances might be coming back to him, and the chapter of other life reopening. Had she relented? Was there to be a place of repentance allowed him? He held the letter in his hand, not opening it for the moment, and asking himself if it were so, whether he would be happy, or—the reverse. It had been humiliating to come to an end of the dream of brighter things, but—would it not be rather inconvenient that it should be resumed again? These were his reflections, his self-questionings, before he opened the letter. But when he did open it, and found that the letter was not from Anne but Rose Mountford, the anticlimax was such that he laughed aloud. Little Rose! he had paid her a great deal of attention, and made himself something of a

slave to her little caprices, not for any particular reason, though, perhaps, with a sense that an heiress was always a person to please, whoever she might be. What could little Rose want with him? to give him a commission—something to buy for her, or to match, or one of the nothings with which some girls have a faculty for keeping their friends employed. He began to read her letter with a smile, yet a pang all the same in the recollection that this was now the only kind of communication he was likely to have from the family. Not Anne: not those letters which had half vexed, half charmed him with their impracticable views, yet pleased his refined taste and perception of beauty. This gave him a sharp prick, even though it was with a smile that he unfolded the letter of Rose.

But when he read it he was brought to himself with a curious shock. What did it mean? Rose's letter was not occupied with any commissions, but was of the most startling character, as follows:—

'Dear Mr. Douglas,—I am writing to you quite

secretly—nobody knows anything about it—and I hope at least, whatever you do, that you will keep my secret, and not let Anne know, or mamma.

'I feel quite sure, though nobody has said a word, that Anne and you have quarrelled—and I am so sorry; I don't know if she thought you neglected her and paid too much attention to us. I am quite sure you never meant anything by it. But what I want to say is, that I hope you won't pay attention if she is cross. *Do* make it up, and get married to Anne. You know all the money has been left to me, but if you marry, I will promise faithfully to give her a part of it, say a quarter, or even a third, which would be enough to make you comfortable. Mr. Loseby proposed this to me some time ago, and I have quite made up my mind to it now. I will give her certainly a quarter, perhaps a third, and this ought to be enough for you to marry on. I can't do it till I come of age, but then you may be sure, *if you are married*, that I will make a new will directly and settle it so. The first thing is that you should

be married, Anne and you. I wish for it very much now.

'Be sure, above everything, that you don't let out that I have written to you, *ever*, either to Anne or mamma.

'Yours very truly,

'ROSE MOUNTFORD.'

This letter filled Cosmo with consternation, with derision, with sharp irritation, yet such a sense of the absurdity, as made him laugh in the midst of all his other sentiments. For a moment the thought, the question, glanced across his mind, Could it be, however distantly, however unconsciously, inspired by Anne? But that was not to be believed: or could Mrs. Mountford, wanting perhaps to get rid of her stepdaughter's supervision, have put this idea of intermeddling into Rose's head? But her anxiety that her secret should be kept seemed to clear the mother; and as for Anne! That much he knew, however he might be deceived in any other way. He read it over again, with a sense of humiliation

and anger which mastered his sense of the absurdity. This little frivolous plaything of a girl to interfere in his affairs! It is true, indeed, that if this assurance had been conveyed to him in a serious way, becoming its importance, say by Mr. Loseby himself, and while there was yet time to make everything comfortable, it would have been by no means an unpleasant interference to Cosmo. He could not but think what a difference it might have made if only a month back, only a fortnight back, this information had been conveyed to him. But now that it was perfectly useless, now that Anne's letter and his own reply had entirely closed the matter between them, to have this child push in with her little impertinent offer—her charity to her sister! Rose bestowing a quarter of her fortune upon Anne—the younger graciously affording a provision to the elder! By Jove! Cosmo said to himself, with an outburst of fury. Rose, a creature like Rose, to have it in her power thus to insult Anne! He was himself detached from Anne, and never more would there be any contact between them. Still it was in his power to

avenge her for once in a way. Cosmo did not pause, for once in his life, to think what was prudent, but stretched out his hand for paper and ink, and immediately indited his reply:—

'My dear little Miss Rose,—Your letter is very kind; it makes me feel as if I were a prince in a fairy tale, and you the good fairy, removing the obstacles from my way; but, unfortunately, there were not any obstacles in my way of the kind you suppose, and your present of part of your fortune to me, which seems to be what you mean, though carried out through your sister, is, I fear, a sort of thing that neither the respectable Mr. Loseby nor any other lawyer would sanction. It is very kind of you to wish to gratify me with so much money, but, alas! I cannot take it—unless, indeed, you were to give me the whole of it, along with your own pretty little hand, which I should not at all object to. Are you quite, quite sure I never "meant anything" by the attention I paid you? Perhaps I meant all the time to transfer my affections from one sister to the

other, from the one without any money to the one with a fortune, which she can afford to divide into four or even three parts. Think over it again, and perhaps you will find out that this was in my mind all the time. But, short of this, I fear there is not much ground for a commercial transaction of any kind between you and me.

'Your obedient servant to command,

'C. DOUGLAS.'

This was the revenge he took upon Rose for her impertinence: it was mere impertinence, he supposed. Once, and once only, it crossed his mind that she might have had a motive for her anxiety that he should marry her sister. But how could that be? It was an impossibility. And notwithstanding the miserable way in which you will say he had himself behaved, his furious indignation at this patronage of Anne by Rose shows how real was still the love and better worship for Anne that was in his heart.

And when he had satisfied his temper by this

letter, he sat and thought of Anne. Would it have been well with this support behind to have ventured, perhaps, and been bold, and knit their lives together? Rose's guarantee, though the offer irritated him so much, would have made that possible which at present was impossible. Would the game have been worth the candle? He sat and thought over it for a long time in the darkening evening and sighed. On the whole, perhaps, as things stood—— And then he went out to his club to dine. Not proud of himself—far from proud of himself—feeling on the whole a poor creature—and yet—— Perhaps, as things stood, it was just as well.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE HEIRESS'S TRIAL.

ROSE'S letter to Cosmo had been conceived in a sudden commotion of feeling, in which her instincts and sensations had come uppermost, and got almost out of her own control. That savage sense of property which exists in unreasoning childhood had risen to flame and fire within her, mingled with and made still more furious by the terror and panic of possible loss. Beneath all her gentleness and smoothness, and the many glosses of civilisation that clothed her being, Rose had an entirely primitive nature, tenacious of every personal belonging, full of natural acquisitiveness and a love of *having*, which children and savages share with many highly cultivated persons. She was one of those who, without any conscious evil meaning, are rendered desperate by the idea of personal loss.

Her first impulse, when she knew that her 'rights' were in danger, was to fight for them wildly, to turn upon all assailants with impassioned fury. She did not want to hurt any one, but what she had got she meant to keep. The idea of losing the position to which she had been elevated, and the fortune which had made her for the last year so much more important a person than before, filled her with a kind of cruel panic or fierce terror which was ready to seize at any instrument by which its enemies could be confounded. This fierce passion of fear is apt to do more mischief than deliberate cruelty. It will launch any thunder bolt that comes to hand, arrest the very motion of the earth, if possible, and upset the whole course of mortal living. It is more unscrupulous than any tyrant. Rose was altogether possessed by this ferocious terror. When she saw her property and importance threatened, she looked about her wildly to see what machinery she could set in motion for the confusion of her enemies and her own defence. The character of it, and the result of it to others, seemed entirely unimportant to her if

only it could stop the danger, forestall the approaching crisis. In the letter which she had surreptitiously read it was stipulated that in a certain case her inheritance was to be absolutely secure, and it had immediately become all-important to Rose to bring about the forbidden thing against which her father had made so violent a stand. She took her measures instantly, with the cunning of ignorance and simplicity and the cruel directness of a childish mind. That there was some difficulty between her sister and Cosmo her quick observation had early divined. Perhaps her vanity had whispered that it was because he liked her best: but, on the other hand, Rose understood the power of pecuniary obstacles, and could feel the want of money in a much more reasonable way than her sister, though so much her superior, ever had done. And in either case her appeal to Cosmo would be sovereign, she thought, in the first heat of her panic. If he had liked her best, he would perceive that it was hopeless. If he had been afraid, because of the want of fortune, her letter would reassure him. And if she could but bring

it about—make Anne unpardonable— secure her own 'rights'!—with a passion of hostility against every body who could injure her, this was what Rose thought.

But when the letter was fairly gone, and the machinery set in motion, a little chill crept over that first energy of passionate self-defence. Other thoughts began to steal in. The strength of the savage and of the child lies in their singleness of vision. As long as you can perceive only what you want and how it is to be had, or tried for, everything is possible; but when a cold breath steals upon you from here and there, suggesting perhaps the hurt of another whom you have really no desire to hurt, perhaps the actual wickedness which you have no desire to perpetrate, what chills come upon the heat of action, what creeping doubts even of the first headlong step already taken! Rose had three days to reflect upon what she had done, and those three days were not happy. She disguised her discomposure as much as she could, avoiding the society of her mother and sister. Anne, though she was absorbed in occupations much more important

than anything that was likely to be involved in the varying looks of Rose, perceived her little sister's flightiness and petulance with a grieved consciousness that her position as heiress and principal personage of the family group was, now that they were in their own country and better able to realise what it meant, doing Rose harm; while Mrs. Mountford set it down to the girl's unreasonable fancy for little Keziah, whose company she seemed to seek on all occasions, and whose confidences and preparations were not the kind of things for a young girl to share.

'No good ever comes of making intimates of your servants,' her mother said, disturbed by Rose's uncertain spirits, her excitedness and agitation. What was there to be agitated about? Once or twice the girl, so wildly stirred in her own limited being, so full of ignorant desperation, boldness, and terror, and at the same time cold creepings of doubt and self-disapproval, came pressing close to her mother's side, with a kind of dumb overture of confidence. But Mrs. Mountford could not understand that there was

anything to tell. If there had been a lover at hand, if Heathcote had shown his former admiration (as she understood it) for Rose, or even if he had been coming daily to visit them, she might have been curious, interested, roused to the possibility that there was a secret to tell. But what could Rose find of a nature to be confidential about in Hunston? The thing was incredible. So Mrs. Mountford had said with a little impatience, 'Can't you find a seat, my dear? I want my footstool to myself,' when the child came to her feet as girls are in the habit of doing. Rose felt herself rejected and pushed aside: and Anne's serious countenance repulsed her still more completely. It frightened her to think that she had been venturing to interfere in her sister's affairs. What would Anne say? Her panic when she thought of this was inconceivable. It was not a passion of fright like that with which her own possible loss had filled her, but it was a terror that put wings to her feet, that gave her that impulse of instant flight and self-concealment which is the first thought of terror. Thus the poor little undeveloped nature

became the plaything of desperate emotions, while yet all incapable of bearing them, and not understanding what they were. She was capable of doing deadly harm to others on one side, and almost of doing deadly harm to herself on the other, out of her extremity of fear.

Cosmo's letter, however, was as a dash of cold water in Rose's face. Its momentary effect was one of relief. He would not do what she wanted, therefore he never, never was likely to betray to Anne that she had interfered, and at the same time his refusal eased her sense of wrong-doing: but after the first momentary relief other sensations much less agreeable came into her mind. Her property! her property! Thus she stood, a prey to all the uncertainties—nay, more than this, almost sure that there was no uncertainty, that danger was over for Anne, that she herself was the victim, the deceived one, cruelly betrayed and deserted by her father, who had raised her so high only to abase her the lower—and even by Anne, who had—what had Anne done? Was it certain, Rose asked herself, that Anne had

not herself privately read that fatal letter, and acted upon it, though she had pretended to be so much shocked when Rose touched it? That must have been at the bottom of it all. Yes, no doubt that was how it was; most likely it was all a plot—a conspiracy! Anne *knew*; and had put Cosmo aside—ordered him, perhaps, to pretend to like Rose best!—bound him to wait till the three years were over, and Rose despoiled, and all secure, when the whole thing would come on again, and they would marry, and cheat poor papa in his grave, and rob Rose of her fortune! She became wild with passion as this gradually rose upon her as the thing most likely—nay, more than likely, certain! Only this could have warranted the tone in which Cosmo wrote. His letter was dreadful: it was unkind, it was mocking, it was insolent. Yes! that was the word—insolent! insulting! was what it was. Why, he pretended to propose to her!—to her! Rose! after being engaged to her sister! When Rose read it over again and perceived what even her somewhat obtuse faculties could not miss—the contemp-

tuous mockery of Cosmo's letter, she stamped her feet with rage and despite. Her passion was too much for her. She clenched her hands tight, and cried for anger, her cheeks flaming, her little feet stamping in fury. And this was the sight which Keziah saw when she came into the room—a sight very alarming to that poor little woman; and, indeed, dangerous in the state of health in which she was.

'Oh! Miss Rose! Miss Rose!' she said, with a violent start (which was so bad for her); 'what is it? what is the matter?'

Rose was in some degree brought to herself by the appearance of a spectator; and, at the same time, it was a comfort to relieve her burdened soul by speaking to some one.

'Keziah,' she said, in a great flush of agitation and resentment, 'it is—it is a gentleman that has been uncivil to me!'

'Oh, Miss Rose!' old Saymore's wife cried out with excitement, attaching a much more practical meaning to the words than Rose had any insight

into. 'Oh, Miss Rose! in our house! Who is it? who is it? Only tell me, and Mr. Saymore will turn him out of doors if it was the best customer we have!'

This rapid acceptance of her complaint, and swift determination to avenge it, brought Rose still more thoroughly to herself.

'Oh, it is not any one here. It is a gentleman in—a letter,' Rose said; and this subdued her. 'It is not anything Saymore can help me about, nor you, nor any one.'

'We are only poor folks, Miss Rose,' said Keziah, 'but for a real interest, and wishing you well, there's none, if it was the Queen herself——'

The ludicrousness of the comparison struck Rose, but struck her not mirthfully—dolefully.

'It is not much that the Queen can care,' she said. 'Anne was presented, but I was never presented. Nobody cares! What was I when Anne was there? Always the little one—the one that was nobody!'

'But, Miss Rose! Miss Rose!'

Keziah did not know how to put the consolation she wished to give, for indeed she, like everybody else, had mourned the injustice to Anne, which she must condone and accept if she adopted the first suggestion of her sympathy.

'You know,' she said, with a little gasp over the renegade nature of the speech—'you know that Miss Anne is nobody now, and you are the one that everybody thinks of——'

Keziah drew her breath hard after this, and stopped short, more ashamed of her own turncoat utterance than could have been supposed: for indeed, she said to herself, with very conciliatory speciousness of reasoning, though Miss Anne was the one that everybody thought of, she herself had always thought most of Miss Rose, who was not a bit proud, but always ready to talk and tell you anything, and had liked her best.

'Ah!' cried Rose, shaking her head, 'if that were always to last!' and then she stopped herself suddenly, and looked at Keziah as if there was something to tell, as if considering whether she should

tell something. But Rose was not without prudence, and she was able to restrain herself.

'It does not matter—it does not matter, Keziah,' she cried, with that air of injured superiority which is always so congenial to youth. 'There are some people who never get justice, whatever they may do.'

Little Mrs. Saymore was more bewildered than words could say. If there was a fortunate person in the world, was it not Miss Rose? So suddenly enriched, chosen, instead of Miss Anne, to have Miss Anne's fortune, and all the world at her feet! Keziah did not know what to make of it. But Rose, who had no foolish consideration for other people's feelings, left her little time for consideration.

'You may go now,' she said, with a little wave of her hand; 'I don't want anything. I want only to be left alone.'

'I am sure, Miss Rose,' said Keziah, offended, 'I didn't mean to intrude upon you. I wanted to say as all *the things* has come home, and if you would like to look at them, I've laid them all out in the

best room, and they do look sweet, said the little expectant mother.

Rose had taken a great deal of interest in the things, and even had aided in various small pieces of needlework—a condescension which Mrs. Mountford did not approve. But to-day she was in no mood for this inspection. She shook her head and waved her hand with a mixture of majesty and despondency.

'Not to-day. I have other things to think of, Keziah. I couldn't look at them to-day.'

This made Keziah take an abrupt leave, with offence which swallowed up her sympathy. Afterwards sympathy had the better of her resentment. She went and reviewed her little show by herself, and felt sorry for Miss Rose. It must be a trouble indeed which could not be consoled by a sight of *the things*, with all their little frills goffered, and little laces so neatly ironed, laid out in sets upon the best bed.

When, however, Keziah had withdrawn, the want of any one to speak to became intolerable to Rose.

She was not used to be shut up within the limits of her own small being; and though she could keep her little secrets as well as any one, yet the possession of this big secret, now that there was no longer anything to do—now that her initiative had failed, and produced her nothing but Cosmo's insolent letter, with its mock proposal—was more than she could contain. She dared not speak to Anne, and her mother had unwittingly repulsed her confidence. A tingling impatience took possession of her. If Keziah had been present—little as Keziah would have understood it, and unsuitable as she would have been for a *confidante*—Rose felt that she must have told her all. But even Keziah was not within her reach. She tried to settle to something, to read, to do some of her fancy-work. For a moment she thought that to 'practise'—a duty which in her emancipation she had much neglected—might soothe her; but she could only practise by going to the sitting-room where the piano was, where her mother usually sat, and where Anne most likely would be at that hour. Her book was a novel, but she could not read it.

Even novels, though they are a wonderful resource in the vigils of life, lose their interest at the moments when the reader's own story is at, or approaching, a crisis. When she sat down to read, one of the phrases in Cosmo's letter would suddenly dart upon her mind like a winged insect and give her a sting: or the more serious words of the other letter—the secret of the dead which she had violated—would flit across her, till her brain could stand it no longer. She rose up with a start and fling, in a kind of childish desperation. She could not, would not bear it! all alone in that little dark cell of herself, with no rays of light penetrating it except the most unconsolatory rays, which were not light at all, but spurts as of evil gases, and bad little savage suggestions, such as to make another raid upon Anne's despatch-box, and get the letter again and burn it, and make an end of it coming into her mind against her will. But then, even if she were so wicked as to do that, how did she know there was not another? indeed, Rose was almost sure that Anne had told her there was another—the result of which would be

that she would only have the excitement of doing something very wrong without getting any good from it. She sat with her book in her hand, and went over a page or two without understanding a word. And then she jumped up and stamped her little feet and clenched her hands, and made faces in the glass at Cosmo and fate. Then, in utter impatience, feeling herself like a hunted creature, pursued by something, she knew not what, Rose seized her hat and went out, stealing softly down the stairs that nobody might see her. She said to herself that there was a bit of ribbon to buy. There are always bits of ribbon to buy for a young lady's toilette. She would save the maid the trouble and get it for herself.

The tranquil little old-fashioned High Street of a country town on an August morning is as tranquillising a place as it is possible to imagine. It was more quiet, more retired, and what Rose called dull, than the open fields. All the irregular roofs—here a high-peaked gable, there an overhanging upper storey, the red pediment of the Queen Anne house

which was Mr. Loseby's office and dwelling, the clustered chimneys of the almshouses—how they stood out upon the serene blueness of the sky and brilliancy of the sunshine! And underneath how shady it was, how cool on the shady side! in what a depth of soft shelter, contrasting with the blaze on the opposite pavement, was the deep cavernous doorway of the 'Black Bull,' and the show in the shop windows, where one mild wayfarer in muslin was gazing in, making the quiet more apparent! A boy in blue, with a butcher's tray upon his head, was crossing the street; two little children in sunbonnets were going along with a basket between them; and in the extreme distance was a costermonger's cart with fruit and vegetables, which had drawn some women to their doors. Of itself the cry of the man who was selling these provisions was not melodious, but it was so softened by the delight of the still, sweet, morning air, in which there was still a whiff of dew, that it toned down into the general harmony, adding a not unpleasant sense of common affairs, the leisurely bargain, the innocent

acquisition, the daily necessary traffic which keeps homes and tables supplied. The buying and selling of the rosy-cheeked apples and green cabbages belonged to the quiet ease of living in such a softened, silent place. Rose did not enter into the sentiment of the scene; she was herself a discord in it. In noisy London she would have been more at home; and yet the quiet soothed her, though she interrupted and broke it up with the sharp pat of her high-heeled boot and the crackle of her French muslin. She was not disposed towards the limp untidy draperies that are 'the fashion.' Her dress neither swept the pavement nor was huddled up about her knees like the curtains of a shabby room, but billowed about her in crisp puffs, with enough of starch; and her footstep, which was never languid, struck the pavement more sharply than ever in the energy of her discomposure. The butcher in the vacant open shop, from which fortunately most of its contents had been removed, came out to the door bewildered to see who it could be; and one of Mr. Loseby's clerks poked out of a window in his shirt-sleeves,

but drew back again much confused and abashed when he caught the young lady's eye. The clerks in Mr. Loseby's office were not, it may be supposed, of an order to hope from any notice from a Miss Mountford of Mount; yet in the twenties both boys and girls have their delusions on that point. Rose, however, noticed the young clerk no more than if he had been a costermonger, or one of the cabbages that worthy was selling: yet the sight of him gave her a new idea. Mr. Loseby! any Mountford of Mount had a right to speak to Mr. Loseby, whatever trouble he or she might be in. And Rose knew the way into his private room as well as if she had been a child of the house. She obeyed her sudden impulse, with a great many calculations equally sudden springing up spontaneously in her bosom. It would be well to see what Mr. Loseby knew; and then he might be able to think of some way of punishing Cosmo: and then—in any case it would be a relief to her mind. The young clerk in his shirt-sleeves, yawning over his desk, heard the pat of her high heels coming up the steps at the door, and could not believe his ears.

He addressed himself to his work with an earnestness which was almost solemn. Was she coming to complain of his stare at her from the window? or was it to ask Mr. Loseby, perhaps, who was that nice-looking young man in the little room close to the door?

Mr. Loseby's room was apt to look dusty in the summer, though it was in fact kept in admirable order. But the Turkey carpet was very old, and penetrated by the sweeping of generations, and the fireplace always had a tinge of ashes about it. To-day the windows were open, the Venetian blinds down, and there was a sort of green dimness in the room, in which Rose, dazzled by the sunshine out of doors, could for the moment distinguish nothing. She was startled by Mr. Loseby's exclamation of her name. She thought for the moment that he had found her out internally as well as externally, and surprised her secret as well as herself. 'Why, little Rose!' he said. He was sitting in a coat made of yellow Indian grass-silk which did not accord so well as his usual shining blackness with

the glistening of his little round bald head, and his eyes and spectacles. His table was covered with papers done up in bundles with all kinds of red tape and bands. 'This is a sight for sore eyes,' he said. 'You are like summer itself stepping into an old man's dusty den; come and sit near me and let me look at you, my summer Rose! I don't know which is the freshest and the prettiest!' said the old lawyer, waving his hand towards a beautiful luxurious blossom of 'La France' which was on his table in a Venetian glass. He had a fancy for pretty things.

'Oh, I was passing, and I thought I would come in—and see you,' Rose said.

Mr. Loseby had taken her appearance very quietly, as a matter of course; but when she began to explain he was startled. He pushed his spectacles up upon his forehead and looked at her curiously. 'Ah!' he said, 'that was kind of you—to come with no other object than to see an old man.'

'Oh!' cried Rose, confused, 'I did not say I had no other object, Mr. Loseby. I want you to tell

me—is—is—Anne likely to settle upon the Dower-house? I do so want to know.'

'My dear child, your mother has as much to do with it as Anne has. You will hear from her better than from me.'

'To be sure, that is true,' said Rose; and then, after a pause, 'Oh, Mr. Loseby, is it really, really true that Cosmo Douglas is not going to marry Anne? isn't it shameful? to bring her into such trouble and then to forsake her. Couldn't he be made to marry her? I think it is a horrid shame that a man should behave like that and get no punishment at all.'

Mr. Loseby pushed his spectacles higher and higher; he peered at her through the partial light with a very close scrutiny. Then he rose and half drew up one of the blinds. But even this did not satisfy him. 'Do you think then,' he said at last, 'that it would be a punishment to a man to marry Anne?'

'It would depend upon what his feelings were,

said Rose with much force of reason; 'if he wanted, for example, to marry—somebody else.'

'Say Rose—instead of Anne,' said the acute old lawyer, with a grin which was very much like a grimace.

'I am sure I never said that!' cried Rose. 'I never, never said it, nor so much as hinted at it. He may say what he pleases, but *I* never, never said it! you always thought the worst of me, Mr. Loseby, Anne was always your favourite; but you need not be unjust. Haven't I come here express to ask you? Couldn't he be made to marry her? Why, they were engaged! everybody has talked of them as engaged. And if it is broken off, think how awkward for Anne.'

Mr. Loseby took off his spectacles, which had been twinkling and glittering upon his forehead like a second pair of eyes—this was a very strong step, denoting unusual excitement—and wiped them deliberately while he looked at Rose. He had the idea, which was not a just idea, that either Rose

had been exercising her fascinations upon her sister's lover, or that she had been in her turn fascinated by him. 'You saw a good deal of Mr. Douglas in town?' he said, looking at her keenly, always polishing his spectacles; but Rose sustained the gaze without shrinking.

'Oh, a great deal,' she said, 'he went everywhere with us. He was very nice to mamma and me. Still I do not care a bit about him if he behaves badly to Anne; but he ought not to be let off --he ought to be made to marry her. I told him—what I was quite ready to do——'

'And what are you quite ready to do, if one might know?' Mr. Loseby was savage. His grin at her was full of malice and all uncharitableness.

'Oh, you know very well!' cried Rose, 'it was you first who said—— Will you tell me one thing, Mr. Loseby,' she ran on, her countenance changing; 'what does it mean by the will of 1868?'

'What does what mean?' The old lawyer was roused instantly. It was not that he divined anything, but his quick instinct forestalled suspicion,

and there suddenly gleamed over him a consciousness that there was something to divine.

'Oh!—I mean,' said Rose, correcting herself quickly, 'what is meant by the will of 1868? I think I ought to know.'

Mr. Loseby eyed her more and more closely. 'I wonder,' he said, 'how you know that there was a will of 1868?'

But there was nothing in his aspect to put Rose on her guard. 'I think I ought to know,' she said, 'but I am always treated like a child. And if things were to turn round again, and everything to go back, and me never to have any good of it, I wonder what would be the use at all of having made any change?'

Mr. Loseby put on his spectacles again. He wore a still more familiar aspect when he had his two spare eyes pushed up from his forehead, ready for use at a moment's notice. He was on the verge of a discovery, but he did not know as yet what that discovery would be.

'That is very true,' he said; 'and it shows a

great deal of sense on your part: for if everything were to turn round it would certainly be no use at all to have made any change. The will of 1868 is the will that was made directly after your father married for the second time; it was made to secure her mother's fortune to your sister Anne.'

'Without even the least thought of me!' cried Rose, indignant.

'It was before you were born,' said Mr. Loseby, with a laugh that exasperated her.

'Oh!' she cried, with an access of that fury which had frightened Keziah, 'how horrible people are! how unkind things are! how odious it is to be set up and set down and never know what you are, or what is going to happen! Did I do anything to Cosmo Douglas to make him break off with Anne? is it my fault that he is not going to marry her after all? and yet it will be me that will suffer, and nobody else at all. Mr. Loseby, can't it be put a stop to? I know you like Anne best, but why should not I have justice, though I am not Anne? Oh, it is too bad! it is cruel—it is wicked! Only

just because papa was cross and out of temper, and another man is changeable, why should I be the one to suffer? Mr. Loseby, I am sure if you were to try you could change it; you could stop us from going back to this will of 1868 that was made before I was born. If it was only to burn that bit of paper, that horrid letter, that thing! I had nearly put it into the fire myself. Oh!' Rose wound up with a little cry; she came suddenly to herself out of her passion and indignation, and shrank away, as it were, into a corner, and confronted the old lawyer with a pale and troubled countenance like a child found out. What had she done? She had betrayed herself. She looked at him alarmed, abashed, in a sudden panic which was cold, not hot with passion, like her previous one. What could he cause to be done to her? What commotion and exposure might he make? She scarcely dared to lift her eyes to his face; but yet would not lose sight of him lest something might escape her which he should do.

'Rose,' he said, with a tone of great severity, yet

a sort of chuckle behind it which gave her consolation, 'you have got hold of your father's letter to Anne.'

'Well,' she said, trembling but defiant, 'it had to be read some time, Mr. Loseby. It was only about us two; why should we wait so many years to know what was in it? A letter from papa! Of course we wanted to know what it said.'

'*We!* Does Anne know too?' he cried, horrified. And it gleamed across Rose's mind for one moment that to join Anne with herself would be to diminish her own criminality. But after a moment she relinquished this idea, which was not tenable. 'Oh, please!' she cried, 'don't let Anne know! She would not let me touch it. But why shouldn't we touch it? It was not a stranger that wrote it —it was our own father. Of course I wanted to know what he said.'

There was a ludicrous struggle on Mr. Loseby's face. He wanted to be severe, and he wanted to laugh. He was disgusted with Rose, yet very lenient to the little pretty child he had known all

his life, and his heart was dancing with satisfaction at the good news thus betrayed to him. 'I have got a duplicate of it in my drawer, and it may not be of much use when all is said. Since you have broken your father's confidence, and violated his last wishes, and laid yourself open to all sorts of penalties, you—may as well tell me all about it,' he said.

When Rose emerged into the street after this interview, she came down the steps straight upon Willie Ashley, who was mooning by, not looking whither he was going, and in a somewhat disconsolate mood. He had been calling upon Mrs. Mountford, but Rose had not been visible. Willie knew it was 'no use' making a fool of himself, as he said, about Rose; but yet when he was within reach he could not keep his feet from wandering where she was. When he thus came in her way accidentally, his glum countenance lighted up into a blaze of pleasure. 'Oh, here you are!' he cried in a delighted voice. 'I've been to Saymore's and seen your mother, but you were not in.' This narrative of so self-evident

a fact made Rose laugh, though there were tears of agitation and trouble on her face, which made Willie conclude that old Loseby (confound him!) had been scolding her for something. But when Rose laughed all was well.

'Of course I was not in. It is so tiresome there —nothing to do, nowhere to go. I can't think why Anne wishes to keep us here of all places in the world.'

'But you are coming to the Dower-house at Lilford? Oh! say you are coming, Rose. I know some people that would dance for joy.'

'What people? I don't believe anybody cares where we live,' said Rose with demure consciousness, walking along by his side with her eyes cast down, but a smile hovering about the corners of her mouth. Confession had been of use to her, and had relieved her soul, even though Mr. Loseby had no power to confer absolution.

'Don't we? Well, there's Charley for one; he has never had a word to throw to a dog since you went away. Though a fellow may know it is no

good, it's always something to know that you're there.'

'What is no good?' said Rose, with extreme innocence. And thus the two went back talking—of matters very important and amusing—through the coolness and sweetness and leisure of the little country street. Anne, who was seated in the bow-window of the sitting-room with her books and her papers, could not help breathing forth a little sigh as she looked out and saw them approaching, so young and so like each other. What a pity!' she said to herself. So far as she herself was concerned, it was far more than a pity; but even for Rose——.

'What is a pity?' said Mrs. Mountford: and she came and looked out over Anne's shoulder, being a little concerned about her child's absence. When she saw the pair advancing she flushed all over with annoyance and impatience. 'Pity! it must be put a stop to,' she cried; 'Willie Ashley was always out of the question; a boy with next to nothing. But now it is not to be thought of for a moment. I rely upon you, if you have any regard for your sister, to put a stop to it, Anne!'

CHAPTER XXXV.

A SIMPLE WOMAN.

The Dower-house at Lilford was fixed upon shortly after by general consent. It was an old house, but showed its original fabric chiefly in the tall stacks of chimneys which guaranteed its hospitable hearths from smoke, and gave an architectural distinction to the pile of building, the walls of which were all matted in honeysuckles, roses, and every climbing plant that can be imagined, embroidering themselves upon the background of the ivy, which filled every crevice. And the pleasure of furnishing, upon which Mr. Loseby had been cunning enough to enlarge, as an inducement to the ladies to take possession of this old dwelling-place, proved as great and as delightful as he had represented it to be. It was a pleasure which none of the three had ever as yet

experienced. Even Mrs. Mountford had never known the satisfaction, almost greater than that of dressing one's self—the delight and amusement of dressing one's house and making it beautiful. She had been taken as a bride to the same furniture which had answered for her predecessor; and though in the course of the last twenty years something had no doubt been renewed, there is no such gratification in a new carpet or curtains, which must be chosen either to suit the previous furniture, or of those homely tints which, according to the usual formula of the shops, 'would look well with anything,' as in the blessed task of renovating a whole room at once. They had everything to do here, new papers (bliss! for you may be sure Mrs. Mountford was too fashionable to consult anybody but Mr. Morris on this important subject), and a whole array of new old furniture. They did not transfer the things that had been left at Mount, which would have been, Mrs. Mountford felt, the right thing to do, but merely selected a few articles from the mass which nobody cared for. The result, they all flattered themselves,

was fine. Not a trace of newness appeared in all the carefully decorated rooms. A simulated suspicion of dirt, a ghost of possible dust, was conjured up by the painter's skill to make everything perfect —not in the way of a vulgar copy of that precious element which softens down the too perfect freshness, but, by a skilful touch of art, reversing the old principle of economy, and making 'the new things look as weel's the auld.' This process, with all its delicate difficulties, did the Mountford family good in every way. To Anne it was the most salutary and health-giving discipline. It gave her scope for the exercise of all those secondary tastes and fancies, which keep the bigger and more primitive sentiments in balance. To be anxious about the harmony of the new curtains, or concerned about the carpet, is sometimes salvation in its way; and there were so many questions to decide—things for beauty and things for use—the character of every room, and the meaning of it, which are things that have to be studied nowadays before we come so far down as to consider the conveniences of it, what you are to sit upon, or lie

upon, though these two are questions almost of life and death. Anne was plunged into the midst of all these questions. Besides her serious business in the management of the estate which Mr. Loseby had taken care should occupy her more and more, there were a hundred trivial play-anxieties always waiting for her, ready to fill up every crevice of thought. She had, indeed, no time to think. The heart which had been so deeply wounded, which had been compelled to give up its ideal and drop one by one the illusions it had cherished, seemed pushed into a corner by this flood of occupation. Anne's mind, indeed, was in a condition of exhaustion, something similar to that which sometimes deadens the sensations of mourners after a death which in anticipation has seemed to involve the loss of all things. When all is over, and the tortures of imagination are no longer added to those of reality, a kind of calm steals over the wounded soul. The worst has happened; the blow has fallen. In this fact there is quiet at least involved, and now the sufferer has nothing to think of but how to bear his pain. The wild rallying of

all his forces to meet a catastrophe to come is no longer necessary. It is over; and though the calm may be but 'a calm despair,' yet it is different from the anguish of looking forward. And in Anne's case there was an additional relief. For a long time past she had been forcing upon herself a fictitious satisfaction. The first delight of her love, which she had described to Rose as the power of saying everything to her lover, pouring out her whole heart in the fullest confidence that everything would interest him and all be understood, had long ago begun to ebb away from her. As time went on, she had fallen upon the pitiful expedient of writing to Cosmo without sending her letters, thus beguiling herself by the separation of an ideal Cosmo, always the same, always true and tender, from the actual Cosmo whose attention often flagged, and who sometimes thought the things that occupied her trivial, and her way of regarding them foolish or high-flown. Yes, Cosmo too had come to think her high-flown: he had been impatient even of her fidelity to himself; and gradually it had come about that Anne's

communications with him were but carefully prepared abridgments of the genuine letters which were addressed to—someone whom she had lost, someone, she could not tell who, on whom her heart could repose, but who was not, so far as she knew, upon this unresponsive earth. All this strain, this dual life, was over now. No attempt to reconcile the one with the other was necessary. It was all over; the worst had happened; there was no painful scene to look forward to, no gradual loosening of a tie once so dear; but whatever was to happen had happened. How she might have felt the blank, had no such crowd of occupations come in to fill up her time and thoughts, is another question. But, as it was, Anne had no time to think of the blank. In the exhaustion of the revolution accomplished she was seized hold upon by all these crowding occupations, her thoughts forced into new channels, her every moment busy. No soul comes through such a crisis without much anguish and many struggles, but Anne had little time to indulge herself. She had to stand to her arms, as it were, night and day. She explained

her position to Mr. Loseby, as has been said, and she informed her stepmother briefly of the change: but to no one else did she say a word.

'There was silence in heaven for the space of half an hour.' Could any word express more impressively the pause of fate, the quiet of patience and deliberation over the great and terrible things to come. There was silence in the heaven of Anne's being. She forbore to think, forbore to speak, even to herself. All was still within her. The firmament had closed in around her. Her world was lessened, so much cut off on every side, a small world now with no far-shining distances, no long gleams of celestial light, nothing but the little round about her, the circle of family details,the work of every day. Instead of the wide sky and the infinite air, to have your soul concentrated within a circle of Mr. Morris's papers, however admirable they may be, makes a great difference in life. Sometimes she even triumphed over circumstances so far as to see the humorous side of her own fate, and to calculate with a smile half pathetic, all that her unreasonable fidelity had cost her. It

had cost her her father's approbation, her fortune, her place in life, and oh! strange turning of the tables! it had cost her at the same time the lover whom she had chosen, in high youthful absolutism and idealism, at the sacrifice of everything else. Was there ever a stranger contradiction, completion, of a transaction? He for whom she had given up all else, was lost to her because she had given everything for him. A woman might weep her heart out over such a fate, or she might smile as Anne smiled, pale, with a woful merriment, a tremulous pathetic scorn, an indignation half lost in that sentiment which made Othello cry out, 'The pity of it! The pity of it!' Oh, the pity of it! that such things should be; that a woman should give so much for so little—and a man return so little for so much. Sometimes, when she was by herself, this smile would come up unawares, a scarcely perceptible gleam upon her pale countenance. 'What are you smiling at, Anne?' her stepmother or Rose would ask her as she sat at work. 'Was I smiling? I did not know—at nobody—I myself,' she would say, quoting Desdemona this

time. Or she would remind herself of a less dignified simile—of poor Dick Swiveller, shutting up one street after another, in which he had made purchases which he could not pay for. She had shut up a great many pleasant paths for herself. Her heart got sick of the usual innocent romance in which the hero is all nobleness and generosity, and the heroine all sweet dependence and faith. She grew sick of poetry and all her youthful fancies. Even places became hateful to her, became as paths shut up. To see the Beeches even from the road gave her a pang. Mount, where she had written volumes all full of her heart and inmost thoughts to Cosmo, pained her to go back to, though she had to do it occasionally. And she could not think of big London itself without a sinking of the heart. He was there. It was the scene of her disenchantment, her disappointment. All these were as so many slices cut off from her life. Rose's estate, and the leases, and the tenants, and the patronage of Lilford parish, which belonged to it, and all its responsibilities, and the old women, with their tea and flannels, and the

Dower-house with Mr. Morris's papers—these circumvented and bound in her life.

But there was one person at least whose affectionate care of her gave Anne an amusement which now and then found expression in a flood of tears: though tears were a luxury which she did not permit herself. This was the Rector, who was always coming and going, and who would walk round Anne at the writing-table, where she spent so much of her time, with anxious looks and many little signs of perturbation. He did not say a great deal to her, but watched her through all the other conversations that would arise, making now and then a vague little remark, which was specially intended for her, as she was aware, and which would strike into her like an arrow, yet make her smile all the same. When there was talk of the second marriage of Lord Meadowlands' brother, the clergyman, Mr. Ashley was strong in his defence. 'No one can be more opposed than I am to inconstancies of all kinds; but when you have made a mistake the first time it is a wise thing and a right thing,' said the good Rector, with

a glance at Anne, 'to take advantage of the release given you by Providence. Charles Meadows had made a great mistake at first—like many others.' And then, when the conversation changed, and the Woodheads became the subject of discussion, even in the fulness of his approbation of 'that excellent girl Fanny,' Mr Ashley found means to insinuate his constant burden of prophecy. 'What I fear is that she will get a little narrow as the years go on. How can a woman help that who has no opening out in her life, who is always at the first chapter?'

'Dear me, Rector,' said Mrs. Mountford, 'I did not know you were such an advocate of marriage.'

'Yes, I am a great advocate of marriage: without it we all get narrow. We want new interests to carry on our life; we want to expand in our children, and widen out instead of closing in.'

'But Fanny has not closed in,' said Anne, with a half malicious smile, which had a quiver of pain in it: for she knew his meaning almost better than he himself did.

'No, no, Fanny is an excellent girl. She is every-

thing that can be desired. But you must marry, Anne, you must marry,' he said, in a lower tone, coming round to the back of her chair. There was doubt and alarm in his eyes. He saw in her that terror of single-minded men, an old maid. Women have greatly got over the fear of that term of reproach. But men who presumably know their own value best, and take more deeply to heart the loss to every woman of their own sweet society, have a great horror of it. And Anne seemed just the sort of person who would not marry, having been once disgusted and disappointed, Mr. Ashley concluded within himself, with much alarm. He was even so far carried away by his feelings as to burst forth upon his excellent son and Curate, one evening in the late autumn, when they were returning together from the Dower-house. They had been walking along for some time in silence upon the dusty, silent road, faintly lighted by some prevision of a coming moon, though she was not visible. Perhaps the same thoughts were in both their minds, and this mutual sympathy warmed the elder to an overflow of the pent-up

feeling. 'Man alive!' he cried out suddenly, turning upon Charley with a kind of ferocity, which startled the Curate as much as if a pistol had been presented at him. 'Man alive! can't *you* go in for her? you're better than nothing if you're not very much. What is the good of you, if you can't try, at least *try*, to please her? She's sick of us all, and not much wonder; but, bless my soul, you're young, and why can't you make an effort? why can't you try? that's what I would like to know,' the Rector cried.

Charley was taken entirely by surprise. He gasped in his agitation, 'I—*try*? But she would not look at me. What have I to offer her?' he said, with a groan.

Upon which the Rector repeated that ungracious formula. 'You may not be very much, but you're better than nothing. No,' the father said, shaking his head regretfully, 'we are none of us very much to look at; but, Lord bless my soul, think of Anne, *Anne*, settling down as a single woman: an old maid!' he cried, with almost a shriek of dismay. The two men were both quite subdued, broken down by

the thought. They could not help feeling in their hearts that to be anybody's wife would be better than that.

But when they had gone on for about half an hour, and the moon had risen silvery over the roofs of the cottages, showing against the sky the familiar and beloved spire of their own village church, Charley, who had said nothing all the time, suddenly found a voice. He said, in his deep and troubled bass, as if his father had spoken one minute ago instead of half an hour, 'Heathcote Mountford is far more likely to do something with her than I.'

'Do you think so?' cried the Rector, who had not been, any more than his son, distracted from the subject, and was as unconscious as Charley was of the long pause. 'She does not know him as she knows you.'

'That is just the thing,' said the Curate, with a sigh. 'She has known me all her life, and why should she think any more about me? I am just Charley, that is all, a kind of a brother; but Mountford is a stranger. He is a clever fellow, cleverer than I am;

and, even if he were not,' said poor Charley, with a tinge of bitterness, 'he is new, and what he says sounds better, for they have not heard it so often before. And then he is older, and has been all about the world; and besides—well,' the Curate broke off with a harsh little laugh, 'that is about all, sir. He is he, and I am me—that's all.'

'If that is what you think,' said the Rector, who had listened to all this with very attentive ears, pausing, as he took hold of the upper bar of his own gate, and raising a very serious countenance to his son, 'if this is really what you think, Charley—you may have better means of judging—we must push Mountford. Anything would be better,' he said, solemnly, 'than to see Anne an old maid. And she's capable of doing that,' he added, laying his hand upon his son's in the seriousness of the moment. 'She is capable of doing it, if we don't mind.'

Charley felt the old hand chill him like something icy and cold. And he did not go in with his father, but took a pensive turn round the garden in the moonlight. No, she would never walk with him

there. It was too presumptuous a thought. Never would Anne be the mistress within, never would it be permitted to Charley to call her forth into the moonlight in the sweet domestic sanctity of home. His heart stirred within him for a moment, then sank, acknowledging the impossibility. He breathed forth a vast sigh as he lit the evening cigar, which his father did not like him to smoke in his presence, disliking the smell, like the old-fashioned person he was. The Curate walked round and round the grass-plats, sadly enjoying this gentle indulgence. When he tossed the end away, after nearly an hour of silent musing, he said to himself, 'Mountford might do it,' with another sigh. It was hard upon Charley. A stranger had a better chance than himself, a man that was nothing to her, whom she had known for a few months only. But so it was: and it was noble of him that he wished Mountford no manner of harm.

This was the state of affairs between the Rectory and the Dower-house, which, fortunately, was on the very edge of Lilford parish, and therefore could,

without any searchings of heart on the part of the new Vicar there, permit the attendance of the ladies at the church which they loved. When Willie was home at Christmas his feet wore a distinct line on the road. He was always there, which his brother thought foolish and weak, since nothing could ever come of it. Indeed, if anything did exasperate the Curate, it was the inordinate presumption and foolishness of Willie, who seemed really to believe that Rose would have something to say to him. *Rose!* who was the rich one of the house, and whose eyes were not magnanimous to observe humble merit like those of her sister. It was setting that little thing up, Charley felt, with hot indignation, as if she were superior to Anne. But then Willie was always more complacent, and thought better of himself than did his humble-minded brother. As for Mr. Ashley himself, he never intermitted his anxious watch upon Anne. She was capable of it. No doubt she was just the very person to do it. The Rector could not deny that she had provocation. If a woman had behaved to him like that, he himself, he felt, might

have turned his back upon the sex, and refused to permit himself to become the father of Charley and Willie. That was putting the case in a practical point of view. The Rector felt a cold dew burst out upon his forehead, when it gleamed across him with all the force of a revelation, that in such a case Charley and Willie might never have been. He set out on the spot to bring this tremendous thought before Anne, but stopped short and came back after a moment depressed and toned down. How could he point out to Anne the horrible chance that perhaps two such paragons yet unborn might owe their non-existence (it was difficult to put it into words even) to her? He could not say it; and thus lost out of shyness or inaptness, he felt (for why should there have been any difficulty in stating it?), by far the best argument that had yet occurred to him. But though he relinquished his argument he did not get over his anxiety. Anne an old maid! it was a thought to move heaven and earth.

In the meantime Heathcote Mountford felt as warmly as anyone could have desired the wonderful

brightening of the local horizon which followed upon the ladies' return. The Dower-house was for him also within the limits of a walk, and the decoration and furnishing which went on to a great extent after they had taken possession, the family bivouacking pleasantly in the meantime, accepting inconveniences with a composure which only ladies are capable of under such circumstances, gave opportunity for many a consultation and discussion. It was no obsequious purpose of pleasing her which made Heathcote almost invariably agree with Anne when questions arose. They were of a similar mould, born under the same star, to speak poetically, with a natural direction of their thoughts and fancies in the same channel, and an agreement of tastes perhaps slightly owing to the mysterious affinities of the powerful and wide-spreading family character which they both shared. By-and-by it came to be recognised that Anne and Heathcote were each other's natural allies. One of them even, no one could remember which, playfully identified a certain line of ideas as 'our side.' When the winter came on and country pleasures shrank as

they are apt to do, to women, within much restricted limits, the friendship between these two elder members of the family grew. That they were naturally on the same level, and indeed about the same age, nobody entertained any doubt, aided by that curious foregone conclusion in the general mind (which is either a mighty compliment or a contemptuous insult to a woman) that a girl of twenty-one is in reality quite the equal and contemporary, so to speak, of a man of thirty-five. Perhaps the assumption was more legitimate than usual in the case of these two; for Anne, always a girl of eager intelligence and indiscriminate intellectual appetite, had lived much of her life among books, and was used to unbounded intercourse with the matured minds of great writers, besides having had the ripening touch of practical work, and of that strange bewildering conflict with difficulties unforeseen which is called disenchantment by some, disappointment by others, but which is perhaps to a noble mind the most certain and unfailing of all maturing influences. Heathcote Mountford had not lived so much longer in the world

without having known what that experience was, and in her gropings darkly after the lost ideal, the lost paradise which had seemed so certain and evident at her first onset, Anne began to feel that now and then she encountered her kinsman's hand in the darkness with a reassuring grasp. This consciousness came to her slowly, she could scarcely tell how; and whether he himself was conscious of it at all she did not know. But let nobody think this was in the way of lovemaking or overtures to a new union. When a girl like Anne, a young woman full of fresh hope and confidence and all belief in the good and true, meets on her outset into life with such a 'disappointment' as people call it, it is not alone the loss of her lover that moves her. She has lost her world as well. Her feet stumble upon the dark mountains; the steadfast sky swims round her in a confusion of bewildering vapours and sickening giddy lights. She stands astonished in the midst of a universe going to pieces, like Hamlet in those times which were out of joint. All that was so clear to her has become dim. If she has a great courage,

she fights her way through the blinding mists, not knowing where she is going, feeling only a dull necessity to keep upright, to hold fast to something. And if by times a hand reaches hers thrust out into the darkness, guiding to this side or that, her fingers close upon it with an instinct of self-preservation. This, I suppose, is what used to be called catching a heart in the rebound. Heathcote himself was not thinking of catching this heart in its rebound. He was not himself aware when he helped her; but he was dimly conscious of the pilgrimage she was making out of the gloom back into the light.

This was going on all the winter through. Mr. Morris's papers, and all the harmonies or discordances of the furniture, and the struggle against too much of Queen Anne, and the attempts to make some compromise that could bear the name of Queen Victoria, afforded a dim amusement, a background of trivial fact and reality which it was good to be able always to make out among the mists. Love may perish, but the willow-pattern remains. The foundation of the world may be shaken, but so long

as the dado is steady! Anne had humour enough to take the good of all these helps, to smile, and then laugh, at all the dimly comic elements around her, from the tremendous seriousness of the decorator, up to the distress and perplexity of the Rector and his alarmed perception of the possible old maid in her. Anne herself was not in the least alarmed by the title which made Mr. Ashley shiver. The idea of going over all that course of enchantment once again was impossible. It had been enchantment once—a second time it would be—what would a second time be? impossible! That was all that could be said. It was over for her, as certainly as life of this kind is over for a widow. To be sure it is not always over even for a widow: but Anne, highly fantastical as became her temper and her years, rejected with a lofty disdain any idea of renewal. Nevertheless, towards the spring, after the darkness had begun to lighten a little, when she found at a hard corner that metaphorical hand of Heathcote taking hers, helping her across a bad bit of the road, her heart was conscious of a throb of pleasure.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LAST.

Rose's behaviour had been a trouble and a puzzle to her family during the latter part of the year. Whether it was that the change from the dissipation of London and the variety of their wanderings 'abroad' to the dead quiet of country life, in which the young heiress became again little Rose and nothing more, was a change beyond the powers of endurance, or whether it was some new spring of life in her, nobody could tell. She became fretful and uncertain in temper, cross to her mother, and absolutely rebellious against Anne, to whom she spoke in a way which even Mrs. Mountford was moved to declare 'very unbecoming.'

'You ought to remember that Anne is your elder

sister, at least, whatever else,' the mother said, who had always been a little aggrieved by the fact that, even in making her poor, her father had given to Anne a position of such authority in the house.

'Mamma!' Rose had cried, flushed and furious, 'she may manage my property, but she shall not manage *me*.'

The little girl talked a great deal about her property in those days, except when Mr. Loseby was present, who was the only person, her mother said, who seemed to exercise any control over her. By-and-by, however, this disturbed condition of mind calmed down. She gave Willie Ashley a great deal of 'encouragement' during the Christmas holidays; then turned round upon him at Easter, and scarcely knew him. But this was Rose's way, and nobody minded very much. In short, the Curate was cruelly consoled by his brother's misadventure. It is a sad confession to have to make; but, good Christian as he was, Charley Ashley felt better when he found that Willie had tumbled down from confidence to despair.

'I told you you were a fool all the time,' he said, with that fraternal frankness which is common among brothers; and he felt it less hard afterwards to endure the entire abandonment in his own person of any sort of hope.

And thus the time went on. Routine reasserted those inalienable rights which are more potent than anything else on earth, and everybody yielded to them. The Mountfords, like the rest, owned that salutary bondage. They half forgot the things that had happened to them—Anne her disenchantments, Rose her discovery, and Mrs. Mountford that life had ever differed much from its present aspect. All things pass away except dinner-time and bed-time, the day's business, and the servants' meals.

But when the third year was nearly completed from Mr. Mountford's death, the agitation of past times began to return again. Rose's temper began to give more trouble than ever, and Mr. Loseby's visits were more frequent, and even Anne showed a disturbance of mind unusual to her. She explained

this to her kinsman Heathcote one autumn afternoon, a few days before Rose's birthday. He had asked the party to go and see the last batch of the cottages, which had been completed—a compliment which went to Anne's heart—according to her plans. But Heathcote had stopped to point out some special features to his cousin, and these two came along some way after the others. The afternoon was soft and balmy, though it was late in the year. The trees stood out in great tufts of yellow and crimson against the sky, which had begun to emulate their hues. The paths were strewed, as for a religious procession, with leaves of russet and gold, and the low sun threw level lights over the slopes of the park, which were pathetically green with the wet and damp of approaching winter.

'The season is all stillness and completion,' Anne said; 'but I am restless. I don't know what is the matter with me. I want to be in motion—to do something—from morning to night.'

'You have had too much of the monotony of our quiet life.'

'No; you forget I have always been used to the country; it is not monotonous to me. Indeed, I know well enough what it is,' said Anne, with a smile. 'It is Rose's birthday coming so near. I will lose my occupation, which I am fond of—and what shall I do?'

'I could tell you some things to do.'

'Oh, no doubt I shall find something,' said Anne, with heightened colour. 'I cannot find out from Rose what she intends. It must be a curious sensation for a little girl who—has never been anything but a little girl—to come into such a responsibility all at once.'

'But you were no older than she—when you came into—' said Heathcote, watching her countenance, 'all this responsibility, and other things as well.'

'I was older, a great deal, when I was born,' said Anne, with a laugh. 'It is so different—even to be the eldest makes a difference. I think I shall ask Rose to keep me on as land-agent. She must have some one.'

'On your own property; on the land which your mother brought into the family; on what would have been yours but for——'

'Hu-ush!' said Anne, with a prolonged soft utterance, lifting her hand as if to put it on his mouth; and, with a smile, 'never say anything of that—it is over—it is all over. I don't mind it now; I am rather glad,' she said resolutely, 'if it must be faced, and we must talk of it—rather glad that it is for nothing that I have paid the price: without any compensation. I dare say it is unreasonable, but I don't think there is any bitterness in my mind. Don't bring it up——'

'I will not—God forbid!' he said, 'bring bitterness to your sweetness—not for anything in the world, Anne; but think, now you are free from your three years' work, now your time will be your own, your hands empty——'

'Think! why that is what I am thinking all day long: and I don't like it. I will ask Rose to appoint me her land-agent.'

'I will appoint you mine,' he said. 'Anne, we

have been coming to this moment all these three years. Don't send me away without thinking it over again. Do you remember all that long time ago how I complained that I had been forestalled; that I had not been given a chance? And for two years I have not dared to say a word. But see the change in my life. I have given up all I used to care for. I have thought of nothing but Mount and you—you and Mount. It does not matter which name comes first; it means one thing. Now that you are free, it is not Rose's land-agent but mine that you ought to be. I am not your love,' he said, a deep colour rising over his face, 'but you are mine, Anne. And, though it sounds blasphemy to say so, love is not everything; life is something; and there is plenty for us to do—together.'

His voice broke off, full of emotion, and for a moment or two she could not command hers. Then she said, with a tremor in her tone—'Heathcote—you are poor and I am poor. Two poverties together will not do the old place much good.'

'Is that all you know, Anne——still? They

will make the old place holy; they will make it the beginning of better things to come. But if it is not possible still to sacrifice those other thoughts —I can wait, dear,' he said, hurriedly, 'I can wait.'

Then there was a little pause, full of fate. After a time she answered him clearly, steadily. 'There is no question of sacrifice: but wait a little, Heathcote, wait still a little.' Then she said with something that tried to be a laugh. 'You are like the Rector; you are frightened lest I should be an old maid.'

And then in his agitation he uttered a cry of alarm as genuine as the Rector's, but more practical. 'That you shall not be!' he cried suddenly, grasping her arm in both his hands. Anne did not know whether to be amused or offended. But after awhile they went on quietly together talking, if not of love, yet of what Heathcote called life—which perhaps was not so very different in the sense in which the word was at present employed.

Two days after was Rose's birthday. Mr. Loseby came over in great state from Hunston, and the

friends of the family were all gathered early, the Ashleys and Heathcote coming to luncheon, with Fanny Woodhead and her sister, while a great party was to assemble in the evening. Rose herself, oddly enough, had resisted this party, and done everything she could against it, which her mother had set down to simple perversity, with much reason on her side. 'Of course we must have a party,' Mrs. Mountford said. 'Could anything be more ridiculous? A coming of age and no rejoicing! We should have had a party under any circumstances, even if you had not been so important a person.' Rose cried when the invitations were sent out. There were traces of tears and a feverish agitation about her as the days went on. Two or three times she was found in close conversation with Mr. Loseby, and once or twice he had the look of urging something upon her which she resisted. Mrs. Mountford thought she knew all about this. It was no doubt his constant appeal about the provision to be made for Anne. This was a point upon which the sentiments of Rose's mother had undergone several changes. At

one time she had been very willing that a division of the property should take place, not, perhaps, a quite equal division, but sufficiently so to content the world, and give everybody the impression that Rose 'had behaved very handsomely!' but at another time it had appeared to her that to settle upon Anne the five hundred a year which had been her allowance as the guardian of her sister's interests, would be a very sufficient provision. She had, as she said, kept herself aloof from these discussions latterly, declaring that she would not influence her daughter's mind—that Rose must decide for herself. And this, no doubt, was the subject upon which Mr. Loseby dwelt with so much insistance. Mrs. Mountford did not hesitate to say that she had no patience with him. 'I suppose it is always the same subject,' she said. 'My darling child, I won't interfere. You must consult your own heart, which will be your best guide. I might be biassed, and I have made up my mind not to interfere.' Rose was excited and impatient, and would scarcely listen to her mother. 'I wish nobody would interfere,' she

cried; 'I wish they would leave us alone, and let us settle it our own way.'

At last the all-important day arrived. The bells were rung in the little church at Lilford very early, and woke Rose with a sound of congratulation, to a day which was as bright as her life, full of sunshine and freshness, the sky all blue and shining, the country gay with its autumn robes, every tree in a holiday dress. Presents poured in upon her on all sides. All her friends, far and near, had remembered, even those who were out of the way, too far off to be invited for the evening festivities, what a great day it was in Rose's life. But she herself did not present the same peaceful and brilliant aspect. Mrs. Worth had not this time been successful about her dress. She was in a flutter of many ribbons as happened to be the fashion of the moment, and her round and blooming face was full of agitation, quite uncongenial to its character. There were lines of anxiety in her soft forehead, and a hot feverish flush upon her cheeks. When the Ashleys arrived they were called into the library where the family

had assembled—a large sunny room filled at one end with a great bow-window, opening upon the lawn, which was the favourite morning-room of the family. At the upper end, at the big writing-table which was generally Anne's throne of serious occupation, both the sisters were seated with Mr. Loseby and his blue bag. Mr. Loseby had been going over his accounts, and Anne had brought her big books, while Rose between them, like a poor little boat bobbing up and down helplessly on this troubled sea of business, gave an agitated attention to all they said to her. Mrs. Mountford sat at the nearest window with her worsted work, as usual counting her stitches, and doing her best to look calm and at her ease, though there was a throb of anxiety which she did not understand in her mind, for what was there to be anxious about? The strangers felt themselves out of place at this serious moment, all except the old Rector, whose interest was so strong and genuine that he went up quite naturally to the table, and drew his chair towards it, as if he had a right to know all about it. Heathcote Mountford stood against

the wall, near Mrs. Mountford, and made a solemn remark to her now and then about nothing at all, while Charley and Willie stood about against the light in the bow-window, mentally leaning against each other, and wishing themselves a hundred miles away.

The group at the table was a peculiar one: little Rose in the centre, restless, uneasy, a flush on her face, clasping and unclasping her hands, turning helplessly from one to the other: Mr. Loseby's shining bald head stooped over the papers, its polished crown turned towards the company as he ran on in an unbroken stream of explanation and instruction, while Anne on the other side, serene and fair, sat listening with far more attention than her sister. Anne had never looked so much herself since all these troubles arose. Her countenance was tranquil and shining as the day. She had on (the Curate thought) the very same dress of white cashmere, easy and graceful in its long sweeping folds, which she wore at Lady Meadowlands' party; but as that was three years ago, I need not say the gown

was not identically the same. A great quietness was in Anne's mind. She was pleased, for one thing, with the approbation she had received. Mr. Loseby had declared that her books were kept as no clerk in his office could have kept them. Perhaps this was exaggerated praise, and bookkeeping is not an heroic gift, but yet the approbation pleased her. And she had executed her father's trust. Whatever might be the next step in her career, this, at least, was well ended, and peace was in her face and her heart. She made a little sign of salutation to Charley and Willie as they came in, smiling at them with the ease that befitted their fraternal relations. A soft repose was about her. Her time of probation, her lonely work, was over. Was there now, perhaps, a brighter epoch, a happier life to begin?

But Rose was neither happy nor serene; her hot hands kept on a perpetual manœuvring, her face grew more and more painfully red, her ribbons fluttered with the nervous trembling in her—now and then the light seemed to fail from her eyes. She could scarcely contain herself while Mr. Loseby's

voice went on. Rose scarcely knew what she wanted or wished. Straight in front of her lay the packet directed in her father's hand to Mr. Loseby, the contents of which she knew, but nobody else knew. Fifty times over she was on the point of covering it with her sleeve, slipping it into her pocket. What was the use of going on with all this farce of making over her fortune to her, if *that* was to be produced at the end? or was it possible, perhaps, that it was not to be produced? that this nightmare, which had oppressed her all the time, had meant nothing after all? Rose was gradually growing beyond her own control. The room went round and round with her; she saw the figures surrounding her darkly, scarcely knowing who they were. Mr. Loseby's voice running on seemed like an iron screw going through and through her head. If she waited a moment longer everything would be over. She clutched at Anne's arm for something to hold fast by—her hour had come.

They were all roused up in a moment by the interruption of some unusual sound, and suddenly Rose

was heard speaking in tones which were sharp and urgent in confused passion. 'I don't want to hear any more,' she said; 'what is the use of it all? Oh, Mr. Loseby, please be quiet for one moment and let me speak! The first thing is to make a new will.'

'To make your will—there is plenty of time for that,' said the old lawyer, astonished, pushing his spectacles as usual out of his way; while Mrs. Mountford said with a glance up from her worsted-work, 'My pet! that is not work for to-day.'

'Not my will—but papa's!' she cried. 'Mr. Loseby, you know; you have always said I must change the will. Anne is to have the half—I settled it long ago. We are to put it all right. I want Anne to have the half—or nearly the half!' she cried, with momentary hesitation, 'before it is too late. Put it all down, and I will sign; the half, or as near the half as—— Quick! I want it all to be settled before it is too late!'

What did she mean by too late? Anne put her arm behind her sister to support her, and kissed her

with trembling lips. 'My Rosie!' she cried, 'my little sister!' with tears brimming over. Mrs. Mountford threw down all her wools and rushed to her child's side. They all drew close, thinking that 'too late' could only mean some fatal impression on the girl's mind that she was going to die.

'Yes, half: half is a great deal!' said Rose, stammering, 'nearly half, you know—I have always meant it. Why should I have all and she none? And she has not married Mr. Douglas—I don't know why. I think—but it hasn't come about—I want everybody to know, papa made a mistake; but I give it to her, *I* give it to her! Mr. Loseby, make a new will, and say that half—or nearly half—is to be for Anne. And oh! please, no more business—that will do for to-day.'

She got up and sat down as she was speaking, feverishly. She shook off her mother's hand on her shoulder, gave up her hold upon Anne, drew her hand out of the Rector's, who had clasped it, bidding God bless her, with tears running down his old cheeks. She scarcely even submitted to the pressure

of Anne's arm, which was round her, and did not seem to understand when her sister spoke. 'Rose!' Anne was saying, making an appeal to all the by-standers, 'Do you know what she says? She is giving me everything back. Do you hear her—the child! My little Rosie! I don't care—I don't care for the money; but it is everything that she is giving me. What a heart she has! do you hear, do you all hear? — everything!' Anne's voice of surprise and generous joy went to all their hearts.

Mrs. Mountford made an effort to draw Rose towards herself. 'There had better be no exaggeration—she said the half—and it is a great thing to do,' said the mother thoughtfully. There was nothing to be said against it; still half was a great deal, and even Rose, though almost wild with excitement, felt this too.

'Yes, half—I did not mean all, as Anne seems to think; half is—a great deal! Mr. Loseby, write it all down and I will sign it. Isn't that enough—enough for to-day?'

'Only one thing else,' Mr. Loseby said. He put out his hand and took up the letter that was lying innocently among the other papers. 'This letter,' he said—but he was not allowed to go any further. Rose turned upon him all feverish and excited, and tore it out of his hands. 'Anne!' she cried, with a gasp, 'Anne! I can't hear any more to-day.'

'No more, no more,' said Anne, soothingly; 'what do we want more, Mr. Loseby? She is quite right. If you were to secure the crown to me, you could not make me more happy. My little Rose! I am richer than the Queen!' Anne cried, her voice breaking. But then, to the astonishment of everybody, Rose burst from her, threw down the letter on the table, and covered her face, with a cry shrill and sharp as if called forth by bodily pain.

'You can read it, if you please,' the girl cried; 'but if you read it, I will die!'

Mr. Loseby looked at Anne and she at him. Something passed between them in that look, which the others did not understand. A sudden flush of

colour covered her face. She said softly, 'My trust is not over yet. What can it matter to anyone but ourselves what is in the letter? We have had business enough for one day.'

And Rose did not appear at lunch. She had been overwrought, everybody said. She lay down in a dark room all the afternoon with a great deal of eau de Cologne about, and her mother sitting by. Mrs. Mountford believed in bed, and the pulling down of the blinds. It was a very strange day: after the luncheon, at which the queen of the feast was absent, and no one knew what to say, the familiar guests walked about the grounds for a little, not knowing what to think, and then judiciously took themselves away till the evening, while Mr. Loseby disappeared with Anne, and Mrs. Mountford soothed her daughter. In the evening Rose appeared in a very pretty dress, though with pale cheeks. Anne, who was far more serious now than she had been in the morning, kissed her little sister tenderly, but they did not say anything to each other. Neither from that time to this has the subject ever been

mentioned by one to the other. The money was divided exactly between them, and Anne gave no explanations even to her most intimate friends. Whether it was Rose who shared with her, or she with Rose, nobody knew. The news stole out, and for a little while everybody celebrated Rose to the echo; but then another whisper got abroad, and no one knew what to think. As a matter of fact, however, Mr. Mountford's two daughters divided everything he left behind. The only indication Anne ever received that the facts of the case had oozed out beyond the circle of the family, was in the following strange letter, which she received some time after, when her approaching marriage to Heathcote Mountford, of Mount, was made known:—

'You will be surprised to receive a letter from me. Perhaps it is an impertinence on my part to write. But I will never forget the past, though I may take it for granted that you have done so. Your father's letter, which I hear was read on your sister's birthday, will explain many things to you and, perhaps,

myself among the many. I do not pretend that I was aware of it, but I may say that I divined it; and divining it, what but one thing in the face of all misconstructions, remained for me to do? Perhaps you will understand me and do me a little justice now. Pardon me, at least, for having troubled even so small a portion of your life. I try to rejoice that it has been but a small portion. In mine you stand where you always did. The altar may be veiled and the worshipper say his litanies unheard. He is a nonjuror, and his rites are licensed by no authority, civil or sacred: nor can he sing mass for any new king. Yet in darkness and silence and humiliation, for your welfare, happiness, and prosperity does ever pray—C.D.'

Anne was moved by this letter more than it deserved, and wondered if, perhaps——? But it did not shake her happiness as, possibly, it was intended to do.

And then followed one of the most remarkable events in this story. Rose, who had always been

more or less worldly-minded, and who would never have hesitated to say that to better yourself was the most legitimate object in life—Rose—no longer a great heiress, but a little person with a very good fortune, and quite capable of making what she, herself, would have called a good marriage—Rose married Willie Ashley, to the astonishment and consternation of everybody. Mrs. Mountford, though she lives with them and is on the whole fond of her son-in-law, has not even yet got over her surprise. And as for the old Rector, it did more than surprise, it bewildered him. A shade of alarm comes over his countenance still, when he speaks of it. 'I had nothing to do with it,' he is always ready to say. With the Curate the feeling is still deeper and more sombre. In the depths of his heart he cannot forgive his brother. That Rose should have been the one to appreciate modest merit and give it its reward, Rose and not her sister—seems like blasphemy to Charley. Nevertheless, there are hopes that Lucy Woodhead, who is growing up a very nice

girl, and prettier than her sister, may induce even the faithful Curate to change the current of his thoughts and ways.

THE END.

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