THE MARRIAGE OF ELINOR

BY

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CHAPTER I.

JOHN TATHAM, barrister-at-law, received one summer morning as he sat at breakfast the following letter. It was written in what was once known distinctively as a lady's hand, in pointed characters, very fine and delicate, and was to this effect:—

'DEAR JOHN,

'Have you heard from Elinor of her new prospects and intentions? I suppose she must have written to you on the subject. Do you know anything of the man? . . . You know how hard it is to convince her against her will of anything, and also how poorly gifted I am with the power of convincing any one. And I don't know him, therefore can speak with no authority. If you can do anything to clear things up, come

and do so. I am very anxious and more than doubtful; but her heart seems set upon it.

'Your affect.

'M. S. D.'

Mr. Tatham was a well-built and vigorous man of five-and-thirty, with health, good behaviour, and well-being in every line of his cheerful countenance and every close curl of his brown hair. His hair was very curly, and helped to give him the cheerful look which was one of his chief characteristics. Nevertheless, when these innocent seeming words, 'Do you know the man?' which was more certainly demonstrative of certain facts than had those facts been stated in the fullest detail, met his eye, Mr. Tatham paused and laid down the letter with a start. His ruddy colour paled for the moment, and he felt something which was like the push or poke of a blunt but heavy weapon somewhere in the regions of the heart. For the moment he felt that he could not read any more. 'Do you know the man?' He did not even ask what man in the momentary sickness of his heart. Then he said to himself almost angrily, 'Well!' and took up the letter again and read to the end.

Well! of course it was a thing that he knew

might happen any day, and which he had expected to happen for the last four or five years. It was nothing to him one way or another. Nothing could be more absurd than that a hearty and strong young man in the full tide of his life and with a good breakfast before him should receive a shock from that innocent little letter as if he had been a sentimental woman. But the fact is that he pushed his plate away with an exclamation of disgust and a feeling that everything was bad and uneatable. He drank his tea, though that also became suddenly bad too, full of tannin, like tea that has stood too long, a thing about which John was very particular. He had been half an hour later than usual this morning consequent on having been an hour or two later than usual last night. These things have their reward, and that very speedily; but as for the letter, what could that have to do with the bad toasting of the bacon and the tannin in the tea? 'Do you know the man?' There was a sort of covert insult, too, in the phraseology, as if no explanation was needed, as if he must know by instinct what she meant—he who knew nothing about it, who did not know there was a man at all!

After a while he began to smile rather cynically to himself. He had got up from the breakfast table, where everything was so bad, and had gone to look out of one of the windows of his pleasant sitting-room. It was in one of the wider ways of the Temple, and looked out upon various houses with a pleasant misty light upon the redness of their old brickwork, and a stretch of green grass and trees, which were scanty in foliage, yet suited very well with the bright morning sun, which was not particularly warm, but looked as if it were a good deal for effect and not so very much for use. That thought floated across his mind with others, and was of the same cynical complexion. It was very well for the sun to shine, making the glistening poplars and plane-trees glow, and warming all the mellow redness of the old houses, but what did he mean by it? No warmth to speak of, only a fictitious gleam—a thing got up for effect. And so was the affectionateness of woman—meaning nothing, only an effect of warmth and geniality, nothing beyond that. As a matter of fact, he reminded himself after a while that he had never wanted anything beyond, neither asked for it, nor wished it. He had no

desire to change the conditions of his life: women never rested till they had done so, manufacturing a new event, whatever it might be, pleased even when they were not pleased, to have a novelty to announce. That, no doubt, was the state of mind in which the lady who called herself his aunt was: pleased to have something to tell him, to fire off her big guns in his face, even though she was not at all pleased with the event itself. But John Tatham, on the other hand, had desired nothing to happen; things were very well as they were. He liked to have a place where he could run down from Saturday to Monday whenever he pleased, and where his visit was always a cheerful event for the womankind. He had liked to take them all the news, to carry the picture-papers, quite a load; to take down a new book for Elinor; to taste doubtfully his aunt's wine, and tell her she had better let him choose it for her. It was a very pleasant state of affairs; he wanted no change; not, certainly, above everything, the intrusion of a stranger whose very existence had been unknown to him until he was thus asked cynically, almost brutally, 'Do you know the man?'

The hour came when John had to assume

the costume of that order of workers whom a persistent popular joke nicknames the 'Devil's Own':—that is, he had to put on gown and wig and go off to the courts, where he was envied of all the briefless as a man who for his age had a great deal to do. He 'devilled' for Mr. Asstewt, the great Chancery man, which was the most excellent beginning: and he was getting into a little practice of his own which was not to be sneezed at. But he did not find himself in a satisfactory frame of mind to-day. He found himself asking the judge, 'Do you know anything of the man?' when it was his special business so to bewilder that potentate with elaborate arguments that he should not have time to consider whether he had ever heard of the particular man before him. Thus it was evident that Mr. Tatham was completely *hors de son assiette*, as the French say; upset and 'out of it,' according to the equally vivid imagination of the English manufacturer of slang. John Tatham was a very capable young lawyer on ordinary occasions, and it was all the more remarkable that he should have been so confused in his mind to-day.

When he went back to his chambers in the

evening, which was not until it was time to dress for dinner, he saw a bulky letter lying on his table, but avoided it as if it had been an overdue bill. He was engaged to dine out, and had not much time: yet all the way, as he drove along the streets, just as sunset was over and a subduing shade came over the light, and that half-holiday look that comes with evening—he kept thinking of the fat letter upon his table. Do you know anything of the man? That would no longer be the refrain of his correspondent, but some absurd strain of devotion and admiration of the man whom John knew nothing of, not even his name. He wondered as he went along in his hansom, and even between the courses at dinner, while he listened with a smile, but without hearing a word, to what the lady next him was saying—what she would tell him about this man? That he was everything that was delightful, no doubt; handsome, of course; probably clever; and that she was fond of him, confound the fellow! Elinor! to think that she should come to that—a girl like her—to tell him, as if she was saying that she had caught a cold or received a present, that she was in love with a man! Good heavens! when one

had thought her so much above anything of that kind—a woman, above all women that ever were.

'Not so much as that,' John said to himself as he walked home. He always preferred to walk home in the evening, and he was not going to change his habit now out of any curiosity about Elinor's letter. Oh, not so much as that! not above all women, or better than the rest, perhaps—but different. He could not quite explain to himself how, except that he had always known her to be Elinor and not another, which was a quite-sufficient explanation. And now it appeared that she was not different, although she would still profess to be Elinor—a curious puzzle, which his brain in its excited state was scarcely able to tackle. His thoughts got somewhat confused and broken as he approached his chambers. He was so near the letter now—a few minutes and he would no longer need to wonder or speculate about it, but would know exactly what she said. He turned and stood for a minute or so at the Temple gates, looking out upon the busy Strand. It was still as lovely as a summer night could be overhead, but down here it was—well, it was London, which is another thing. The usual crowd

was streaming by, coming into bright light as it streamed past a brilliant shop window, then in the shade for another moment, and emerging again. The faces that were suddenly lit up as they passed —some handsome faces, pale in the light; some with heads hung down, either in bad health or bad humour; some full of cares and troubles, others airy and gay—caught his attention. Did any of them all know anything of this man, he wondered —knowing how absurd a question it was. Had any of them written to-day a letter full of explanations, of a matter that could not be explained? There were faces with far more tragic meaning in them than could be so easily explained as that— the faces of men, alas! and women too, who were going to destruction as fast as their hurrying feet could carry them: or else were languidly drifting no one knew where—out of life altogether, out of all that was good in life. John Tatham knew this very well too, and had it in him to do anything a man could to stop the wanderers in their downward career. But to-night he was thinking of none of these things. He was only wondering how she would explain it, how she could explain it, what she would say; and lingering to prolong his suspense, not to know too soon what it was.

At last, however, as there is no delay but must come to an end one time or another, he found himself at last in his room, in his smoking-coat and slippers, divested of his stiff collar—at his ease, the windows open upon the quiet of the Temple Gardens, a little fresh air breathing in. He had taken all this trouble to secure ease for himself, to put off a little the reading of the letter. Now the moment had come when it would be absurd to delay any longer. It was so natural to see her familiar handwriting—not a lady's hand, angular and pointed, like her mother's, but the handwriting of her generation, which looks as if it were full of character, until one perceives that it *is* the writing of the generation, and all the girls and boys write much the same. He took time for this reflection still as he tore open the envelope. There were two sheets very well filled, and written in at the corners, so that no available spot was lost. 'My dear old John,' were the first words he saw. He put down the letter and thought over the address. Well, she had always called him so. He was old John when he was fourteen, to little Elinor. They had always known each other like that—like brother and sister. But not particularly like brother and sister—like cousins twice removed,

which is a more interesting tie in some particulars. And now for the letter.

My Dear Old John,

'I want to tell you myself of a great thing that has happened to me—the very greatest thing that could happen in one's life. Oh, John, dear old John, I feel as if I had nobody else I could open my heart to; for mamma—well, mamma is mamma, a dear mother and a good one; but you know she has her own ways of thinking——'

He put down the letter again with a rueful little laugh. 'And have not I my own ways of thinking, too?' he said to himself.

'Jack dear,' continued the letter, 'you must give me your sympathy, all your sympathy. You never were in love, I suppose (oh, what an odious way that is of putting it! but it spares one's feelings a little, for even in writing it is too tremendous a thing to say quite gravely and seriously, as one feels it). Dear John, I know you never were in love, or you would have told me; but still——'

'Oh,' he said to himself, with the merest sus-

picion of a little quiver in his lip, which might, of course, have been a laugh, but, on the other hand, might have been something else, 'I never was—or I would have told her—that's the way she looks at it.' Then he took up the letter again.

'Because—I see nothing but persecution before me. It was only a week ago that it happened, and we wanted to keep it quiet for a time; but things get out in spite of all one can do—things of that sort, at least. And, oh, dear Jack, fancy! I have got three letters already, all warning me against him; raking up trifling things that have occurred long ago, long before he met me, and holding them up before me like scarecrows—telling me he is not worthy of me, and that I will be wretched if I marry him, and other dreadful lies like that, which show me quite plainly that they neither know him nor me, and that they haven't eyes to see what he really is, nor minds to understand. But though I see the folly of it and the wickedness of it, mamma does not. She is ready to take other people's words; indeed, there is this to be said for her, that she does not know him yet, and therefore cannot be expected to be

ready to take his own word before all. Dear Jack, my heart is so full, and I have so much to tell you, and such perfect confidence in your sympathy, and also in your insight and capacity to see through all the lies and wicked stories which I foresee are going to be poured upon us like a flood that—I don't know how to begin, I have so many things to say. I know it is the heart of the season, and that you are asked out every night in the week, and are so popular everywhere; but if you could but come down from Saturday to Monday, and let me tell you everything and show you his picture, and read you parts of his letters, I know you would see how false and wrong it all is, and help me to face it out with all those horrid people, and to bring round mamma. You know her dreadful way of never giving an opinion, but just saying a great deal worse, and leaving you to your own responsibility, which nearly drives me mad even in little things—so you may suppose what it does in this. Of course, she must see him, which is all I want, for I know after she has had a half-hour's conversation with him that she will be like me and will not believe a word—not one word. Therefore, Jack dear, come, oh, come! I have always turned to you in all my difficulties, since ever I have known

what it was to have a difficulty, and you have done everything for me. I never remember any trouble I ever had but you found some means of clearing it away. Therefore my whole hope is in you. I know it is hard to give up all your parties and things: but it would only be two nights, after all—Saturday and Sunday. Oh, do come, do come, if you ever cared the least little bit for your poor cousin! Come, oh, come, dear old John!

'Your affect.

'E——.'

'Is that all?' he said to himself; but it was not all, for there followed a postscript all about the gifts and graces of the unknown lover, and how he was the victim of circumstances, and how, while other men might steal the horse, he dared not look over the wall, and other convincing pleadings such as these, till John's head began to go round. When he had got through this postscript John Tatham folded the letter and put it away. He had a smile on his face, but he had the air of a man who had been beaten about the head and was confused with the hurry and storm of the blows. She had always turned to him in all her difficulties, that was true: and he had always stood by her, and often, in the

freemasonry of youth, had thought her right and vindicated her capacity to judge for herself. He had been called often on this errand, and he had never refused to obey. For Elinor was very wilful, she had always been wilful—'a rosebud set about with wilful thorns, But sweet as English air could make her, she.' He had come to her aid many a time. But he had never thought to be called upon by her in such a way as this. He folded the letter up carefully and put it in a drawer. Usually when he had a letter from Elinor he put it into his pocket for the satisfaction of reading it over again: for she had a fantastic way of writing, adding little postscripts which escaped the eye at first, and which it was pleasant to find out afterwards. But with this letter he did not do so. He put it in a drawer of his writing-table, so that he might find it again when necessary, but he did not put it in his breast pocket. And then he sat for some time doing nothing, looking before him, with his legs stretched out and his hand beating a little tattoo upon the table. 'Well: well? well!' That was about what he said to himself, but it meant a great deal: it meant a vague but great disappointment, a sort of blank and vacuum expressed by the first of these

words—and then it meant a question of great importance and many divisions. How could it ever have come to anything? Am I a man to marry? What could I have done, just getting into practice, just getting a few pounds to spend for myself? And then came the conclusion. Since I can't do anything else for her; since she's done it for herself—shall I be a beast and not help her, because it puts my own nose out of joint? Not a bit of it!—The reader must remember that in venturing to reflect a young man's sentiments a dignified style is scarcely possible; they express themselves sometimes with much force in their private moments, but not as Dr. Johnson would have approved, or with any sense of elegance; and one must try to be truthful to nature. He knew very well that Elinor was not responsible for his disappointment, and even he was aware that if she had been so foolish as to fix her hopes upon him, it would probably have been she who would have been disappointed, and left in the lurch. But still—

John had gone through an interminable amount of thinking, and a good deal of soda-water (with or without, how should I know, some other moderate ingredient), and a cigar or two—not to

speak of certain hours when he ought to have been in bed to keep his head clear for the cases of to-morrow: when it suddenly flashed upon him all at once that he was not a step further on than when he had received Mrs. Dennistoun's letter in the morning, for Elinor, though she had said so much about him, had given no indication who her lover was. Who was the man?

CHAPTER II.

It was a blustering afternoon when John, with his bag in his hand, set out from the station at Hurrymere for Mrs. Dennistoun's cottage. Why that station should have had 'mere' in its name I have never been able to divine, for there is no water to be seen for miles, scarcely so much as a duckpond: but, perhaps, there are two meanings to the words. It was a steep walk up a succession of slopes, and the name of the one upon which the cottage stood was Windyhill, not an encouraging title on such a day, but true enough to the character of the place. The cottage lay, however, at the head of a combe or shelving irregular valley, just sheltered from the winds on a little platform of its own, and commanding a view which was delightful in its long sweeping distance, and varied enough to be called

picturesque, especially by those who were familiar with nothing higher than the swelling slopes of the Surrey hills. It was wild, little cultivated, save in the emerald green of the bottom, a few fields which lay where a stream ought to have been. Nowadays there are red-roofed houses peeping out at every corner, but at that period fashion had not even heard of Hurrymere, and, save for a farmhouse or two, a village alehouse and posting-house at a corner of the high-road, and one or two great houses within the circuit of six or seven miles, retired within their trees and parks, there were few habitations. Mrs. Dennistoun's cottage was red-roofed like the rest, but much subdued by lichens, and its walls were covered by climbing plants, so that it struck no bold note upon the wild landscape, yet was visible afar off in glimpses, from the much-winding road, for a mile or two before it could be come at. There was, indeed, a nearer way, necessitating a sharp scramble, but when John came just in sight of the house his heart failed him a little, and, notwithstanding that his bag had come to feel very heavy by this time, he deliberately chose the longer round to gain a little time—as we all do sometimes, when we are most anxious to be

at our journey's end, and hear what has to be told us. It looked very peaceful seated in that fold of the hill, no tossing of trees about it, though a little higher up the slim oaks and beeches of the copse were flinging themselves about against the grey sky in a kind of agonised appeal. John liked the sound of the wind sweeping over the hills, rending the trees, and filling the horizon as with a crowd of shadows in pain, twisting and bending with every fresh sweep of the breeze. Sometimes such sounds and sights give a relief to the mind. He liked it better than if all had been undisturbed, lying in afternoon quiet as might have been expected at the crown of the year—but the winds had always to be taken into account at Windyhill.

When he came in sight of the gate, John was aware of some one waiting for him, walking up and down the sandy road into which it opened. Her face was turned the other way, and she evidently looked for him by way of the combe, the scrambling steep road which he had avoided in despite: for why should he scramble and make himself hot in order to hear ten minutes sooner what he did not wish to hear at all? She turned round suddenly as he knocked his foot against a stone upon the rough, but otherwise noiseless

road, presenting a countenance flushed with sudden relief and pleasure to John's remorseful eye. 'Oh, there you are!' she said, 'I am so glad. I thought you could not be coming. You might have been here a quarter of an hour ago by the short road.'

'I did not think there was any hurry,' said John ungraciously. 'The wind is enough to carry one off one's feet; though, to be sure, it's quiet enough here.'

'It's always quiet here,' she said, reading his face with her eyes after the manner of women, and wondering what the harassed look meant that was so unusual in John's cheerful face. She jumped at the idea that he was tired, that his bag was heavy, that he had been beaten about by the wind till he had lost his temper, always a possible thing to happen to a man. Elinor flung herself upon the bag and tried to take possession of it. 'Why didn't you get a boy at the station to carry it? Let me carry it,' she said.

'That is so likely,' said John, with a hard laugh, shifting it to his other hand.

Elinor caught his arm with both her hands, and looked up with wistful eyes into his face. 'Oh, John, you are angry,' she said.

'Nonsense. I am tired, buffeting about with this wind.' Here the gardener and man-of-all-work about the cottage came up and took the bag, which John parted with with angry reluctance, as if it had been a sort of weapon of offence. After it was gone there was nothing for it but to walk quietly to the house through the flowers with that girl hanging on his arm, begging a hundred pardons with her eyes. The folly of it! as if she had not a right to do as she pleased, or he would try to prevent her; but finally, the soft, silent apology of that clinging, and the look full of petitions touched his surly heart. 'Well—Nelly,' he said, with involuntary softening.

'Oh, if you call me that I am not afraid!' she cried, with an instant upleaping of pleasure and confidence in her changeable face, which (John tried to say to himself) was not really pretty at all, only so full of expression, changing with every breath of feeling. The eyes, which had only been brown a moment before, leaped up into globes of light, yet not too dazzling, with some liquid medium to soften their shining. Even though you know that a girl is in love with another man, that she thinks of you no more than of the old gardener who has just hobbled round the corner, it

is pleasant to be able to change the whole aspect of affairs to her and make her light up like that, solely by a little unwilling softening of your gruff and surly tone.

'You know, John,' she said, holding his arm tight with her two hands, 'that nobody ever calls me Nelly—except you.'

'Possibly I shall call you Nelly no longer. Why? Why, because that fellow will object.'

'That fellow! Oh, *he!*' Elinor's face grew very red all over, from the chin, which almost touched John's arm, to the forehead, bent back a little over those eyes suffused with light which were intent upon all the changes of John's face. This one was, like the landscape, swept by all the vicissitudes of sun and shade. It was radiant now with the unexpected splendour of the sudden gleam.

'Oh, John, John, I have so much to say to you! He will object to nothing. He knows very well you are like my brother—almost more than my brother—for you could help it, John. You almost chose me for your friend, which a brother would not. He says, Get him to be our friend and all will be well!'

He had not said this, but Elinor had said it to

him, and he had assented, which was almost the same—in the way of reckoning of a girl, at least.

'He is very kind, I am sure,' said John, gulping down something which had almost made him throw off Elinor's arm, and fling away from her in indignation. Her brother——!! But there was no use making any row, he said to himself. If anything were to be done for her he must put up with all that. There had suddenly come upon John, he knew not how, as he scanned her anxious face, a conviction that the man was a scamp, from whom at all hazards she should be free.

Said Elinor, unsuspecting, 'That is just what he is, John! I knew you would divine his character at once. You can't think how kind he is—kind to everybody. He never judges anyone, or throws a stone, or makes an insinuation.' ('Probably because he knows he cannot bear investigation himself,' John said in his heart.) 'That was the thing that took my heart first. Everybody is so censorious—always something to say against their neighbours; he, never a word.'

'That's a very good quality,' said John, reluctantly, 'if it doesn't mean confounding good with bad, and thinking nothing matters.'

Elinor gave him a grieved, reproachful look,

and loosened the clasping of her hands. 'It is not like you to imagine that, John!'

'Well, what is a man to say? Don't you see, if you do nothing but blow his trumpet, the only thing left for me to do is to insinuate something against him? I don't know the man from Adam. He may be an angel, for anything I can say.'

'No; I do not pretend he is that,' said Elinor, with impartiality. 'He has his faults, like others, but they are *nice* faults. He doesn't know how to take care of his money (but he hasn't got very much, which makes it the less matter), and he is sometimes taken in about his friends. Anybody almost that appeals to his kindness is treated like a friend, which makes precise people think —— but, of course, I don't share that opinion in the very least.'

('A wasteful beggar, with a disreputable set,' was John's practical comment within himself upon this speech.)

'And he doesn't know how to curry favour with people who can help him on; so that though he has been for years promised something, it never turns up. Oh, I know his faults very well indeed,' said Elinor; 'but a woman can do so much to make up for faults like that.

We're naturally saving, you know, and we always keep those unnecessary friends that were made before our time at a distance; and it's part of our nature to coax a patron—that is what Mariamne says.'

'Mariamne?' said John.

'His sister, who first introduced him to me; and I am very fond of her, so you need not say anything against her, John. I know she is—fashionable, but that's no harm.'

'Mariamne,' he repeated; 'it is a very uncommon name. You don't mean Lady Mariamne Prestwich, do you? and not—not—— Elinor! not Phil Compton, for goodness' sake? Don't tell me he's the man?'

Elinor's hands dropped from his arm. She drew herself up until she seemed to tower over him. 'And why should I say it is not Mr. Compton?' she asked, with a scarlet flush of anger, so different from that rosy red of love and happiness, covering her face.

'Phil Compton! the *dis*-Honourable Phil! Why, Elinor! you cannot mean it! you must not mean it!' he cried.

Elinor said not a word. She turned from him with a look of pathetic reproach but with

the air of a queen, and walked into the house, he following in a ferment of wrath and trouble, yet humbled and miserable more than words could say. Oh, the flowery peaceful house! jasmine and rose overleaping each other upon the porch, honeysuckle scenting the air, all manner of feminine contrivances to continue the greenness and the sweetness into the little bright hall, into the open drawing-room, where flowers stood on every table amid the hundred pretty trifles of a woman's house. There was no one in this room where she led him, and then turned round confronting him, taller than he had ever seen her before, pale, with her nostrils dilating and her lips trembling. 'I never thought it possible that you, of all people in the world, you, John—my stand-by since ever I was a baby—my—— Oh! what a horrid thing it is to be a woman,' cried Elinor, stamping her foot, 'to be ready to cry for everything!—you, John! that I always put my trust in—that you should turn against me—and at the very first word!'

'Elinor,' he said, 'my dear girl! not against you, not against you, for all the world!'

'And what is *me?*' she said, with that sudden turning of the tables and high scorn of her pre-

vious argument which is common with women; 'do I care what you do to *me?* Oh, nothing, nothing! I am of no account, you can trample me down under your feet if you like. But what I will not bear,' she said, clenching her hands, 'is injustice to him: that I will not bear, neither from you, Cousin John, who are only my distant cousin, after all, and have no right to thrust your advice upon me—or from any one in the world.'

'What you say is quite true, Elinor, I am only a distant cousin—after all: but——'

'Oh no, no,' she cried, flying to him, seizing once more his arm with her clinging hands, 'I did not mean that—you know I did not mean that, my more than brother, my good, good John, whom I have trusted all my life!'

And then the poor girl broke out into passionate weeping with her head upon his shoulder, as she might have leant upon the handy trunk of a tree, or on the nearest door or window, as John Tatham said in his heart. He soothed her as best he could, and put her in a chair and stood with his hand upon the back of it, looking down upon her as the fit of crying wore itself out. Poor little girl! he had seen her cry often enough before. A girl cries for anything, for a thorn in

her finger, for a twist of her foot. He had seen her cry and laugh, and dash the tears out of her eyes on such occasions, oh! often and often: there was that time when he rushed out of the bushes unexpectedly and frightened her pony, and she fell among the grass and vowed, sobbing and laughing, it was her fault! and once when she was a little tot, not old enough for boy's play, when she fell upon her little nose and cut it and disfigured herself, and held up that wounded little knob of a feature to have it kissed and made well. Oh, why did he think of that now! the little thing all trust and simple confidence! There was that time too when she jumped up to get a gun and shoot the tramps who had hurt somebody, if John would but give her his hand! These things came rushing into his mind as he stood watching Elinor cry, with his hand upon the back of her chair.

She wanted John's hand now when she was going forth to far greater dangers. Oh, poor little Nelly! poor little thing! but he could not put her on his shoulder and carry her out to face the foe now.

She jumped up suddenly while he was thinking, with the tears still wet upon her cheeks,

but the paroxysm mastered, and the light of her eyes coming out doubly bright like the sun from the clouds. 'We poor women,' she said with a laugh, 'are so badly off, we are so handicapped, as you call it! We can't help crying like fools! We can't help caring for what other people think, trying to conciliate and bring them round to approve us—when we ought to stand by our own conscience and judgment, and sense of what is right, like independent beings.'

'If that means taking your own way, Elinor, whatever any one may say to you, I think women do it at least as much as men.'

'No, it does not mean taking our own way,' she cried, 'and if you do not understand any better than that, why should I—But you do understand better, John,' she said, her countenance again softening: 'you know I want, above everything in the world, that you should approve of me and see that I am right. That is what I want! I will do what I think right; but, oh, if I could only have you with me in doing it, and know that you saw with me that it was the best, the only thing to do! Happiness lies in that, not in having one's own way.'

'My dear Elinor,' he said, 'isn't that asking a

great deal? To prevent you from doing what you think right is in nobody's power. You are of age, and I am sure my aunt will force nothing; but how can we change our opinions, our convictions, our entire points of view? There is nobody in the world I would do so much for as you, Elinor: but I cannot do that, even for you.'

The hot tears were dried from her cheeks, the passion was over. She looked at him, her efforts to gain him at an end, on the equal footing of an independent individual agreeing to differ, and as strong in her own view as he could be.

'There is one thing you can do for me,' she said. 'Mamma knows nothing about—fashionable gossip. She is not acquainted with the wicked things that are said. If she disapproves it is only because—— Oh, I suppose because one's mother always disapproves a thing that is done without her, that she has no hand in, what she calls pledging one's self to a stranger, and not knowing his antecedents, his circumstances, and so forth! But she hasn't any definite ground for it as you—think you have, judging in the uncharitable way of the world—not remembering that

if we love one another the more there is against him the more need he has of me! But all I have to ask of you, John, is not to prejudice my mother. I know you can do it if you please—a hint would be enough, an uncertain word, even hesitating when you answer a question—that would be quite enough! John, if you put things into her head——'

'You ask most extraordinary things of me,' said John, turning to bay. 'To tell her lies about a man whom everybody knows—to pretend I think one thing when I think quite another. Not to say that my duty is to inform her exactly what things are said, so that she may judge for herself, not let her go forward in ignorance—that is my plain duty, Elinor.'

'But you won't do it; oh, you won't do it!' she said. 'Oh, John, for the sake of all the time that you have been so good to Nelly—your own little Nelly, nobody else's! Remember that I and everybody who loves him know these stories to be lies—and don't, don't put things into my mother's head! Let her judge for herself—don't, don't prejudice her, John. It can be no one's duty to repeat malicious stories when there is no possibility of proving or disproving them.

Don't make her think——Oh, mamma! we couldn't think where you had gone to. Yes, here is John.'

'So I perceive,' said Mrs. Dennistoun. It was getting towards evening, and the room was not very light. She could not distinguish their looks or the agitation that scarcely could have been hidden but for the dusk. 'You seem to have been having a very animated conversation. I heard your voices all along the garden walk. Let me have the benefit of it, if there is anything to tell.'

'You know well enough, mamma, what we must have been talking about,' said Elinor, turning half angrily away.

'To be sure,' said the mother, 'I ought to have known. There is nothing so interesting as that sort of thing. I thought, however, you would probably have put it off a little, Elinor.'

'Put it off a little—when it is the thing that concerns us more than anything else in the world!'

'That is true,' said Mrs. Dennistoun with a sigh. 'Did you walk all the way, John? I meant to have sent the pony-cart for you, but the man was too late. It is a nice evening though, and coming out of town it is a good thing for you to have a good walk.'

'Yes, I like it more than anything,' said John, 'but the evening is not so very fine. The wind is high, and I shouldn't wonder if we had rain.'

'The wind is always high here,' said Mrs. Dennistoun. 'We don't have our view for nothing; but the sky is quite clear in the west, and all the clouds blowing away. I don't think we shall have more than a shower.'

Elinor stood listening to this talk with restrained impatience, as if waiting for the moment when they should come to something worth talking about. Then she gave herself a sort of shake—half weary, half indignant—and left the room. There was a moment's silence, until her quick step was heard going to the other end of the house and upstairs, and the shutting of a door.

'Oh, John, I am very uneasy, very uneasy,' said Mrs. Dennistoun. 'I scarcely thought she would have begun to you about it at once; but then I am doing the very same. We can't think of anything else. I am not going to worry you before dinner, for you must be tired with your walk, and want to refresh yourself before we enter upon that weary, weary business. But my heart misgives me dreadfully about it all. If I only had gone with her! It was not for want of an

invitation, but just my laziness. I could not be troubled to leave my own house.'

'I don't see what difference it would have made had you been with her, aunt.'

'Oh, I should have seen the man: and been able to judge what he was and his motive, John.'

'Elinor is not rich. He could scarcely have had an interested motive.'

'There is some comfort in that. I have said that to myself again and again. He could not have an interested motive. But, oh! I am uneasy! There is the dressing-bell. I will not keep you any longer, John; but in the evening, or to-morrow, when we can get a quiet moment——'

The dusk was now pervading all the house—that summer dusk which there is a natural prejudice everywhere against cutting short by lights. He could not see her face, nor she his, as they went out of the drawing-room together and along the long passage, which led by several arched doorways to the stairs. John had a room on the ground floor which was kept for gentlemen visitors, and in which the candles were twinkling on the dressing-table. He was more than ever thankful as he caught a glimpse of himself in the vague reflected world of the mirror, with its lights stand-

ing up reflected too, like inquisitors spying upon him, that there had not been light enough to show how he was looking: for though he was both a lawyer and a man of the world, John Tatham had not been able to keep the trouble which his interview with Elinor had caused him out of his face.

CHAPTER III.

THE drawing-room of the Cottage was large and low, and had that *faux air* of being old-fashioned which is dear to the hearts of superior people generally. Mrs. Dennistoun and her daughter scarcely belonged to that class, yet they were, as ladies of leisure with a little taste for the arts are bound to be, touched by all the fancies of their time, which was just beginning to adore Queen Anne. There was still, however, a mixture of luxury with the square settees and spindle-legged cabinets which were 'the fashion': and partly because that was also 'the fashion,' and partly because on Windyhill even a July evening was sometimes a little chill, or looked so by reason of the great darkness of the silent, little-inhabited country outside—there was a log burning on the fire-dogs (the newest thing in furnishing in those

days, though now so common) on the hearth. The log burned as little as possible, being, perhaps, not quite so thoroughly dry and serviceable as it would have been in its proper period, and made a faint hissing sound in the silence as it burned, and diffused its pungent odour through the house. The bow window was open behind its white curtains, and it was there that the little party gathered, out of reach of the unnecessary heat and the smoke. There was a low sofa on either side of this recess, and in the centre the French window opened into the garden, where all the scents were balmy in the stillness which had fallen upon the night.

Mrs. Dennistoun was tall and slim, a woman with a presence, and sat with a sort of dignity on her side of the window, with a little table beside her covered with her little requirements, the properties, so to speak, without which she was never known to be—a book for moments when there was nothing else to interest her, a case for work should there arise any necessity for putting in a stitch in time, a bottle of salts should she or any one else become suddenly faint, a paper-cutter in cases of emergency, and finally, for mere ornament, two roses, a red and a white, in one of those

tall old-fashioned glasses which are so pretty for flowers. I do wrong to dismiss the roses with such vulgar qualifications as white and red—the one was a *Souvenir de Malmaison,* the other a *General*—something or other. If you spoke to Mrs. Dennistoun about her flowers, she said, 'Oh, the Malmaison,' or 'Oh, the General So-and-so.' Rose was only the family name, but happily, as we all know, under the other appellation they smelt just as sweet. Mrs. Dennistoun kept up all this little state because she had been used to do so; because it was part of a lady's accoutrements, so to speak. She had also a cushion, which was necessary, if not for comfort, yet for her sense of being fully equipped, placed behind her back when she sat down. But with all this she was not a formal or prim person. She was a woman who had not produced a great deal of effect in life; one of those who are not accustomed to have their advice taken, or to find that their opinion has much weight upon others. Perhaps it was because Elinor resembled her father that this peculiarity which had affected all Mrs. Dennistoun's married life should have continued into a sphere where she ought to have been paramount. But she was with her daughter as she

had been with her husband, a person of an ineffective character, taking refuge from the sensation of being unable to influence those about her whose wills were stronger than her own, by relinquishing authority, and in her most decided moments offering an opinion only, no more. This was not because she was really undecided, for on the contrary she knew her own mind well enough; but it had become a matter of habit with her to insist upon no opinion, knowing, as she did, how little chance she had of imposing her opinion upon the stronger wills about her. She had two other children older than Elinor: one, the eldest of all, married in India, a woman with many children of her own, practically altogether severed from the maternal nest; the other an adventurous son, who was generally understood to be at the ends of the earth, but seldom or never had any more definite address. This lady had naturally gone through many pangs and anxieties on behalf of these children, who had dropped away from her side into the unknown; but it belonged to her character to have said very little about this, so that she was generally supposed to take things very easily, and other mothers were apt to admire the composure of Mrs. Dennistoun, whose son

might be being murdered by savages at any moment, for anything she knew—or minded apparently. 'Now it would have driven *me* out of my senses!' the other ladies said. Mrs. Dennistoun perhaps did not feel the back so well fitted to the burden as appeared—but she kept her own sentiments on this subject entirely to herself.

(I may say, too—but this the young reader may skip without disadvantage—by way of explanation of a peculiarity which has lately been much remarked as characteristic of those records of human history contemptuously called fiction, i.e. the unimportance, or ill-report, or unjust disapproval of the mother in records of this description—that it is almost impossible to maintain her due rank and character in a piece of history, which has to be kept within certain limits—and where her daughter the heroine must have the first place. To lessen *her* pre-eminence by dwelling at length upon the mother—unless that mother is a fool, or a termagant, or something thoroughly contrasting with the beauty and virtues of the daughter—would in most cases be a mistake in art. For one thing the necessary incidents are wanting, for I strongly object, and so I think do most people, to mothers who fall in love, or think of marriage, or any such

vanity in their own person, and unless she is to interfere mischievously with the young lady's prospects, or take more or less the part of the villain, how is she to be permitted any importance at all? For there cannot be two suns in one sphere, or two centres to one world. Thus the mother has to be sacrificed to the daughter: which is a parable; or else it is the other way, which is against all the principles and prepossessions of life.)

Elinor did not sit up like her mother. She had flung herself upon the opposite sofa, with her arms flung behind her head, supporting it with her fingers half buried in the twists of her hair. She was not tall, like Mrs. Dennistoun, and there was far more vivid colour than had ever been the mother's in her brown eyes and bright complexion, which was milk-white and rose-red after an old-fashioned rule of colour, too crude perhaps for modern artistic taste. Sometimes these delightful tints go with a placid soul which never varies, but in Elinor's case there was a demon in the hazel of the eyes, not dark enough for placidity, all fire at the best of times, and ready in a moment to burst into flame. She it was who had to be in the forefront of the interest, and not her

mother, though for metaphysical, or what I suppose should now be called psychological interests, the elder lady was probably the most interesting of the two. Elinor beat her foot upon the carpet, out of sheer impatience, while John lingered alone in the dining-room. What did he stay there for? When there are several men together, and they drink wine, the thing is comprehensible; but one man alone who takes his claret with his dinner, and cares for nothing more, why should he stay behind when there was so much to say to him, and not one minute too much time till Monday morning, should the house be given up to talk not only by day but by night? But it was no use beating one's foot, for John did not come.

'You spoke to your cousin, Elinor, before dinner?' her mother said.

'Oh yes, I spoke to him before dinner. What did he come here for but that? I sent for him on purpose, you know, mamma, to hear what he would say.'

'And what did he say?'

This most natural question produced a small convulsion once more on Elinor's side. She loosed the hands that had been supporting her

head and flung them out in front of her. 'Oh, mamma, how can you be so exasperating! What did he say? What was he likely to say? If the beggar maid that married King Cophetua had a family it would have been exactly the same thing—though in that case surely the advantage was all on the gentleman's side.'

'We know none of the particulars in that case,' said Mrs. Dennistoun calmly. 'I have always thought it quite possible that the beggar maid was a princess of an old dynasty and King Cophetua a *parvenu*. But in your case, Elinor——'

'You know just as little,' said the girl impetuously.

'That is what I say. I don't know the man who has possessed himself of my child's fancy and heart. I want to know more about him. I want——'

'For goodness' sake, whatever you want, don't be sentimental, mamma!'

'Was I sentimental? I didn't mean it. He has got your heart, my dear, whatever words may be used.'

'Yes—and for ever!' said the girl, turning round upon herself. 'I know you think I don't know my own mind; but there will never be

any change in me. Oh, what does John mean, sitting all by himself in that stuffy room? He has had time to smoke a hundred cigarettes!'

'Elinor, you must not forget it is rather hard upon John to be brought down to settle your difficulties for you. What do you want with him? Only that he should advise you to do what you have settled upon doing. If he took the other side, how much attention would you give him? You must be reasonable, my dear.'

'I would give him every attention,' said Elinor, 'if he said what was reasonable. You don't think mere blind opposition is reasonable, I hope, mamma. To say Don't, merely, without saying why, what reason is there in that?'

'My dear, when you argue I am lost. I am not clever at making out my ground. Mine is not mere blind opposition, or indeed opposition at all. You have been always trained to use your own faculties, and I have never made any stand against you.'

'Why not? why not?' said the girl, springing to her feet. 'That is just the dreadful, dreadful part of it! Why don't you say straight out what I am to do and keep to it, and not tell me I must make use of my own faculties? When I do, you

put on a face and object. Either don't object, or tell me point-blank what I am to do.'

'Do you think for one moment if I did, you would obey me, Elinor?'

'Oh, I don't know what I might do in that case, for it will never happen. You will never take that responsibility. For my part, if you locked me up in my room and kept me on bread and water I should think *that* reasonable; but not this kind of letting I dare not wait upon I would, saying I am to exercise my own faculties, and then hesitating and finding fault.'

'I daresay, my dear,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, with great tolerance, 'that this may be provoking to your impatient mind: but you must put yourself in my place a little, as I try to put myself in yours. I have never seen Mr. Compton. It is probable, or at least quite possible, that if I knew him I might look upon him with your eyes——'

'Probable! Possible! What words to use! when all my happiness, all my life, everything I care for is in it: and my own mother thinks it just possible that she might be able to tolerate the man that—the man who——'

She flung herself down on her seat again, pant-

ing and excited. 'Did you wear out Adelaide like that,' she cried, 'before she married, papa and you——'

'Adelaide was very different, Elinor. She married *selon les règles* a man whom we all knew. There was no trouble about it. Your father was the one who was impatient then. He thought it too well arranged, too commonplace and satisfactory. You may believe he did not object to that in words, but he laughed at them and it worried him. It has done very well on the whole,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, with a faint sigh.

'You say that—and then you sigh. There is always a little reserve. You are never wholly satisfied.'

'One seldom is in this world,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, this time with a soft laugh. 'This world is not very satisfactory. One makes the best one can of it.'

'And that is just what I hate to hear,' said Elinor, 'what I have always heard. Oh, yes, when you don't say it you mean it, mamma. One can read it in the turn of your head. You put up with things. You think perhaps they might have been worse. In every way that's your philosophy. And it's killing, killing to all life! I

would rather far you said out, "Adelaide's husband is a prig and I hate him."'

'There is only one drawback, that it would not be true. I don't in the least hate him. I am glad I was not called upon to marry him myself, I don't think I should have liked it. But he makes Adelaide a very good husband, and she is quite happy with him—as far as I know.'

'The same thing again—never more. I wonder, I wonder after I have been married a dozen years what you will say of me?'

'I wonder, too: if we could but know that it would solve the question,' the mother said. Elinor looked at her with a provoked and impatient air, which softened off after a moment—partly because she heard the door of the dining-room open—into a smile.

'I try you in every way,' she said, half laughing. 'I do everything to beguile you into a pleasanter speech. I thought you must at least have said then that you hoped you would have nothing to say but happiness. No! you are not to be caught, however one tries, mamma.'

John came in at this moment, not without a whiff about him of the cigarette over which he had lingered so. It relieved him to see the two

ladies seated opposite each other in the bow window, and to hear something like a laugh in the air. Perhaps they were discussing other things, and not this momentous marriage question, in which certainly no laughter was.

'You have your usual fire,' he said, 'but the wind has quite gone down, and I am sure it is not wanted to-night.'

'It looks cheerful always, John.'

'Which is the reason, I suppose, why you carefully place yourself out of sight of it—one of the prejudices of English life.'

And then he came forward into the recess of the window, which was partly separated from the room by a table with flowers on it, and a great bush in a pot, of delicate maiden-hair fern. It was perhaps significant, though he did not mean it for any demonstration of partisanship, that he sat down on Elinor's side. Both the ladies felt it so instinctively, although, on the contrary, had the truth been known, all John's real agreement was with the mother; but in such a conjuncture it is not truth but personal sympathy that carries the day. 'You are almost in the dark here,' he said.

'Neither of us is doing anything. One is lazy on a summer night.'

'There is a great deal more in it than that,' said Elinor, in a voice which faltered a little. 'You talk about summer nights, and the weather, and all manner of indifferent things, but you know all the time there is but one real subject to talk of, and that we are all thinking of that.'

'That is my line, aunt,' said John. 'Elinor is right. We might sit and make conversation, but of course this is the only subject we are thinking of. It's very kind of you to take me into the consultation. Of course I am in a kind of way the nearest in relation, and the only man in the family —except my father—and I know a little about law, and all that. Now let me hear formally, as if I knew nothing about it (and, in fact, I know very little), what the question is. Elinor has met someone who—who has proposed to her—not to put too fine a point upon it,' said John, with a smile that was somewhat ghastly—'and she has accepted him. Congratulations are understood, but here there arises a hitch.'

'There arises no hitch. Mamma is dissatisfied (which mamma generally is) chiefly because she does not know Mr. Compton; and some wretched old woman, who doesn't know him either, has written to her—to her and also to me—telling us

a pack of lies,' said Elinor indignantly, 'to which I do not give the least credence for a moment—not for a moment!'

'That's all very well for you,' said John, 'it's quite simple; but for us, Elinor—that is, for your mother and me, as you are good enough to allow me to have a say in the matter—it's not so simple. We feel, you know, that, like Cæsar's wife, our Elinor's—husband'—he could not help making a grimace as he said that word, but no one saw or suspected it—'should be above suspicion.'

'That is exactly what I feel, John.'

'Well, we must do something about it, don't you see? Probably it will be as easy as possible for him to clear himself.' (The dis-Honourable Phil! Good heavens! to think it was a man branded with such a name that was to marry Elinor! For a moment he was silenced by the thought, as if some one had given him a blow.)

'To clear himself!' said Elinor. 'And do you think I will permit him to be asked to clear himself? Do you think I will allow him to believe for a moment that *I* believed anything against him? Do you think I will take the word of a spiteful old woman?'

'Old women are not always spiteful, and they are sometimes right.' John put out his hand to prevent Mrs. Dennistoun from speaking, which, indeed, she had no intention of doing. 'I don't mean so, of course, in Mr. Compton's case—and I don't know what has been said.'

'Things that are very uncomfortable—very inconsistent with a happy life and a comfortable establishment,' said Mrs. Dennistoun.

'Oh, if you could only hear yourself, mamma! You are not generally a Philistine, I must say that for you; but if you only heard the tone in which you said "comfortable establishment!" the most conventional match-making mother in existence could not have done it better; and as for what has been said, there has nothing been said but what is said about everybody—what, probably, would be said of you yourself, John, for you play whist sometimes, I hear, and often billiards, at the club.'

A half-audible 'God forbid!' had come from John's lips when she said, 'What would probably be said of yourself'—audible that is to Elinor, not to the mother. She sprang up as this murmur came to her ear: 'Oh, if you are going to prejudge the case, there is nothing for me to say!'

'I should be very sorry to prejudge the case, or to judge it at all,' said John. 'I am too closely interested to be judicial. Let somebody who knows nothing about it be your judge. Let the accusations be submitted—to your Rector, say; he's a sensible man enough, and knows the world. He won't be scared by a rubber at the club, or that sort of thing. Let him inquire, and then your mind will be at rest.'

'There is only one difficulty, John,' said Mrs. Dennistoun. 'Mr. Hudson would be the best man in the world, only for one thing—that it is from his sister and his wife that the warning came.'

'Oh!' said John. This fact seemed to take him aback in the most ludicrous way. He sat and gazed at them, and had not another word to say. Perhaps the fact that he himself who suggested the inquiry was still better informed of the true state of the case, and of the truth of the accusation, than were those to whom he might have submitted it, gave him a sense of the hopelessness and also absurdity of the attempt more than anything else could have done.

'And that proves, if there was nothing else,' said Elinor, 'how false it is: for how could

Mrs. Hudson and Mary Dale know? They are not fashionable people, they are not in society. How could they or any one like them know anything of Phil'—she stopped quickly, drew herself up, and added—'of Mr. Compton, I mean?'

'They might not know, but they might state their authority,' Mrs. Dennistoun said; 'and if the Rector cannot be used to help us, surely, John, you are a man of the world, you are not like a woman, unacquainted with evidence. Why should not you do it, though you are, as you kindly say, an interested party?'

'He shall not do it. I forbid him to do it. If he takes in hand anything of the kind he must say good-bye to me.'

'You hear?' said John; 'but I could not do it in any case, my dear Elinor. I am too near. I never could see this thing all round. Why not your lawyer, old Lynch, a decent old fellow——'

'I will tell him the same,' cried Elinor; 'I will never, never speak to him again.'

'My dear,' said her mother, 'you will give everybody the idea that you don't want to know the truth.'

'I know the truth already,' said Elinor, rising

with great dignity. 'Do you think that any slander would for a moment shake my faith in you—or you? You don't deserve it, John, for you turn against me—you that I thought were going to take my part; but do you think if all the people in London set up one story that I would believe it against you? And how should I against *him?*' she added, with an emphasis upon the word, as expressing something immeasurably more to be loved and trusted than either mother or cousin, by which, after having raised John up to a sort of heaven of gratified affection, she let him down again to the ground like a stone. Oh, yes! trusted in with perfect faith, nothing believed against him, whom she had known all her life—but yet not to be mentioned in the same breath with the ineffable trust she reposed in the man she loved—whom she did not know at all. The first made John's countenance beam with emotion and pleasure, the second brought a cold shade over his face. For a moment he could scarcely speak.

'She bribes us,' he said at last, forcing a smile. 'She flatters us, but only to let us drop again, Mrs. Dennistoun; it is as good as saying, What are we to *him?*'

'They all do so,' said the elder lady, calmly; 'I am used to it.'

'But, perhaps, I am not quite—used to it,' said John, with something in his voice which made them both look at him—Elinor only for a moment, carelessly, before she swept away—Mrs. Dennistoun with a more warmly awakened sensation, as if she had made some discovery. 'Ah!' she said, with a tone of pain. But Elinor did not wait for any further disclosures. She waved her hand, and went off with her head high, carrying, as she felt, the honours of war. They might plot, indeed, behind her back, and try to invent some tribunal before which her future husband might be arraigned; but John, at least, would say nothing to make things worse. John would be true to her—he would not injure Phil Compton. Elinor, perhaps, guessed a little of what John was thinking, and felt, though she could scarcely have told how, that it would be a point of honour with him not to betray her love.

He sat with Mrs. Dennistoun in partial silence for some time after this. He felt as if he had been partially discovered—partially, and yet more would be discovered than there was to discover;

for if either of them believed that he was in love with Elinor, they were mistaken, he said to himself. He had been annoyed by her engagement, but he had never come to the point of asking her that question in his own person. No, nor would not, he said to himself—certainly would not—not even to save her from the clutches of this gambler and adventurer. No; they might think what they liked, but this was the case. He never should have done it—never would have exposed himself to refusal—never besought this high-tempered girl to have the control of his life. Poor Nelly all the same! poor little thing! To think she had so little judgment as to ignore what might have been a great deal better, and to pin her faith to the dis-Honourable Phil!

CHAPTER IV.

In the morning John accompanied Elinor to church. Mrs. Dennistoun had found an excuse for not going, which I am sorry to say was a way she had. She expressed (and felt) much sorrow for it herself, saying, which was quite true, that not to go was a great distress to her, and put the household out, and was a custom she did not approve of. But somehow it had grown upon her. She regretted this, but did it, saying that everybody was illogical, and that when Elinor had some one to go with she thought herself justified at her age in this little indulgence. Neither Elinor nor John objected to the arrangement. There are things that can be said in a walk while both parties are in motion, and when it is not necessary to face each other and to be subjected each to the other's examina-

tion of feature and expression. It is easier in this way to say many things, to ask questions which might be embarrassing, to receive the fire of an examination which it might be otherwise difficult to meet. Thus the two had not walked above half the way to church, which was on the other edge of the combe, and stood, a lovely old place—but not the trim and restored and well-decorated edifice it is nowadays—tinkling its little bells into the sweet moorland air, amid such a hum of innumerable bees as seemed to make the very sunshine a vehicle for sound—before John began to perceive that he was being ingeniously driven to revelations which he had never intended, by a process for which he was not at all prepared. She who had been so indignant last night and determined not to allow a word to be said against the immaculate honour of the man she loved, was now—was it possible?—straining all her faculties to obtain from him, whom she would not permit to be Phil Compton's judge, such unguarded admissions as would enlighten her as to what Phil Compton was accused of. It was some time before John perceived her aim; he did not even grasp the idea at first that this girl whose whole heart was set upon marrying Phil

Compton, and defying for his sake every prophecy of evil and all the teachings of prudence, did not indeed at all know what it was which Phil had been supposed to have done. Had she been a girl in society she could scarcely have avoided some glimmerings of knowledge. She would have heard an unguarded word here and there, a broken phrase, an expression of scorn or dislike, she might even have heard that most unforgettable of nicknames, the dis-Honourable Phil. But Elinor, who was not in society, heard none of these things. She had been warned in the first fervour of her betrothal that he was not a man she ought to marry, but why? nobody had told her; how was she to know?

'You don't like Lady Mariamne, John?'

'It matters very little whether I like her or not: we don't meet once in a year.'

'It will matter if you are to be in a kind of way connected. What has she ever done that you shouldn't like her? She is very nice at home; she has three nice little children. It's quite pretty to see her with them.'

'Ah, I daresay; it's pretty to see a tiger with her cubs, I don't doubt.'

'What do you mean, John? What has she ever done?'

'I cannot tell you, Elinor; nothing perhaps. She does not take my fancy: that's all.'

'That's not all; you could never be so unjust and so absurd. How dreadful you good people are! Pretending to mean kindness,' she cried, 'you put the mark of your dislike upon people, and then you won't say why. What have *they* done?'

It was this 'they' that put John upon his guard. Hitherto she had only been asking about the sister, who did not matter so very much. If a man was to be judged by his sister! but 'they' gave him a new light.

'Can't you understand, Elinor,' he said, 'that without doing anything that can be built upon, a woman may set herself in a position of enmity to the world, her hand against every one, and every one's hand against her?'

'I know that well enough—generally because she does not comply with every conventional rule, but does and thinks what commends itself to her; I do that myself—so far as I can with mamma behind me.'

'You! the question has nothing to do with you.'

'Why not with me as much as with another of my family?' said Elinor, throwing back her head.

He turned round upon her with something like a snort of indignation: she to be compared —but Elinor met his eyes with scornful composure and defiance, and John was obliged to calm himself. 'There's no analogy,' he said; 'Lady Mariamne is an old campaigner. She's up to everything. Besides, a sister-in-law—if it comes to that—is not a very near relation. No one will judge you by her.' He would not be led into any discussion of the other, whose name, alas! Elinor intended to bear.

'If it comes to that! Perhaps you think,' said Elinor, with a smile of fine scorn, 'that you will prevent it ever coming to that?'

'Oh no,' he said, 'I'm very humble; I don't think much of my own powers in that way: nothing that I can do will affect it, if Providence doesn't take it in hand.'

'You really think it's a big enough thing to invoke Providence about?'

'If Providence looks after the sparrows as we are told,' said John, 'it certainly may be expected to step in to save a nice girl like you, Nelly,

from—from connections you'll soon get to hate —and—and a shady man.'

She turned upon him with sparkling eyes in a sudden blaze of indignation. 'How dare you! how dare you!'

'I dare a great deal more than that to save you. You must hear me, Nelly: they're all badly spoken of, not one but all. They are a shady lot—excuse a man's way of talking. I don't know what other words to use—partly from misfortune but more from ——Nelly, Nelly, how could you, a high-minded, well-brought-up girl like you, tolerate that?'

She turned upon him again, breathing hard with restrained rage and desperation; evidently she was at a loss for words to convey her indignant wrath: and at last in sheer inability to express the vehemence of her feelings she fastened on one word and repeated 'well-brought-up!' in accents of scorn.

'Yes,' said John, 'my aunt and you may not always understand each other, but she's proved her case to every fair mind by yourself, Elinor. A girl could not be better brought up than you've been: and you could not put up with it, not unless you changed your nature as well as your name.'

'With what?' she said, 'with what?' They had gone up and down the sloping sides of the combe, through the rustling copse, sometimes where there was a path, sometimes where there was none, treading over the big bushes of ling and the bell-heather, all bursting into bloom, past groups of primeval firs and seedling beeches, self-sown, over little hillocks and hollows formed of rocks or big old roots of trees covered with the close glittering green foliage and dark blue clusters of the dewberry, with the hum of bees filling the air, the twittering of the birds, the sound of the church bells—nothing more like the heart of summer, more peaceful, genial, happy than that brooding calm of nature amid all the harmonious sounds, could be.

But as Elinor put this impatient question, her countenance all ablaze with anger and vehemence and resolution, yet with a gleam of anxiety in the puckers of her forehead and the eyes which shone from beneath them, they stepped out upon the road by which other groups were passing, all bound towards the centre of the church and its tinkling bells. Elinor stopped, and drew a long panting breath, and gave him a look of fierce reproach, as if this too were his fault: and then

she smoothed her ruffled plumes, after the manner of women, and replied to the Sunday-morning salutations with the smiles and nods of use and wont. She knew everybody, both the rich and the poor, or rather I should say the well-off and the less-well-off, for there were neither rich nor poor, formally speaking, on Windyhill. John did not find it so easy to put his emotions in his pocket. He cast an admiring glance upon her as with heightened colour and a little panting of the breath, but no other sign of disturbance, she made her inquiries after this one's mother and that one's child. It was wonderful to him to see how the storm was got under in a moment. An occasional glance aside at himself from the corner of her eye, a sort of dart of defiance as if to bid him remember that she was not done with him, was shot at John from time to time over the heads of the innocent country people in whom she pretended to be so much interested. Pretended!—was it pretence, or was the one as real as the other? He heard her promising to come to-morrow to see an invalid, to send certain articles as soon as she got home, to look up certain books. Would she do so? or was all this a mere veil to cover the other which engaged all her soul?

And then there came the service—that soothing routine of familiar prayers, which the lips of men and women absorbed in the violence and urgency of life murmur over almost without knowing, with now and then an awakening to something that touches their own aspirations, to something that offers or that asks for help. 'Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God.' That seems to the careless soul such a *non sequitur*, as if peace was asked for, only because there was none other to fight; but to the man heavily laden, what a cry out of the depths! Because there is none other —all resources gone, all possibilities: but one that fighteth for us, standing fast, always the champion of the perplexed, the overborne, the weak. John was a little careless in this respect, as so many young men are. He thought most of the music when he joined the fashionable throng in the Temple Church. But there was no music to speak of at Windyhill. There was more sound of the bees outside and the birds and the sighing bass of the fir-trees than of anything more carefully concerted. The organ was played with a curious drone in it, almost like that of the primitive bagpipe. But there was that

one phrase, a strong strain of human appeal, enough to lift the world, nay, to let itself go straight to the blue heavens: 'Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God.'

Mr. Hudson preached his little sermon like a discord in the midst. What should he have preached it for, that little sermon, which was only composed because he could not help himself, which was about nothing in heaven or earth? John gave it a sort of partial attention because he could not help it, partly in wonder to think how a sensible man like Mr. Hudson could account to himself for such a strange little interruption of the natural sequence of high human emotion. What theory had he in his mind? This was a question John was fond of putting to himself, with perhaps an idea peculiar to a lawyer, that every man must be thinking what he is about, and be able to produce a clear reason, and, as it were, some theory of the meaning of his own actions—which everybody must know is nonsense. For the Rector of course preached just because it was in his day's work, and the people would have been much surprised, though possibly much relieved, had he

not done so—feeling that to listen was in the day's work too, and to be gone through doggedly as a duty. John thought how much better it would be to have some man who could preach now and then when he had something to say, instead of troubling the Rector, who, good man, had nothing. But it is not to be supposed that he was thinking this consecutively while the morning went on. It flitted through his mind from time to time among his many thinkings about the Compton family and Elinor; poor Nelly, standing upon the edge of that precipice and the helplessness of every one to save her, and the great refrain like the peal of an organ going through everything, 'None other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God.' Surely, surely to prevent this sacrifice He would interfere.

She turned to him the moment they were out of the church doors with that same look of eager defiance yet demand, and as soon as they left the road, the first step into the copse, putting out her hand to call his attention: 'You said I could not put up with it, a girl so well-brought-up as I am. What is it a well-brought-up girl can't put up with? A disorderly house, late

hours, and so forth, hateful to the well-brought-up? What is it, what is it, John?'

'Have you been thinking of that all through the morning prayers?' he said.

'Yes, I have been thinking about it. What did you expect me to think about? Is there anything else so important? Mr. Hudson's sermon, perhaps, which I have heard before, which I suppose *you* listened to,' she said, with a troubled laugh.

'I did a little, wondering how a good man like that could go on doing it; and there were other things——' John did not like to say what it was which was still throbbing through the air to him, and through his own being.

'Nothing that is of so much moment to me: come back, John, to the well-brought-up girl.'

'You think that's a poor sort of description, Elinor; so it is. You are of course a great deal more than that. Still, it's what one can turn to most easily. You don't know what life is in a sort of fast house, where there is nothing thought of but amusement—or where it's a constant round of race meetings, yachting, steeplechases—I don't know if men still ride steeplechases—I mean that sort of thing: Monte Carlo in the winter; betting all the year round—if not on one thing then on

another: expedients to raise money, for money's always wanted. You don't know—how can you know?—what goes on in a fast life.'

'Don't you see, John,' she cried eagerly, 'that all that, if put in a different way not to their prejudice, if put in the right way would sound delightful? There is no harm in these things at all. Betting's not a sin in the Bible any more than races are. Don't you see it's only the abuse of them that's wrong? One might ruin one's health, I believe, with tea, which is the most righteous thing! I should like above all things a yacht, say in the Mediterranean, and to go to Monte Carlo, which is a beautiful place, and where there is the best music in the world, besides the gambling. I should like even to see the gambling once in a way, for the fun of the thing. You don't frighten me at all. I have been a fortnight at Lady Mariamne's, and the continual "go" was delightful, there was never a dull moment. As for expedients to raise money, *there*——'

'To be sure—old Prestwich is as rich as Crœsus—or was,' said John, with significance, 'but you are not going to live with Lady Mariamne, I suppose.'

'Oh, John!' she cried, 'oh, John!' suddenly

seizing him by the arm, clasping her hands on it in the pretty way of earnestness she had, though one hand held her parasol, which was inconvenient. The soft face was suffused with rosy colour, so different from the angry red, the flush of love and tenderness—her eyes swam in liquid light, looking up with mingled happiness and entreaty to John's face. 'Fancy what he says, that he will not object to come here for half the year to let me be with my mother! Remember what he is, a man of fashion, and fond of the world, and of going out, and all that. He has consented to come, nay, he almost offered to come for six months in the year to be with mamma.'

'Good heavens,' cried John to himself, 'he must indeed be down on his luck!' but what he said was, 'Does your mother know of this, Elinor?'

'I have not told her yet. I have reserved it to hear first what you had to say: and so far as I can make out you have nothing at all to say, only general things, disapproval in the general. What should you say if I told you that he disapproves too? He said himself that there had been too much of all that—that he had backed

something—isn't that what you say?—backed it at odds, and stood to win what he calls a pot of money. But after that was decided—for he said he could not be off bets that were made—never any more. Now that I know you have nothing more to say, my heart is free, and I can tell you. He has never really liked that sort of life, but was led into it when he was very young. And now as soon as—we are together, you know'—she looked so bright, so sweet in the happiness of her love, that John could have flung her from his arm, and felt that she insulted him by that clinging hold—'he means to turn entirely to serious things, and to go into politics, John.'

'Oh, he is going into politics!'

'Of course, on the people's side—to do everything for them—Home Rule, and all that is best: to see that they are heard in Parliament, and have their wants attended to, instead of jobs and corruption everywhere. So you will see, John, that if he has been fast, and gone a little too far, and been very much mixed up in the Turf, and all that, it was only in the exuberance of youth, liking the fun of it, as I feel I should myself. But that now, now all that

is to be changed when he steps into settled, responsible life. I should not have told you if you had repeated the lies that people say. But as you did not, but only found fault with him for being fast——'

'Then you have heard—what people say?' He shifted his arm a little, so that she instinctively perceived that the affectionate clasp of her hands was no longer agreeable to him, and his face seemed suddenly to have become a blank page, absolutely devoid of all expression. He kicked vigorously at one of the hillocks he had stumbled against, as if he thought he could dislodge it and get it out of his way.

'Mariamne told me there was a lot of lies—that people said—I am so glad, John, oh! so thankful, that you have not repeated any of them; for now I can feel you are my own good John, as you always were, not a slanderer of any one, and we can go on being fond of each other like brother and sister. I have told him you have been the best of brothers to me.'

'Oh,' said John, without a sign of wonder or admiration in him, with a dead blank in his face.

'And what do you think he said? "Then I know he must be a capital fellow, Ne——"'

'Not Nelly,' said poor John, with a foolish pang that seemed to rend his heart. Oh, if that scamp, that cheat, that low betting card-playing rascal were but here! he would capital-fellow him. To take not herself only, but the dear pet name that she had said was only John's——

'He says Nell sometimes, John. Oh, not Nelly—Nelly is for you only. I would never let him call me that. But they are all for short names, one syllable—he is Phil, and Mariamne, well at home they call her Jew—horrible, isn't it?—because she was called after some Jewess; but somehow it seems queer when you see her, so fair and frizzy, like anything but a Jew.'

'So I have got one letter to myself,' said John. 'I don't know that I think that worth very much, however. And so far as I can see, you seem to think everything very fine—the bets, perhaps, and the rows and all.'

'Well, they are, you know,' said Elinor, with a laugh, 'to a little country mouse like me that has never seen anything. There is always something going on, and their slang way of speaking is certainly very amusing if it is not at all dignified, and they have such droll ways of looking at things. All so entirely different!

Don't you know, John, sometimes in one's life one longs for something to be quite different. A complete change, anything new.'

'If that is what you long for, no doubt you will get it, Elinor.'

'Well!' she cried, 'I have had the other for three-and-twenty years, long enough to have exhausted it, don't you think? but I don't mean to throw it over, oh, no! Coming back to mamma makes the arrangement perfect. Probably in the end it is the old life, the life I was brought up in, that I shall like best in the long run. That is one thing of being well brought up. Phil will laugh till he cries when I tell him of your description of me as a well-brought-up girl.'

John set his teeth as he walked or rather stumbled along by her side, catching in the roots of the trees as he had never done before, and swearing under his breath. Her flutter of talk running on delighted, full of laughter and softness, as if he had fully declared his satisfaction and was interested in every detail, kept John in a state of suppressed fury which made his countenance dark, and almost took the sight from his eyes. He did not know how to escape from that false position, nor did she give him time, she

had so much to say. Mrs. Dennistoun looked anxiously at the pair as they came up through the copse to the level of the cottage. There were no enclosures in that primitive place. From the copse you came straight into the garden with its banks of flowers. She was seated near the cottage door in a corner sheltered from the sun, with a number of books about her. But I don't think she had read anything except some portions of the lessons in the morning service. She had been sitting with her eyes vaguely fixed upon the horizon and her hands clasped in her lap, and a heavy shadow like an overhanging cloud upon her mind. But when she heard Elinor's voice approaching so gay and tuneful her heart rose a little. John evidently could have had nothing very bad to say. Elinor had been satisfied with the morning. Mrs. Dennistoun had expected to see them come back estranged and silent. The conclusion she drew was entirely satisfactory. After all John must have been moved solely by general disapproval, which is so very different from the dreadful hints and warnings that might mean any criminality. Elinor was talking to him as freely as she had done before this spectre rose. It must, Mrs. Dennistoun concluded, be all right.

It was not till he was going away that she had an opportunity of talking with him alone. Her satisfaction, it must be allowed, had been a little subdued by John's demeanour during the afternoon and evening. But Mrs. Dennistoun had said to herself that there might be other ways of accounting for this. She had long had a fancy that John was more interested in Elinor than he had confessed himself to be. It had been her conviction that as soon as he felt it warrantable, as soon as he was sufficiently well-established, and his practice secured, he would probably declare himself, with, she feared, no particular issue so far as Elinor was concerned. And perhaps he was disappointed, poor fellow, which was a very natural explanation of his glum looks. But at breakfast on Monday Elinor announced her intention of driving her cousin to the station, and went out to see that the pony was harnessed, an operation which took some time, for the pony was out in the field and had to be caught, and the man of all work, who had a hundred affairs to look after, had to be caught too to perform this duty; which sometimes, however, Elinor performed herself, but always with some expenditure of time. Mrs. Dennistoun

seized the opportunity, plunging at once into the all-important subject.

'You seemed to get on all right together yesterday, John, so I suppose you found that after all there was not very much to say.'

'I was not allowed to say——anything. You mean——'

'Oh, John, John, do you mean to tell me after all——'

'Aunt Ellen,' he said, 'stop it if you can; if there is any means in the world by which you can stop it, do so. I can't bring accusations against the man, for I couldn't prove them. I only know what everybody knows. He is not a man fit for Elinor to marry. He is not fit to touch the tie of her shoe.'

'Oh, don't trouble me with your superlatives, John. Elinor is a good girl and a clever girl, but not a lady of romance. Is there anything really against him? Tell me for goodness' sake! Even with these few words you have made me very unhappy,' Mrs. Dennistoun said in a half resentful tone.

'I can't help it,' said the unfortunate man, 'I can't bring accusations, as I tell you. He is simply a scamp—that is all I know.'

'A scamp!' said Mrs. Dennistoun, with a look of alarm. 'But then that is a word that has so many meanings. A scamp may be only a careless fellow, nice in his way. That is not enough to break off a marriage for. And, John, as you have said so much, you must say more.'

'I have no more to say, that's all I know. Inquire what the Hudsons have heard. Stop it if you can.'

'Oh dear, dear, here is Elinor back already,' Mrs. Dennistoun said.

CHAPTER V.

THE next time that John's presence was required at the cottage was for the signing of the very simple settlements; which, as there was nothing or next to nothing in the power of the man to settle upon his wife, were easy enough. He met Mr. Lynch, who was Mrs. Dennistoun's 'man of business,' and a sharp London solicitor, who was for the husband. Elinor's fortune was five thousand pounds, no more, not counting her expectations from him, which were left out of the question. It was a very small matter altogether, and one which the smart solicitor who was in Mr. Compton's interest spoke of with a certain contempt, as who should say he was not in the habit of being disturbed and brought to the country for any such trifle. It was now August — not a time when any man was sup-

posed to be available for matters like these. Mr. Lynch was just about starting for his annual holiday, but came, at no small personal inconvenience, to do his duty by the poor girl whom he had known all his life. John and he travelled to the cottage together, and their aspect was not cheerful. 'Did you ever hear,' said Mr. Lynch, 'such a piece of folly as this—a man with no character at all? 'This is what it is to leave a girl in the sole care of her mother. What does a woman know about such things?'

'I don't think it was her mother's fault,' said John, anxious to do justice all round. 'Elinor is very headstrong, and when she has made up her mind to a thing——'

'A bit of a girl!' said Mr. Lynch, contemptuously. He was an old bachelor and knew nothing about the subject, as the reader will perceive. 'Her mother ought never to have permitted it for a moment. She should have put down her foot: and then Miss Elinor would soon have come to reason. What I wonder is the ruffian's own motives? for it can't be a little bit of money like that. Five thousand's a mere mouthful to such a man as he is. He'll get rid of it all in a week.'

'It must be tied up as tight as possible,' said John.

Here Mr. Lynch faltered a little. 'She has got an idea into her head, with the intention, I don't doubt, of defrauding herself if she can. He has got some investment for it, it appears. He is on the board of some company—a pretty board to take in such a fellow! But the Honourable is always something, I suppose.'

John did not say the *dis*-Honourable, though it trembled on the edge of his tongue. 'But you will not permit that?' he said.

'No, no; we will not permit it,' said Mr. Lynch, with an emphasis on the negative which sounded like failing resolution.

'That would be giving the lamb to the wolf with a vengeance.'

'Exactly what I said; exactly what I said. I am very glad, Mr. Tatham, that you take the same view.'

'There is but one view to be taken,' said John. 'He must not have the slightest power over her money. It must be tied up as tight as the law can do it; not that I think it of the least consequence,' he added. 'Of course, he will get it all from her one way or another. Law's but a poor barrier against a determined man.'

'I'm glad you see that too,' said Mr. Lynch, 'and you might say a determined woman: for she has set her mind on this, and we'll have a nice business with her, I can see.'

'A bit of a girl!' said John, with a laugh, echoing the previous sentiment.

'That's very true,' said the old lawyer; 'and still I think her mother—but I don't put any great confidence in my own power to resist Elinor. Poor little thing, I've known her since she was *that* high; indeed, I may say I knew her before she was born. And you are a relation, Mr. Tatham?'

'Third or fourth cousin.'

'But still, more intimate than a person unconnected with them, and able to speak your mind more freely. I wonder now that you never said anything. But in family matters sometimes one is very reluctant to interfere.'

'I said everything I could say, not to offend them mortally: but I could only tell them the common talk of society. I told my aunt he was a scamp: but after the first shock I am not sure that she thought that was any such bad thing. It depended upon the sense you put upon the word, she said.'

'Oh, women, women!' said Mr. Lynch. 'That's their way—a reformed rake makes the best husband. It's an old-fashioned sentiment, but it's in the background of their minds, a sort of tradition that they can't shake off—or else the poor fellow has had so many disadvantages, and they think they can make it all right. It's partly ignorance and partly vanity. But they are all the same, and their ways in the matter of marriage are not to be made out.'

'You have a great deal of experience.'

'Experience—oh, don't speak of it!' said the old gentleman. 'A man has a certain idea of the value of money, however great a fool he may be, but the women——'

'And yet they are said to stick to money, and to be respectful of it beyond anything but a miser. I have myself remarked——'

'In small matters,' said Mr. Lynch, 'in detail —sixpences to railway porters and that sort of thing—so people say at least. But a sum of money on paper has no effect on a woman, she will sign it away with a wave of her hand. It doesn't touch their imagination. Five pounds in her pocket is far more than five thousand on paper, to Elinor, for instance. I wish,' cried the

old gentleman, with a little spitefulness, 'that this Married Women's Property Bill would push on and get itself made law. It would save us a great deal of trouble, and perhaps convince the world at the last how little able they are to be trusted with property. A nice mess they will make of it, and plenty of employment for young solicitors,' he said, rubbing his hands.

For this was before that important bill was passed, which has not had (like so many other bills) the disastrous consequences which Mr. Lynch foresaw.

They were met at the station by the pony-carriage, and at the door by Elinor herself, who came flying out to meet them. She seized Mr. Lynch by both arms, for he was a little old man, and she was bigger than he was.

'Now you will remember what I said,' she cried in his ear, yet not so low but that John heard it too.

'You are a little witch; you mustn't insist upon anything so foolish. Leave all that to me, my dear,' said Mr. Lynch. 'What do you know about business? You must leave it to me and the other gentleman, who I suppose is here, or coming.'

'He is here, but I don't care for him. I care only for you. There are such advantages: and I do know a great deal about business: and,' she said, with her mouth close to the old lawyer's ear, 'it will please Phil so much if I show my confidence in him, and in the things with which he has to do.'

'It will not please him so much if the thing bursts, and you are left without a penny, my dear.'

Elinor laughed. 'I don't suppose he will mind a bit: he cares nothing for money. But I do,' she said. 'You know you always say women love acquisition. I want good interest, and of course with Phil on it, it must be safe for me.'

'Oh, that makes it like the Bank of England, you think! but I don't share your confidence, my pretty Elinor. I'm an old fellow. No Phil in the world has any charm for me. You must trust me to do what I feel is best for you. And Mr. Tatham here is quite of my opinion.'

'Oh, John! he is sure to be against me,' said Elinor, with an angry glimmer in her eyes. She had not as yet taken any notice of him while she welcomed with such warmth his old companion. And John had stood by offering no

greeting, with his bag in his hand. But when she said this the quick-feeling girl was seized with compunction. She turned from Mr. Lynch and held out both her hands to her cousin. 'John, I didn't mean that; it is only that I am excited and cross. And don't, oh, don't go against me,' she cried.

'I never did, and never will, Elinor,' he said gravely. Then he asked, after a moment, 'Is Mr. Compton here?'

'No; how could he be here? Three gentlemen in the cottage is enough to overwhelm us already. Mr. Sharp fortunately can't stay,' she added, lowering her voice; 'he has to be driven back to the station to catch the last express. And it is August,' she said with a laugh; 'you forget, the 15th. Now, could Phil be anywhere but where there is grouse? You shall have some to dinner to-night that fell by his gun. That should mollify you, for I am sure you never got grouse at the cottage before in August. Mamma would as soon think of buying manna for you to eat.'

'I think it would have been more respectful, Elinor, if he had been here. What is grouse to you?'

'Then I don't think anything of the kind,' cried Elinor. 'He is much better away. And I assure you, John, I never mean to put myself in competition with the grouse.'

The old lawyer had gone into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Dennistoun was holding parley with Mr. Sharp. Elinor and John were standing alone in the half light of the summer evening, the sun down, the depths of the combe below falling into faint mist, but the sunset-tinted clouds still floating like a vapour made of roses upon the clearness of the blue above. 'Come and take a turn through the copse,' said John. 'They don't want either of us indoors.'

She went with a momentary reluctance and a glance back at the bow-window of the drawing-room, from which the sound of voices issued. 'Don't you think I should be there to keep them up to the mark?' she said, half laughing. And then, 'Well, yes—as you are going to Switzerland too. I think you might have stayed and seen me married after all, and made acquaintance with Phil.'

'I thought I should have met him here to-day, Elinor.'

'Now, how could you? You know the accom-

modation of the Cottage just as well as I do. We have two spare rooms, and no more.'

'You could have sent me out somewhere to sleep. That has been done before now.'

'Oh, John, how persistent you are, and worrying! When I tell you that Phil is shooting, as everybody of his kind is—do you think I want him to give up all the habits of his life? He is not like us: we adapt ourselves: but these people parcel out their time as if they were in a trade, don't you know? So long in London, so long abroad, and in the Highlands for the grouse, and somewhere else for the partridges, or they would die.'

'I think he might have departed from that routine once in a way, Elinor, for you.'

'I tell you again, John, I shall never put myself in competition'—Elinor stopped abruptly, with perhaps, he thought, a little glimmer of indignation in her eyes. 'I hate women who do that sort of thing,' she cried. 'Give up your cigar—or me, as I've heard girls say. Such an unworthy thing! When one accepts a man one accepts him as he stands, with all his habits. What should I think of him if he said, Give up your tea—or me! I should laugh in his face and throw him overboard without a pause.'

'You would never look at tea again as long as you lived if he did not like it: I suppose that is what you mean, Elinor?'

'Perhaps, if I found that out, afterwards; but to be given the choice beforehand, never! After all, you don't half know me, John.'

'Perhaps not,' he said gravely. They had left the garden behind in its blaze of flowers, and strayed off into the subdued twilight of the copse, where everything was in a half tone of greenness and shadow and waning light. 'There are always new lights arising on a many-sided creature like you—and that makes one think. Do you know you are not at all the person to take a great disappointment quietly, if that should happen to come to you in your life?'

'A great disappointment?' she said, looking up at him with a wondering glance. Then he thought the colour paled a little in her face. 'No,' she said, 'I don't suppose I should take it quietly. Who does?'

'Oh, many people—people with less determination and more patience than you. You are not very patient by nature, Elinor.'

'I never said I was.'

'And though no one would give up more

generously, as a voluntary matter, you could not bear being made a nonentity of, or put in a secondary place.'

'I should not like it, I suppose.'

'You would give everything, flinging it away; but to have all your sacrifices taken for granted, your tastes made of no account ——'

There was no doubt now that she had grown pale. 'May I ask what all these investigations into my character mean? I never was so anatomised before.'

'It was only to say that you are not a good subject for this kind of experiment, Elinor. I don't see you putting up with things, making the best of everything, submitting to have your sense of right and wrong outraged perhaps. Some women would not be much disturbed by that. They would put off the responsibility and feel it their duty to accept whatever was put before them. But you—it would be a different matter with you.'

'I should hope so, if I was ever exposed to such dangers. But now may I know what you are driving at, John, for you have some meaning in what you say?'

He took her hand and drew it through his arm.

He was more moved than he wished to show. 'Only this, Elinor'—he said.

'Oh, John, will you never call me Nelly any more?'

'Only this, Nelly, my little Nelly, never mine again—and that never was mine, except in my silly thought. Only this: that if you have the least doubt, the smallest flutter of an uncertainty, just enough to make you hold your breath for a moment, oh, my dear girl, stop! Don't go on with it; pause until you can make sure.'

'John!' she forced her arm from his with an indignant movement. 'Oh, how do you dare to say it?' she said. 'Doubt of Mr. Compton! Uncertainty about Phil!' She laughed out, and the echo seemed to ring into all the recesses of the trees. 'I would be much more ready to doubt myself,' she said.

'Doubt yourself; that is what I mean. Think if you are not deceiving yourself. I don't think you are so very sure as you believe you are, Nelly. You don't feel so certain ——'

'Do you know that you are insulting me, John? You say as much as that I am a fool carried away by a momentary enthusiasm, with no real love, no true feeling in me, tempted,

perhaps, as Mrs. Hudson thinks, by the Honourable!' Her lip quivered, and the fading colour came back in a rush to her face. 'It is hard enough to have a woman like that think it, who ought to know better, who has always known me —but you, John!'

'You may be sure, Elinor, that I did not put it on that ground.'

'No, perhaps: but on ground not much more respectful to me—perhaps that I have been fascinated by a handsome man, which is not considered derogatory. Oh, John, a girl does not give herself away on an argument like that. I may be hasty and self-willed and impatient, as you say; but when you—love!' Her face flushed like a rose, so that even in the grey of the evening it shone out like one of the clouds full of sunset that still lingered on the sky. A few quick tears followed, the natural consequence of her emotion. And then she turned to him with the ineffable condescension of one farther advanced in life stooping sweetly to his ignorance. 'You have not yet come to the moment in your experience when you can understand that, dear John.'

Oh, the insight and the ignorance, the knowledge and the absence of all perception! He, too,

laughed out, as she had done, with a sense of the intolerable ridicule and folly and mistake. 'Perhaps that's how it is,' he said.

Elinor looked at him gravely, in an elder-sisterly, profoundly-investigating way, and then she took his arm quietly and turned towards home. 'I shall forget what you have said, and you will forget that you ever said it; and now we will go home, John, and be just the same dear friends as before.'

'Will you promise me,' he said, 'that whatever happens, without pride, or recollection of what I've been so foolish as to say, in any need or emergency, or whenever you want anything, or if you should be in trouble—trouble comes to everybody in this life—you will remember what you have said just now, and send for your cousin John?'

Her whole face beamed out in one smile, she clasped her other hand round his arm: 'I should have done it without being asked, without ever doubting for a moment, because it was the most natural thing in the world. Whom should I turn to else if not to my dear old—— But call me Nelly, John.'

'Dear little Nelly!' he said with a faltering voice, 'then that is a bargain.'

She held up her cheek to him, and he kissed it solemnly in the shadow of the little young oak that fluttered its leaves wistfully in the breeze that was getting up—and then very soberly, saying little, they walked back to the cottage. He was going abroad for his vacation, not saying to himself even that he preferred not to be present at the wedding, but resigning himself to the necessity, for it was not to be till the middle of September, and it would be breaking up his holiday had he to come back at that time. So this little interview was a leave-taking as well as a solemn engagement for all the risks and dangers of life. The pain in it, after that very sharp moment in the copse, was softened down into a sadness not unsweet, as they came silently together from out of the shadow into the quiet hemisphere of sky and space, which was over the little centre of the cottage with its human glimmer of fire and lights. The sky was unusually clear, and among those soft, rose-tinted clouds of the sunset, which were no clouds at all, had risen a young crescent of a moon, just about to disappear, too, in the short course of one of her earliest nights. They lingered for a moment before they went indoors. The depth of the combe was filled with the

growing darkness, but the ridges above were still light and softly edged with the silver of the moon, and the distant road, like a long, white line, came conspicuously into sight, winding for a little way along the hill-top unsheltered, before it plunged into the shadow of the trees—the road that led into the world, by which they should both depart presently to stray into such different ways.

CHAPTER VI.

THE drawing-room after dinner always looked cheerful. Perhaps the fact that it was a sort of little oasis in the desert, and that the light from those windows shone into three counties, made the interior more cosy and bright. (There are houses now upon every knoll, and the wind cannot blow on Windyhill for the quantity of obstructions it meets with.) There was the usual log burning on the hearth, and the party in general kept away from it, for the night was warm. Only Mr. Sharp, the London lawyer, was equal to bearing the heat. He stood with his back to it, and his long legs showing against the glow behind, a sharp-nosed, long man in black, who had immediately suggested Mephistopheles to Elinor, even though he was on the Compton side. He had taken his coffee after dinner, and

now he stood over the fire slowly sipping a cup of tea. There was a look of acquisitiveness about him which suggested an inclination to appropriate anything from the unnecessary heat of the fire to the equally unnecessary tea. But Mr. Sharp had been on the winning side. He had demonstrated the superior sense of making the money—which was not a large enough sum to settle—of real use to the young pair by an investment which would increase Mr. Compton's importance in his company, besides producing very good dividends—much better dividends than would be possible if it were treated in the old-fashioned way by trustees. This was how the bride wished it, which was the most telling of arguments; and surely, to insure good interest and an increase of capital to her, through her husband's hands, was better than to secure some beggarly hundred and fifty pounds a year for her portion, though without any risks at all.

Mr. Sharp had also taken great pains to point out that there were only three brothers—one an invalid and the other two soldiers—between Mr. Phil and the title, and that even to be the Honourable Mrs. Compton was something for a young lady, who was, if he might venture to

say so, nobody—not to say a word against her charms. Lord St. Serf was hourly getting an old man, and the chances that his client might step over a hecatomb of dead relations to the height of fortune was a thing quite worth taking into account. It was a much better argument, however, to return to the analogy of other poor young people, where the bride's little fortune would be put into the husband's business, and thus their joint advantage considered. Mr. Sharp, at the same time, did not hesitate to express politely his opinion that to call him down to the country for a discussion which could have been carried on much better in one or other of their respective offices was a most uncalled-for proceeding, especially as even now the other side was wavering, and would not consent to conclude matters, and make the signatures that were necessary at once. Mr. Lynch, it must be allowed, was of the same opinion too.

'Your country is a little bleak at night,' said Mr. Sharp, partially mollified by a good dinner, but beginning to remember unpleasantly the cold drive in a rattletrap of a little rustic pony carriage over the hills and hollows. 'Do you really remain here all the year? How wonderful!

Not even a glimpse of the world in summer, or a little escape from the chills in winter? How brave of you! What patience and powers of endurance must be cultivated in that way!'

'One would think Windyhill was Siberia at least,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, laughing; 'we do not give ourselves credit for all these fine qualities.'

'Some people are heroes—or heroines—without knowing it,' said Mr. Sharp, with a bow.

'And yet,' said the mother, with a little indignation, 'there was some talk of Mr. Compton doing me the honour to share my hermitage for a part of the year.'

'Mr. Compton! my dear lady! Mr. Compton would die of it in a week,' said Mr. Sharp.

'I am quite well aware of it,' said Mrs. Dennistoun; and she added, after a pause, 'so should I.'

'What a change it will be for your daughter,' said Mr. Sharp. 'She will see everything that is worth seeing. More in a month than she would see here in a dozen years. Trust Mr. Compton for knowing all that's worth going after. They have all an instinct for life that is quite remarkable. There's Lady Mariamne, who has society at her feet, and the old lord is a most

remarkable old gentleman. Your daughter, Mrs. Dennistoun, is a very fortunate young lady. She has my best congratulations, I am sure.'

'Sharp,' said Mr. Lynch from the background, 'you had better be thinking of starting, if you want to catch that train.'

'I'll see if the pony is there,' said John.

Mr. Sharp put down his teacup with precipitation. 'Is it as late as that?' he cried.

'It is the last train,' said Mrs. Dennistoun with great satisfaction. 'And I am afraid, if you missed it, as the house is full, there would be nothing but a bed at the public-house to offer——'

'Oh, not another word,' the lawyer said: and fortunately he never knew how near that rising young man at the bar, John Tatham, who had every object in conciliating a solicitor, was to a charge of manslaughter, if killing an attorney can thus be called. But the feelings of the party were expressed only in actions of the greatest kindness. They helped him on with his coat, and covered him with rugs as he got in shivering to the little pony carriage. It was a beautiful night, but the wind is always a thing to be considered on Windyhill.

'Well, that's a good thing over,' said Mr.

Lynch, going to the fire as he came in from the night air at the door and rubbing his hands.

'It would have been a relief to one's feelings to have kicked that fellow all the way down and up the other side of the combe, and kept him warm,' said John with a laugh of wrath.

'It is a pity a man should have so little taste,' said Mrs. Dennistoun.

Elinor still stood where she had been standing, with every feeling in her breast in commotion. She had not taken any part in the insidious kindnesses of speeding the parting guest; and now she remembered that he was her Phil's representative: whatever she might herself think of the man, how could she join in abuse of one who represented Phil?

'He is no worse, I suppose, than others,' she said. 'He was bound to stand up for those in whose interest he was. Mr. Lynch would have made himself quite as disagreeable for me.'

'Not I,' said the old gentleman; 'for what is the good of standing up for you? You would throw me over on the first opportunity. You have taken all the force out of my sword-arm, my dear, as it is. How can I make myself disagreeable for those who won't stand up for

themselves? I suppose you must have it your own way.'

'Yes, I suppose it will be the best,' said Mrs. Dennistoun in subdued tones.

'It would come to about the same thing, however you settled it,' said John.

Elinor looked from one to another with eyes that began to glow. 'You are a cheerful company,' she said. 'You speak as if you were arranging my funeral. On the whole I think I like Mr. Sharp best; for if he was contemptuous of me and my little bit of money, he was at all events cheerful about the future, and that is always something; whereas you all——'

There was a little pause, no one responding. There was no pleasant jest, no bright augury for Elinor. The girl's heart rose against this gloom that surrounded her. 'I think,' she said, with an angry laugh, 'that I had better run after Mr. Sharp and bring him back, for he had at least a little sympathy with me!'

'Don't be too sure of that,' said Mr. Lynch, 'for if we think you are throwing yourself away, Elinor, so does he on his side. He thinks the Honourable Mr. Compton is going dreadfully cheap for five thousand pounds.'

'Elinor need not take any of us *au pied de la lettre*—of course we are all firm for our own side,' said John.

Elinor turned her head from one to another, growing pale and red by turns. There was a certain surprise in her look, as she found herself thus at bay. The triumph of having got the better of their opposition was lost in the sense of isolation with which the girl, so long the first object of everybody about her, felt herself thus placed alone. And the tears were very ready to start, but were kept back by jealous pride which rose to her help. Well! if they put her outside the circle she would remain so; if they talked to her as one no longer of them, but belonging to another life, so be it! Elinor determined that she would make no further appeal. She would not even show how much it hurt her. After that pale look round upon them all, she went into the corner of the room where the piano stood, and where there was little light. She was too proud to go out of the room, lest they should think she was going to cry. She went with a sudden, quick movement to the piano instead, where perhaps she might cry too, but where nobody should see. Poor Elinor!

they had made her feel alone by their words, and she made herself more alone by this little instinctive withdrawal. She began to play softly one thing after another. She was not a great performer. Her little 'tunes' were of the simplest—no better indeed than tunes, things that every musician despises: they made a little atmosphere round her, a voluntary hermitage which separated her as if she had been a hundred miles away.

'I wish you could have stayed for the marriage,' Mrs. Dennistoun said.

'My dear lady, it would spoil my holiday—the middle of September. You'll have nobody except, of course, the people you have always. To tell the truth,' John added, 'I don't care tuppence for my holiday. I'd have come—like a shot: but I don't think I could stand it. She has always been such a pet of mine. I don't think I could bear it, to tell the truth.'

'I shall have to bear it, though she is more than a pet of mine,' said Mrs. Dennistoun.

'I know, I know! the relatives cannot be let off—especially the mother, who must put up with everything. I trust,' said Mr. Lynch, with a sigh, 'that it may all turn out a great deal better

than we hope. Where are they going after the marriage?'

'Some one has lent them a place—a very pretty place—on the Thames, where they can have boating and all that—Lord Sudbury, I think. And later they are going on a round of visits, to his father, Lord St. Serf, and to Lady Mariamne, and to his aunt, who is Countess of —— something or other.' Mrs. Dennistoun's voice was not untouched by a certain vague pleasure in these fine names.

'Ah,' said the old lawyer, nodding his head at each, 'all among the aristocracy, I see. Well, my dear lady, I hope you will be able to find some satisfaction in that; it is better than to fall among—nobodies, at least.'

'I hope so,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, with a sigh.

They were speaking low, and fondly hoped that they were not heard; but Elinor's ears and every faculty were quickened and almost every word reached her. But she was too proud to take any notice. And perhaps these dreary anticipations, on the whole, did her good, for her heart rose against them, and any little possible doubts in her own mind were put to sudden flight by the opposition and determination which flooded her

heart. This made her playing a little more unsteady than usual, and she broke down several times in the middle of a 'tune'; but nobody remarked this; they were all fully occupied with their own thoughts.

All, at least, except John, who wandered uneasily about the room, now studying the names of the books on the bookshelves—which he knew by heart, now pulling the curtains aside to look out at the moonlight, now pulling at the fronds of the great maidenhair in his distraction till the table round was scattered with little broken leaves. He wanted to keep out of that atmosphere of emotion which surrounded Elinor at the piano. But it attracted him, all the same, as the light attracts a moth. To get away from that, to make the severance which so soon must be a perfect severance, was the only true policy he knew; for what was he to her, and what could she be to him? He had already said everything which a man in his position ought to say. He took out a book at last, and sat down doggedly by the table to read, thus making another circle of atmosphere, so to speak, another globe of isolated being in the little room, while the two elder people talked low in the centre, conventionally inaudible

to the girl who was playing and the young man who was reading. But John might as well have tried to solve some tremendous problem as to read that book. He too heard every word the elders were saying. He heard them with his own ears, and also he heard them through the ears of Elinor, gauging the effect which every word would have upon her. At last he could bear it no longer. He was driven to her side to bear a part of her burden, even to prevent her from hearing, which would be something. He resisted the impulse to throw down his book, and only placed it very quietly on the table, and even in a deliberate way, that there might be no appearance of feeling about him—and made his way by degrees, pausing now and then to look at a picture, though he knew them all by heart. Thus he arrived at last at the piano, in what he flattered himself was an accidental way.

'Elinor, the stars are so bright over the combe, do come out. It is not often they are so clear.'

'No,' she said, more with the movement of her lips than with any sound.

'Why not? You can't want to play all those old pieces just at this moment. You will have plenty of time to play them to-morrow.'

She said 'No' again, with a little impatient movement of her hands on the keys and a look towards the others.

'You are listening to what they are saying? Why should you? They don't want you to hear. Come along, Elinor. It's far better for you not to listen to what is not intended——'

'Oh, go away, John.'

'I must say no in my turn. Leave the tunes till to-morrow, and come out with me.'

'I thought,' she said, roused a little, 'that you were fond of music, John.'

This brought John up suddenly in an unexpected way. 'Oh, as for that,'—he said, in a dubious tone. Poor Elinor's tunes were not music in his sense, as she very well knew.

She laughed in a forlorn way. 'I know what you mean: but this is quite good enough for what I shall want. I am going down, you know, to a different level altogether. Oh, you can hear for yourself what mamma and Mr. Lynch are saying.'

'Going up you mean, Elinor. I thought them both very complaisant over all those titles.'

'Ah,' she said, 'they say that mocking. They think I am going down; so do you, too, to the

land of mere fast people, people with no sense. Well; there is nothing but the trial will teach any of us. We shall see.'

'It is rather a dreadful risk to run, if it's only a trial, Elinor.'

'A trial—for you, not for me—I am not the one that thinks so, except so far as the tunes are concerned,' she said with a laugh. 'I confess so far as that Lady Mariamne is fond of a comic song. I don't think she goes any further. I shall be good enough for them in the way of music.'

'I should be content never to hear another note of music all my life, Elinor, if——'

'Ah, there you begin again. Not you, John, not you! I can't bear any more. Neither stars, nor walks, nor listening; no more! This rather,' and she brought down her hands with a great crash upon the piano, making every one start. Then Elinor rose, having produced her effect. 'I think it must be time to go to bed, mamma. John is talking of the stars, which means that he wants his cigar, and Mr. Lynch must want just to look at the tray in the dining-room. And you are tired by all this fuss, all this unnatural fuss about me, that am not worth—— Come, mother, to bed.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE days in the Cottage were full of excitement and of occupation during the blazing August weather, not so much indeed as is common in many houses in which the expectant bridegroom is always coming and going: though perhaps the place of that exhilarating commotion was more or less filled by the ever-present diversity of opinion, the excitement of a subdued but never-ended conflict in which one was always on the defensive, and the other covertly or openly attacking, or at least believed to be so doing, the distant and unseen object to which all their thoughts turned. Mrs. Dennistoun, indeed, was not always aggressive, her opposition was but in fits and starts. Often her feelings of pain and alarm were quiescent in that unfeigned and salutary interest in clothes and necessities of preparation which is

almost always a resource to a woman's mind. It is wrong to undervalue this possibility which compensates a woman in a small degree for some of her special troubles. When the mother's heart was very heavy, it was often diverted a little by the discussion of a dinner dress, or made to forget itself for the moment in a question about the cut of a sleeve, or which would be most becoming to Elinor of two colours for a ball gown. But though Mrs. Dennistoun forgot often, Elinor never forgot. The dresses and 'things' generally occupied her a great deal, but not in the form of the anodyne which they supplied to her mother. Her mind was always on the alert, looking out for those flying arrows of warfare which your true fighter lets fly in the most innocent conversation at the most unexpected moments. Elinor thus flung her shield in her mother's face a hundred times when that poor lady was thinking no evil, when she was altogether occupied by the question of frills and laces, or whether tucks or flounces were best, and she was startled many times by that unnecessary rattle of Elinor's arms. 'I was not thinking of Mr. Compton,' she would sometimes be driven to say; 'he was not in my head at all. I was thinking of nothing more im-

portant than that walking dress, and what you had best wear in the afternoon when you are on those grand visits.'

There was one thing which occasioned a little discussion between them, and that was the necessary civility of asking the neighbours to inspect these 'things' when they were finally ready. It was only the argument that these neighbours would be Mrs. Dennistoun's sole resource when she was left alone that made Elinor assent at last. Perhaps, however, as she walked quickly along towards the moorland Rectory, a certain satisfaction in showing them how little their hints had been taken, mingled with the reluctance to admit those people who had breathed a doubt upon the sacred name of Phil, to such a sign of intimacy.

'I have been watching you along the side of the combe, and wondering if it was you such a threatening day,' said Alice Hudson, coming to the door to meet her. 'How nice of you to come, Elinor, when you must be so busy, and you have not been here since—I don't know how long ago!'

'No, I have not been here,' said Elinor, with a gravity worthy the bride of a maligned man.

'But the time is so near when I shall not be able to come at all that I thought it was best. Mamma wishes you to come over to-morrow if you will, to see my things.'

'Oh!' the three ladies said together; and Mrs. Hudson came forward and gave Elinor a kiss. 'My dear,' she said, 'I take it very kind you coming yourself to ask us. Many would not have done it after what we felt it our duty——But you always had a beautiful spirit, Elinor, bearing no malice, and I hope with all my heart that it will have its reward.'

'Well, mother,' said Alice, 'I don't see how Elinor could do anything less, seeing we have been such friends all our lives as girls, she and I, and I am sure I have always been ready to give her patterns, or to show her how a thing was done. I should have been very much disappointed if she had not asked me to see her things.'

Mary Dale, who was Mrs. Hudson's sister, said nothing at all, but accepted the visit as in the course of nature. Mary was the one who really knew something about Phil Compton; but she had been against the remonstrance which Mrs. Hudson thought it her duty to make. What was the good? Miss Dale had said; and

she had refrained from telling two or three stories about the Comptons which would have made the hair stand upright on the heads of the Rector and the Rectoress. She did not even now say that it was kind, but met Elinor in silence, as, in her position as the not important member of the family, it was quite becoming for her to do.

Then the Rector came in and took her by both hands, and gave her the most friendly greeting. 'I heard Elinor's voice, and I stopped in the middle of my sermon,' he said. 'You will remark in church on Sunday a jerky piece, which shows how I stopped to reflect whether it could be you—and then went on for another sentence, and then decided that it must be you. There is a big Elinor written across my sermon paper.' He laughed, but he was a little moved, to see, after the 'coolness,' the little girl whom he had christened come back to her old friends again.

'She has come to ask us to go and see her things, papa,' said Mrs. Hudson, twinkling an eye to get rid of a suspicion of a tear.

'Am I to come, too?' said the Rector; and thus the little incident of the reconciliation was got over, to the great content of all.

Elinor reflected to herself that they were really kind people, as she went out again into the grey afternoon where everything was getting up for rain. She made up her mind she would just have time to run into the Hills', at the Hurst, and leave her message, and so get home before the storm began. The clouds lay low like a dark grey hood over the fir-trees and moorland shaggy tops of the downs all round. There was not a break anywhere in the consistent grey, and the air, always so brisk, had fallen still with that ominous lull that comes over everything before a convulsion of nature. Some birds were still hurrying home into the depths of the copses with a frightened straightness of flight, as if they were afraid they would not get back in time, and all the insects that are so gay with their humming and booming had disappeared under leaves and stones and grasses. Elinor saw a bee burrowing deep in the waxen trumpet of a foxglove, as if taking shelter, as she walked quickly past. The Hills—there were two middle-aged sisters of them, with an old mother, too old for such diversion as the inspection of wedding-clothes, in the background—would scarcely let Elinor go out again after they had accepted her invitation with

rapture. 'I was just wondering where I should see the new fashions,' said Miss Hill, 'for though we are not going to be married we must begin to think about our winter things——' 'And this will be such an opportunity,' said Miss Susan, 'and so good of you to come yourself to ask us.'

'What has she come to ask you to,' said old Mrs. Hill; 'the wedding? I told you girls, I was sure you would not be left out. Why, I knew her mother before she was married. I have known them all, man and boy, for nearer sixty than fifty years—before her mother was born! To have left you out would have been ridiculous. Yes, yes, Elinor, my dear; tell your mother they will come—delighted! They have been thinking for the last fortnight what bonnets they would wear——'

'Oh, mother!' and 'Oh, Elinor!' said the 'girls,' 'you must not mind what mother says. We know very well that you must have worlds of people to ask. Don't think, among all your new connections, of such little country mice as us. We shall always just take the same interest in you, dear child, whether you find you can ask us or not.'

'But of course you are asked,' said Elinor, in *gaieté de cœur*, not reflecting that her mother had begun to be in despair about the number of people who could be entertained in the cottage dining-room, 'and you must not talk about my new grand connections, for nobody will ever be like my old friends.'

'Dear child!' they said, and 'I always knew that dear Elinor's heart was in the right place.' But it was all that Elinor could do to get free of their eager affection, and alarm lest she should be caught in the rain. Both of the ladies produced waterproofs, and one a large pair of goloshes to fortify her, when it was found that she would go; and they stood in the porch watching her as she went along into the darkening afternoon, without any of their covers and shelters. The Miss Hills were apt to cling together, after the manner of those pairs of sweet sisters in the 'Books of Beauty' which had been the delight of their youth; they stood, with arms intertwined, in their porch, watching Elinor as she hurried home, with her light half-flying step, like the belated birds. 'Did you hear what she said about old friends, poor little thing?' 'I wonder if she is finding out already that her new grand con-

nections are but vanity!' they said, shaking their heads. The middle-aged sisters looked out of the sheltered home, which perhaps they had not chosen for themselves, with a sort of wistful feeling, half pity, perhaps half envy, upon the 'poor little thing' who was running out so light-hearted into the storm. They had long ago retired into waterproofs and goloshes, and had much unwillingness to wet their feet—which things are a parable. They went back and closed the door only when the first flash of lightning dazzled them, and they remembered that an open door is dangerous during a thunderstorm.

Elinor quickened her pace as the storm began, and got home breathless with running, shaking off the first big drops of thunder-rain from her dress. But she did not think of any danger, and sat out in the porch watching how the darkness came down on the combe; how it was met with the jagged gleam of the great white flash, and how the thunderous explosion shook the earth. The combe, with its hill-tops on either side, became like the scene of a battle, great armies, invisible in the sharp torrents of rain, meeting each other with a fierce shock and recoil, with now and then a trumpet-blast, and now the gleam that

lit up tree and copse, and anon the tremendous artillery. When the lightning came she caught a glimpse of the winding line of the white road leading away out of all this—leading into the world where she was going—and for a moment escaped by it, even amid the roar of all the elements: then came back, alighting again with a start in the familiar porch, amid all the surroundings of the familiar life, to feel her mother's hand upon her shoulder, and her mother's voice saying, 'Have you got wet, my darling? Did you get much of it? Come in, come in from the storm!'

'It is so glorious, mamma!' Mrs. Dennistoun stood for a few minutes looking at it, then, with a shudder, withdrew into the drawing-room. 'I think I have seen too many storms to like it,' she said. But Elinor had not seen too many storms. She sat and watched it, now rolling away towards the south, and bursting again as though one army or the other had got reinforcements; while the flash of the explosions and the roar of the guns, and the white blast of the rain, falling like a sheet from the leaden skies, wrapped everything in mystery. The only thing that was to be identified from time to time was that bit of road leading out of it—leading her thoughts

away, as it should one day lead her eager feet, from all the storm and turmoil out into the bright and shining world. Elinor never asked herself, as she sat there, a spectator of this great conflict of nature, whether that one human thing, by which her swift thoughts traversed the storm, carried any other suggestion as of coming back.

Perhaps it is betraying feminine counsels too much to the modest public to narrate how Elinor's things were all laid out for the inspection of the ladies of the parish, the dresses in one room, the 'under things' in another, and in the dining-room the presents, which everybody was doubly curious to see, to compare their own offerings with those of other people, or else to note with anxious eye what was wanting, in order, if their present had not yet been procured, to supply the gap. How to get something that would look well among the others, and yet not be too expensive, was a problem which the country neighbours had much and painfully considered. The Hudsons had given Elinor a little tea-kettle upon a stand, which they were painfully conscious was only plated, and sadly afraid would not look well among all the gorgeous articles with which no doubt her grand new connections had loaded her.

The Rector came himself with his ladies to see how the kettle looked, with a great line of anxiety between his brows; but when they saw that the revolving dishes beside it, which were the gift of the wealthy Lady Mariamne, were plated too, and not nearly such a pretty design, their hearts went up in instant exhilaration, followed a moment after by such indignation as they could scarcely restrain. 'That rich sister, the woman who married the Jew' (which was their very natural explanation of the lady's nickname), 'a woman who is rolling in wealth, and who actually made up the match!' This was crescendo, a height of scorn impossible to describe upon a mere printed page. 'One would have thought she would have given a diamond necklace or something of consequence,' said Mrs. Hudson in her husband's ear. 'Or at least silver,' said the Rector. 'These fashionable people, though they give themselves every luxury, have sometimes not very much money to spend; but silver, at least, she might have been expected to give silver.' 'It is simply disgraceful,' said the Rector's wife. 'I am glad, at all events, my dear,' said he, 'that our little thing looks just as well as any.' 'It is one of the prettiest things she

has got,' said Mrs. Hudson, with a proud heart. Lord St. Serf sent an old-fashioned little ring in a much-worn velvet case, and the elder brother, Lord Lomond, an album for photographs. The Rector's wife indicated these gifts to her husband with little shrugs of her shoulders, 'If that's all the family can do!' she said: why, Alice's cushion, which was worked with floss silks upon satin, was a more creditable present than that. The Miss Hills, who as yet had not had an opportunity, as they said, of giving their present, roamed about, curious, inspecting everything. 'What is the child to do with a kettle, a thing so difficult to pack, and requiring spirit for the lamp, and all that—and only plated!' the Hills said to each other. 'Now, that little teapot of ours,' said Jane to Susan, 'if mother would only consent to it, is no use to us, and would look very handsome here.' 'Real silver, and old silver, which is so much the rage, and a thing she could use every day when she has her visitors for afternoon tea,' said Susan to Jane. 'It is rather small,' said Miss Hill doubtfully. 'But quite enough for two people,' said the other, forgetting that she had just declared that the teapot would be serviceable when Elinor had

visitors. But that was a small matter. Elinor, however, had other things better than these—a necklace, worth half a year's income, from John Tatham, which he had pinched himself to get for her that she might hold up her head among those great friends; and almost all that her mother possessed in the way of jewellery, which was enough to make a show among these simple people. 'Her own family at least have done Elinor justice,' said the Rector, going again to have a look at the kettle, which was the chief of the display to him. Thus the visitors made their remarks. The Hills did nothing but stand apart and discuss their teapot and the means by which 'mother' could be got to assent.

The Rector took his cup of tea, always with a side glance at the kettle, and cut his cake, and made his gentle jest. 'If Alick and I come over in the night and carry them all off you must not be surprised,' he said; 'such valuable things as these in a little poor parish are a dreadful temptation, and I don't suppose you have much in the way of bolts and bars. Alick is as nimble as a cat, he can get in at any crevice, and I'll bring over the box for the collections to carry off the little things.' This harmless wit pleased the good

clergyman much, and he repeated it to all the ladies. 'I am coming over with Alick one of these dark nights to make a sweep of everything,' he said. Mr. Hudson retired in the gentle laughter that followed this, feeling that he had acquitted himself as a man ought who is the only gentleman present, as well as the Rector of the parish. 'I am afraid I would not be a good judge of the "things,"' he said, 'and for anything I know there may be mysteries not intended for men's eyes. I like to see your pretty dresses when you are wearing them, but I can't judge of their effect in the gross.' He was a man who had a pleasant wit. The ladies all agreed that the Rector was sure to make you laugh whatever was the occasion, and he walked home very briskly, pleased with the effect of the kettle, and saying to himself that from the moment he saw it in Mappin's window he had felt sure it was the very thing.

The other ladies were sufficiently impressed with the number and splendour of Elinor's gowns. Mrs. Dennistoun explained, with a humility which was not, I fear, untinctured by pride, that both number and variety were rendered necessary by the fact that Elinor was going upon a series of visits among her future husband's great relations,

and would have to be much in society and among fine people who dressed very much, and would expect a great deal from a bride. 'Of course, in ordinary circumstances the half of them would have been enough: for I don't approve of too many dresses.'

'They get old-fashioned,' said Mrs. Hudson gravely, 'before they are half worn out.'

'And to do them up again is quite as expensive as getting new ones, and not so satisfactory,' said the Miss Hills.

The proud mother allowed both of these drawbacks. 'But what could I do?' she said. 'I cannot have my child go away into such a different sphere unprovided. It is a sacrifice, but we had to make it. I wish,' she said, looking round to see that Elinor was out of hearing, 'it was the only sacrifice that had to be made.'

'Let us hope,' said the Rector's wife solemnly, 'that it will all turn out for the best.'

'It will do that however it turns out,' said Miss Dale, who was even more serious than it was incumbent on a member of a clerical household to be, 'for we all know that troubles are sent for our advantage as well as blessings, and poor dear Elinor may require much discipline——'

'Oh, goodness, don't talk as if the poor child was going to be executed,' said Susan Hill.

'I am not at all alarmed,' said Mrs. Dennistoun. It was unwise of her to have left an opening for any such remark. 'My Elinor has always been surrounded by love wherever she has been. Her future husband's family are already very fond of her. I am not at all alarmed on Elinor's account.'

She laid the covering wrapper over the dresses with an air of pride and confidence which was remembered long afterwards – as the pride that goeth before a fall by some, but by others with more sympathy, who guessed the secret workings of the mother's heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

TIME went on quickly enough amid all these preparations and the little attendant excitements of letters, congratulations, and presents which came in on every side. Elinor complained mildly of the fuss, but it was a new and far from unpleasant experience. She liked to have the packets brought in by the post, or the bigger boxes that arrived from the station, and to open them and produce out of the wadding or the sawdust one pretty thing after another. At first it was altogether fresh and amusing, this new kind of existence, though after a while she grew *blasée*, as may be supposed. Lady Mariamne's present she was a little ashamed of: not that she cared much, but because of the look on her mother's face when those inferior articles were unpacked; and at the ring which old Lord St. Serf sent her she laughed freely.

'I will put it with my own little old baby rings in this little silver tray, and they will all look as if they were antiques, or something worth looking at,' said Elinor. Happily there were other people who endowed her more richly with rings fit for a bride to wear. The relations at a distance were more or less pleased with Elinor's prospects. A few, indeed, from different parts of the world wrote in the vein of Elinor's home-advisers, hoping that it was not the Mr. Compton who was so well known as a betting man whom she was going to marry; but the fact that she was marrying into a noble family, and would henceforward be known as the Honourable Mrs. Compton, mollified even these critics. Only three brothers—one a great invalid, and two soldiers—between him and the title. Elinor's relations promptly inaugurated in their imaginations a great war, in which two noble regiments were cut to pieces, to dispose of the two Captains Compton; and as for the invalid, that he would obligingly die off was a contingency which nobody doubted—and behold Elinor Dennistoun Lady St. Serf! This greatly calmed criticism among her relations, who were all at a distance, and whose approval or disapproval did not much affect her spirits anyhow. John Ta-

tham's father, Mrs. Dennistoun's cousin, was of more consequence, chiefly as being John's father, but also a little for himself, and it was remarked that he said not a word against the marriage, but sent a very handsome present, and many congratulations—chiefly inspired (but this Elinor did not divine) by an unfeigned satisfaction that it was not his son who was the bridegroom. Mr. Tatham, senr., did not approve of early marriages for young men pushing their way at the bar, unless the bride was, so to speak, in the profession and could be of use to her husband. Even in such cases, the young man was better off without a wife, he was of opinion. How could he get up his cases properly if he had to drag about in society at the tail of a gay young woman? Therefore he sent Elinor a very nice present in gratitude to her and providence. She was a danger removed out of his boy's way.

All this kept a cheerful little commotion about the house, and often kept the mother and daughter from thinking more than was good for them. These extraneous matters did not indeed preserve Elinor altogether from the consciousness that her *fiancé's* letters were very short and a little uncertain in their arrival, sometimes missing several

days together, and generally written in a hurry to catch the post. But they kept Mrs. Dennistoun from remarking that fact, as otherwise she would have been sure to do. If any chill of disappointment was in Elinor's mind, she said to herself that men were generally bad correspondents, not like girls, who had nothing else to do, and other consolations of this kind, which to begin with beg the question, and show the beginning of that disenchantment which ought to be reserved at least for a later period. Elinor had already given up a good deal of her own ideal. She would not, as she said, put herself in competition with the grouse, she would not give him the choice between her and a cigar; but already the consciousness that he preferred the grouse, and even the cigar to her society, had come an unwilling intruder into Elinor's mind. She would not allow to herself that she felt it in either case. She said to herself that she was proud of it, that it showed the freedom and strength of a man, and that love was only one of many things which occupied his life. She rebelled against the other deduction, that ''tis woman's sole existence,' protesting loudly (to herself) that she too had a hundred things to

do, and did not want him always at her apron-strings like a tame curate. But as a matter of fact, no doubt the girl would have been flattered and happy had he been more with her. The time was coming very quickly in which they should be together always, even when there was grouse in hand, when his wife would be invited with him, and all things would be in common between them; so what did it matter for a few days? The marriage was fixed for the 16th of September, and that great date was now scarcely a fortnight off. The excitement quickened as everything grew towards this central point. Arrangements had to be made about the wedding breakfast and where the guests were to be placed. The Hudsons had put their spare rooms at the disposition of the Cottage, and so had the Hills. The bridegroom was to stay at the Rectory. Lady Mariamne must of course, Mrs. Dennistoun felt, be put up at the Cottage, where the two rooms on the ground floor—what were called the gentlemen's rooms—had to be prepared to receive her. It was with a little awe indeed that the ladies of the Cottage endeavoured, by the aid of Elinor's recollections, to come to an understanding of what a fine lady would want

even for a single night. Mrs. Dennistoun's experiences were all old-fashioned, and of a period when even great ladies were less luxurious than now; and it made her a little angry to think how much more was required for her daughter's future sister-in-law than had been necessary to herself. But after all, what had herself to do with it? The thing was to do Elinor credit, and make the future sister-in-law perceive that the Cottage was no rustic establishment, but one in which it was known what was what, and all the requirements of the most refined life. Elinor's bridesmaid, Mary Tatham, was to have the spare room up-stairs, and some other cousins, who were what Mrs. Dennistoun called 'quiet people,' were to receive the hospitalities of the Hills, whose house was roomy and old-fashioned. Thus the arrangements of the crisis were more or less settled and everything made smooth.

Elinor and her mother were seated together in the drawing-room on one of those evenings of which Mrs. Dennistoun desired to make the most as they would be the last, but which, as they actually passed, were—if not occupied with discussions of how everything was to be arranged, which they went over again and again by instinct

as a safe subject—heavy, almost dull, and dragged sadly over the poor ladies whose hearts were so full, but to whom to be separated, though it would be bitter, would also at the same time almost be a relief. They had been silent for some time, not because they had not plenty to say, but because it was so difficult to say it without awaking too much feeling. How could they talk of the future in which one of them would be away in strange places, exposed to the risks and vicissitudes of a new life, and one of them be left alone in the unbroken silence sitting over the fire, with nothing but that blaze to give her any comfort? It was too much to think of, much more to talk about, though it need not be said that it was in the minds of both—with a difference, for Elinor's imagination was most employed upon the brilliant canvas where she herself held necessarily the first place, with a sketch of her mother's lonely life, giving her heart a pang, in the distance; while Mrs. Dennistoun could not help but see the lonely figure in her own foreground against the brightness of all the entertainments in which Elinor should appear as a queen. They were sitting thus, the mother employed at some fine needle-

work for the daughter, the daughter doing little, as is usual nowadays. They had been talking over Lady Mariamne and her requirements again, and had come to an end of that subject. What a pity that it was so hard to open the doors of their two hearts, which were so close together, so that each might see all the tenderness and compunction in the other: the shame and sorrow of the mother to grudge her child's happiness, the remorse and trouble of the child to be leaving that mother out in all her calculations for the future! How were they to do it on either side? They could not talk, these poor loving women, so they were mostly silent, saying a word or two at intervals about Mrs. Dennistoun's work (which of course was for Elinor), or of Elinor's village class for sewing, which was to be transferred to her mother, skirting the edges of the great separation which could neither be dismissed nor ignored.

Suddenly Elinor looked up, holding up her finger. 'What was that?' she said. 'A step upon the gravel?'

'Nonsense, child. If we were to listen to all these noises of the night there would always be a step upon—— Oh! I think I did hear something.'

'It is some one coming to the door,' said Elinor, rising up with that sudden prevision of trouble which is so seldom deceived.

'Don't go, Elinor; don't go. It might be a tramp; wait at least till they knock at the door.'

'I don't think it can be a tramp, mamma. It may be a telegram. It is coming straight up to the door.'

'It will be the parcel porter from the station. He is always coming and going, though I never knew him so late. Pearson is in the house, you know. There is not any cause to be alarmed.'

'Alarmed!' said Elinor, with a laugh of excitement; 'but I put more confidence in myself than in Pearson, whoever it may be.'

She stood listening with a face full of expectation, and Mrs. Dennistoun put down her work and listened too. The step advanced lightly, scattering the gravel, and then there was a pause as if the stranger had stopped to reconnoitre. Then came a knock at the window, which could only have been done by a tall man, and the hearts of the ladies jumped up, and then seemed to stop beating. To be sure, there were bolts and bars, but Pearson was not much good, and the house was full of valuables and very lonely. Mrs. Dennistoun rose up, trem-

bling a little, and went forward to the window, bidding Elinor go back and keep quite quiet. But here they were interrupted by a voice which called from without, with another knock on the window, 'Nell! Nell!'

'It is Phil,' said Elinor, flying to the door.

Mrs. Dennistoun sat down again and said nothing. Her heart sank in her breast. She did not know what she feared; perhaps that he had come to break off the marriage, perhaps to hurry it and carry her child away. There was a pause, as was natural, at the door, a murmur of voices, a fond confusion of words which made it clear that no breach was likely, and presently after that interval Elinor came back beaming, leading her lover. 'Here is Phil,' she said in such liquid tones of happiness as filled her mother with mingled pleasure, gratitude, and despite. 'He has found he had a day or two to spare, and he has rushed down here, fancy, with an apology for not letting us know!'

'She thinks everyone is like herself, Mrs. Dennistoun, but I am aware that I am not such a popular personage as she thinks me, and you have least reason of all to approve of the man who is coming to carry her away.'

'I am glad to see you, Mr. Compton,' she said gravely, giving him her hand.

The Hon. Philip Compton was a very tall man, with very black hair. He had fine but rather hawk-like features, a large nose, a complexion too white to be agreeable, though it added to his romantic appearance. There was a furtive look in his big dark eyes, which had a way of surveying the country, so to speak, before making a reply to any question, like a man whose response depended upon what he saw. He surveyed Mrs. Dennistoun in this way while she spoke; but then he took her hand, stooped his head over it and kissed it, not without grace. 'Thank you very much for that,' he said, as if there had been some doubt on his mind about his reception. 'I was glad enough to get the opportunity, I can tell you. I've brought you some birds, Mrs. Dennistoun, and I hope you'll give me some supper, for I'm as hungry as a hawk. And now, Nell, let's have a look at you,' the lover said. He was troubled by no false modesty. As soon as he had paid the required toll of courtesy to the mother, who naturally ought to have at once proceeded to give orders about his supper, he held Elinor at arm's length

before the lamp, then, having fully inspected her appearance, and expressed by a 'Charming, by Jove!' his opinion of it, proceeded to demonstrations which the presence of the mother standing by did not moderate. There are few mothers to whom it would be agreeable to see their child engulfed in the arms of a large and strong man and covered with his bold kisses. Mrs. Dennistoun was more fastidious even than most mothers, and to her this embrace was a sort of profanation. The Elinor who had been guarded like a flower from every contact—to see her gripped in his arms by this stranger made her mother glow with an indignation which she knew was out of the question, yet felt to the bottom of her soul. Elinor was abashed before her mother, but she was not angry. She forced herself from his embrace, but her blushing countenance was full of happiness. What a revolution had thus taken place in a few minutes! They had been so dull sitting there alone: alone, though each with the other who had filled her life for more than twenty years: and now all was lightened, palpitating with life. 'Be good, sir,' said Elinor, pushing him into a chair as if he had been a great dog, 'and quiet and well behaved; and then you shall have

some supper. But tell us first where you have come from, and what put it into your head to come here.'

'I came up direct from my brother Lomond's shooting-box. Reply No. 1. What put it into my head to come? Love, I suppose, and the bright eyes of a certain little witch called Nell. I ought to have been in Ireland for a sort of a farewell visit there; but when I found I could steal two days, you may imagine I knew very well what to do with them. Eh? Oh, it's mamma that frightens you, I see.'

'It is kind of you to give Elinor two days when you have so many other engagements,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, turning away.

But he was not in the least abashed. 'Yes, isn't it?' he said, 'my last few days of freedom. I consider I deserve the prize for virtue—to cut short my very last rampage; and she will not as much as give me a kiss! I think she is ashamed before you, Mrs. Dennistoun.'

'It would not be surprising if she were,' said Mrs. Dennistoun gravely. 'I am old-fashioned, as you may perceive.'

'Oh, you don't need to tell me that,' said he; 'one can see it with half an eye. Come here,

Nell, you little coquette; or I shall tell the Jew you were afraid of mamma, and you will never hear an end of it as long as you live.'

'Elinor, I think you had better see, perhaps, what there is to make up as good a meal as possible for Mr. Compton,' said her mother, sitting down opposite to the stranger, whose long limbs were stretched over half the floor, with the intention of tripping up Elinor, it seemed; but she glided past him and went on her way—not offended, oh, not at all—waving her hand to him, as she avoided the very choice joke of his stretched-out foot.

'Mr. Compton,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, 'you will be Elinor's husband in less than a fortnight.'

'I hope so,' he said, displaying the large cavern of a yawn under his black moustache as he looked her in the face.

'And after that I will have no right to interfere; but, in the meantime, this is my house, and I hope you will remember that these ways are not mine, and that I am too old-fashioned to like them. I prefer a little more respect to your betrothed.'

'Oh, respect,' he said. 'I have never found that girls like too much respect. But as you

please. Well, look here, Nell,' he said, catching her by the arm as she came back and swinging her towards him, 'your mother thinks I'm too rough with you, my little dear.'

'Do you, mamma?' said Elinor, faltering a little; but she had the sweetest rose-flush on her cheeks and the moisture of joy in her eyes. In all her twenty-three years she had never looked as she looked now. Her life had been a happy one, but not like this. She had been always beloved, and never had known for a day what it was to be neglected; yet love had never appeared to her as it did now, so sweet, nor life so beautiful. What strange delusion! what a wonderful incomprehensible mistake! or so at least the mother thought, looking at her beautiful girl with a pang at her heart.

'It is only his bad manners,' said Elinor in a voice which sounded like a caress. 'He knows very well how to behave. He can be as nice as any one, and as pretty spoken, and careful not to offend. It is only arriving so suddenly, and not being expected—or that he has forgotten his nice manners to-night. Phil, do you hear what I say?'

Phil made himself into the semblance of a dog,

and sat up and begged for pardon. It was a trick which made people 'shriek with laughing;' but Mrs. Dennistoun's gravity remained unbroken. Perhaps her extreme seriousness had something in it that was rather ridiculous too. It was a relief when he went off to his supper, attended by Elinor, and Mrs. Dennistoun was left alone over her fire. She had a slight sense that she had been absurd, as well as that Philip Compton had lacked breeding, which did not make her more comfortable. Was it possible that she would be glad when it was all over, and her child gone—her child gone, and with that man! Her child, her little delicately bred, finely nurtured girl, who had been wrapped in all the refinements of life from her cradle, and had never heard a rough word, never been allowed to know anything that would disturb her virginal calm!—yet now in a moment passed away beyond her mother to the unceremonious wooer who had no reverence for her, none of the worship her mother expected. How strange it was! Yet a thing that happened every day. Mrs. Dennistoun sat over the fire, though it was not cold, and listened to the voices and laughter in the next room. How happy they were to be together! She did not,

however, dwell upon the fact that she was alone and deserted, as many women would have done. She knew that she would have plenty of time to dwell on this in the lonely days to come. What occupied her was the want of more than manners, of any delicate feeling in the lover who had seized with rude caresses upon Elinor in her mother's presence, and the fact that Elinor did not object, nor dislike that it should be so. That she should feel forlorn was no wonderful thing; that did not disturb her mind. It was the other matter about Elinor that pained and horrified her, she could not tell why; which, perhaps, was fantastic, which, indeed, she felt sure must be so.

They were so long in the dining-room, where Compton had his supper, that when that was over it was time to go to bed. Still talking and laughing as if they could never exhaust either the fountain of talk or the mirth, which was probably much more sheer pleasure in their meeting than genuine laughter produced by any wit or *bon mot*, they came out into the passage, and stood by Mrs. Dennistoun and the housemaid, who had brought her the keys and was now fastening the hall door. A little calendar hung on the wall beneath the lamp, and Phil Compton walked up to it and with

a laugh read out the date. 'Sixth September,' he said, and turned round to Elinor. 'Only ten days more, Nell.' The housemaid stooping down over the bolt blushed and laughed too under her breath in sympathy; but Mrs. Dennistoun turning suddenly round caught Compton's eye. Why had he given that keen glance about him? There was nothing to call for his usual survey of the company in that sentiment. He might have known well enough what were the feelings he was likely to call forth. A keen suspicion shot through her mind. Suspicion of what? She could not tell. There was nothing that was not most natural in his sudden arrival, the delightful surprise of his coming, his certainty of a good reception. The wonder was that he had come so little, not that he should come now.

The next morning the visitor made himself very agreeable: his raptures were a little calmed. He talked over all the arrangements, and entered into everything with the interest of a man to whom that great day approaching was indeed the greatest day in his life. And it turned out that he had something to tell which was of practical importance. 'I may relieve your mind about Nell's money,' he said, 'for I believe my company is

going to be wound up. We'll look out for another investment which will pay as well and be less risky. It has been found not to be doing quite so well as was thought, so we're going to wind up.'

'I hope you have not lost anything,' said Mrs. Dennistoun.

'Oh, nothing to speak of,' he said carelessly.

'I am not fond of speculative companies. I am glad you are done with it,' Mrs. Dennistoun said.

'And I'm glad to be done with it. I shall look out for something permanent and decline joint-stock companies. I thought you would like to know. But that is the last word I shall say about business. Come, Nell, I have only one day; let's spend it in the woods.'

Elinor, who felt that the day in the woods was far more important than any business, hurried to get her hat and follow him to the door. It chanced to her to glance at the calendar as she passed hastily out to where he stood awaiting her in the porch. Why that should have happened to anyone in the Cottage twice in the twenty-four hours is a coincidence which I cannot explain, but so it was. Her eye caught the little

white plaque in passing, and perceived with surprise that it had moved up two numbers, and that it was the figure 8 which was marked upon it now.

'We cannot have slept through a day and night,' she said laughing as she joined him. 'The calendar says the eighth September now.'

'But I arrived on the sixth,' he said. 'Mind that, Nell, whatever happens. You saw it with your own eyes. It may be of consequence to remember.'

'Of what consequence could it be?' said Elinor wondering.

'One can never tell. The only thing is I arrived on the sixth—that you know. And, Nell, my darling, supposing any fellow should inquire too closely into my movements, you'll back me up, won't you, and agree in everything I say?'

'Who should inquire into your movements? There is no one here who would be so impertinent, Phil.'

'Oh,' he said, 'there is never any telling how impertinent people may be.'

'And what is there in your movements that anyone dare inquire about? I hope you are not ashamed of coming to see me.'

'That is just what is the saving of me, Nell. I can't explain what I mean now, but I will later on. Only mind you don't contradict me if we should meet any inquisitive person. I arrived on the sixth, and you'll back me like my true love in everything I say.'

'As far as—as I know, Phil.'

'Oh, we must have no conditions. You must stand by me in everything I say.'

CHAPTER IX.

THIS day in the copse was one that Elinor never forgot. At the moment it seemed to her the most blissful period of all her life. There had been times in which she had longed that Phil knew more and cared more for the objects which had always been most familiar, and told for most in her own existence—although it is true that at first his very ignorance, real or assumed, his careless way of treating all intellectual subjects, his indifference to books and pictures, and even nature, had amused and pleased her, giving a piquancy to the physical strength and enjoying manhood, the perpetual activity and state of doing something in which he was. It was not a kind of life which she had ever known before, and it dazzled her with its apparent freedom and fulness, the variety in it, the constant movement, the crowd of

occupations and people. To her who had been used to finding a great deal of her amusement in reading, in sketching (not very well), in playing (tunes), and generally practising with very moderate success arts for which she had no individual enthusiasm, it had seemed like a new life to be plunged into the society of horses and dogs, into the active world which was made up of a round of amusements, race meetings, days on the river, follies of every conceivable kind, exercise, and air, and movement. The ignorance of all these people dazzled her as if it had been a new science. It had seemed something wonderful and piquant to Elinor to find people who knew so much of subjects she had never heard of, and nothing at all of those she had been trained to know. And then there had come a moment when she had begun to sigh under her breath as it were, and wish that Phil would sometimes open a book, that when he took up the newspaper he would look at something more than the sporting news and the bits of gossip, that he would talk now and then of something different from the racings and the startings, and the odds, and the scrapes other men got into, and the astonishing 'frocks' of the Jew—those things, so wonderful at first, like a

new language, absurd, yet amusing, came to be a little tiresome, especially when scraps of them made up the bulk of the very brief letters which Phil scribbled to his betrothed. But during this day, after his unexpected arrival, the joy of seeing him suddenly, the pleasure of feeling that he had broken through all his engagements to come to her, and the fervour of his satisfaction in being with her again (that very fervour which shocked her mother), Elinor's first glow of delight in her love came fully back. And as they wandered through the pleasant paths of the copse, his very talk seemed somehow changed, and to have gained just that little mingling of perception of her tastes and wishes which she had desired. There was a little autumnal mist about, the softening haze which was not decay, but only the 'mellow fruitfulness' of the poet; and the day, notwithstanding this, was as warm as June, the sky blue, with only a little white puff of cloud here and there. Phil paused to look down the combe, with all the folds of the downs that wrapped it about going off in blue outlines into the distance, and said it was 'a jolly view'—which amused Elinor more than if he had used the finest language, and showed that he was beginning (she thought) to care a little for the

things which pleased her. 'And I suppose you could see a man coming by that bit of road.'

'Yes,' said Elinor, 'you could see a man coming —or going: but, unless you were to make believe very strong, like the Marchioness, you could not make out who the man was.'

'What Marchioness?' said Phil. 'I didn't know you had anybody with a title about here. I say, Nell, it's a very jolly view, but hideously dull for you, my pet, to have lived so long here.'

'I never found it in the least dull,' she said.

'Why, there is nothing to do! I suppose you read books, eh? That's what you call amusing yourself. You ought to have made the old lady take you about a deal, abroad, and all over the place: but I expect you have never stood up for yourself a bit, Nell.'

'Don't call mamma the old lady, Phil. She is not old, and far prettier than most people I know.'

'Well, she should have done it for herself. Might have picked up a good match, eh? a father-in-law that would have left you a pot of money. You don't mean to say you wouldn't have liked that?'

'Oh, Phil, Phil! I wish you could understand.'

'Well, well, I'll let the old girl alone.' And then came the point at which Phil improved so much. 'Tell me what you've been reading last,' he said. 'I should like to know what you are thinking about, even if I don't understand it myself. I say, Nell, who do you think that can be dashing so fast along the road?'

'It is the people at Reddown,' she said. 'I know their white horses. They always dash along as if they were in the greatest hurry. Do you really want to know what I have been reading, Phil? though it is very little, I fear, because of the dressmakers and—all the other things.'

'You see,' he said, 'when you have lots to do you can't keep up with your books: which is the reason why I never pretend to read—I have no time.'

'You might find a little time. I have seen you look very much bored, and complain that there was nothing to do.'

'Never when you were there, Nell, that I'll answer for—but of course there are times when a fellow isn't doing anything much. What would you have me read? There's always the *Sporting and Dramatic*, you know, the *Pink 'un*, and a few more.'

'Oh, Phil! you don't call them literature, I hope.'

'I don't know much about what you call literature. There's Ruff, and Hoyle, and—I say, Nell, there's a dog-cart going a pace! Who can that be, do you suppose?'

'I don't know all the dog-carts about. I should think it was some one coming from the station.'

'Oh!' he said, and made a long pause. 'Driving like that, if they don't break their necks, they should be here in ten minutes or so.'

'Oh, not for twice that time—the road makes such a round—but there is no reason to suppose that any dog-cart from the station should be coming here.'

'Well, to return to the literature, as you call it. I suppose I shall have to get a lot of books for you to keep you amused—eh, Nell? even in the honeymoon.'

'We shall not have time to read very much if we are moving about all the time.'

'Not me, but you. I know what you'll do. You'll go and leave me planted, and run upstairs to read your book. I've seen the Jew do it with some of her confounded novels that she's always wanting to turn over to me.'

'But there are some novels that you would like to read, Phil.'

'Not a bit. Why, Nell, I know far better stories of fellows in our own set than any novel these writing men ever can put on paper: fellows, and women too—stories that would make your hair stand on end, and that would make you die with laughing. You can't think what lots I know. That cart would have been here by this time if it had been coming here, eh?'

'Oh, no, not yet—the road makes such a long round. Do you expect any one, Phil?'

'I don't quite know; there's something on at that confounded office of ours; everything, you know, has gone to smash. I didn't think it well to say too much to the old lady last night. There's been a regular row, and the manager's absconded, and all turns on whether they can find some books. I shouldn't wonder if one of the fellows came down here, if they find out where I am. I say, Nell, mind you back me up whatever I say.'

'But I can't possibly know anything about it,' said Elinor, astonished.

'Never mind—about dates and that—if you don't stand by me, there may be a fuss, and the

wedding delayed. Remember that, my pet, the wedding delayed—that's what I want to avoid. Now, come, Nell, let's have another go about the books. All English, mind you. I won't buy you any of the French rot. They're too spicy for a little girl like you.'

'I don't know what you mean, Phil. I hope you don't think that I read nothing but novels,' Elinor said.

'Nothing but novels! Oh, if you go in for mathematics and that sort of thing, Nell! the novels are too deep for me. Don't say poetry, if you love me. I could stand most things from you, Nell, you little darling—but Nell, if you come spouting verses all the time—'

His look of horror made Elinor laugh. 'You need not be afraid. I never spout verses,' she said.

'Come along this way a little, where we can see the road. All women seem to like poetry. There's a few fellows I don't mind myself. Ingoldsby now, that's something fine. We had him at school, and perhaps it was the contrast from one's lessons. Do you know Ingoldsby, Nell?'

'A—little—I have read some——'

'Ah, you like the sentimental best. There's

Whyte Melville then, there's always something melancholy about him—"When the old horse died," and that sort of thing—makes you cry, don't you know. You all like that. Certainly if that dog-cart had been coming here it must have come by this time.'

'Yes, it must have come,' Elinor admitted, with a little wonder at the importance which he gave to this possible incident. 'But there is another train at two if you are very anxious to see this man.'

'Oh, I'm not anxious to see him,' said Mr. Compton with a laugh, 'but probably he will want to see me. No, Nell, you will not expect me to read poetry to you while we're away. There's quite a library at Lomond's place. You can amuse yourself there when I'm shooting; not that I shall shoot much, or anything that takes me away from my Nell. But you must come out with us. There is no such fun as stumping over the moors—the Jew has got all the turn-out for that sort of thing—short frocks and knickerbockers, and a duck of a little breech-loader. She thinks she's a great shot, poor thing, and men are civil and let her imagine that she's knocked over a pheasant or a hare,

now and then. As for the partridges, she lets fly, of course, but to say she hits anything——'

'I should not want to hit anything,' said Elinor. 'Oh, please Phil! I will try anything else you like, but don't make me shoot.'

'You little humbug! See what you'll say when you get quite clear of the old lady. But I don't want you to shoot, Nell. If you don't get tired sitting at home, with all of us out on the hill, I like to come in for my part and find a little duck all tidy, not blowzy and blown about by the wind, like the Jew with her ridiculous bag, that all the fellows snigger at behind her back.'

'You should not let any fellow laugh at your sister, Phil——'

'Oh, as for that! they are all as thick with her as I am, and why should I interfere? But I promise you nobody shall cut a joke upon my Nell.'

'I should hope not, indeed,' said Elinor, indignant; 'but as for your "fellows," Phil, as you call them, you mustn't be angry with me, but I don't much like those gentlemen; they are a little rude and rough. They shall not call me by my Christian name, or anything but my own formal——'

'Mrs. Compton,' he said, seizing her in his arms; 'you little duck! they'll be as frightened of you as if you were fifty. But you mustn't spoil good company, Nell. I shall like you to keep them at a distance, but you mustn't go too far; and, above all, my pet, you mustn't put out the Jew. I calculate on being a lot there; they have a nice house and a good table, and all that, and Prestwich is glad of somebody to help about his horses. You mustn't set up any of your airs with the Jew.'

'I don't know what you mean by my airs, Phil.'

'Oh, but I do, and they're delicious, Nell; half like a little girl and half like a queen: but it will never do to make the Jew feel small in her own set. Hallo! there's some one tumbling along over the stones on that precious road of yours. I believe it's that cart from the station after all.'

'No,' said Elinor, 'it is only one of the tradespeople. You certainly are anxious about those carts from the station, Phil.'

'Not a bit!' he said, and then, after a moment he added, 'Yes, on the whole I'd much rather the man came, if he's coming while I'm here, and while you are with me, Nell; for I want

you to stick to me, and back me up. They might think I ought to go after that manager fellow and spoil the wedding. Therefore mind you back me up.'

'I can't think, dear Phil, what there is for me to do. I know nothing about the business nor what has happened. You never told me anything, and how can I back you up about things I don't know?'

'Oh, yes, you can,' he said, 'you'll soon see if the fellow comes; just you stand by me, whatever I say. You mayn't know—or even I may seem to make a mistake; but you know me if you don't know the circumstances, and I hope you can trust me, Nell, that it will be all right.'

'But——' said Elinor, confused.

'Don't go on with your buts; there's a darling, don't contradict me. There is nothing looks so silly to strangers as a woman contradicting every word a fellow says. I only want you to stand by me, don't you know, that's all; and I'll tell you everything about it after, when there's time.'

'Tell me about it now,' said Elinor; 'you may be sure I shall be interested; there's plenty of time now.'

'Talk about business to you! when I've only

a single day, and not half time enough, you little duck, to tell you what a darling you are, and how I count every hour till I can have you all to myself. Ah, Nell, Nell, if that day were only here——'

And then Phil turned to those subjects and those methods which cast so much confusion into the mind of Mrs. Dennistoun, when practised under her sedate and middle-aged eyes. But Elinor, as has been said, did not take exactly the same view.

Presently they went in to luncheon, and Phil secured himself a place at table commanding the road. 'I never knew before how jolly it was,' he said, 'though everything is jolly here. And that peep of the road must give you warning when any invasion is coming.'

'It is too far off for that,' said Mrs. Dennistoun.

'Oh, no, not for sharp eyes. Nell there told me who several people were—those white horses—the people at—where did you say, Nell?'

'Reddown, mamma—the Philistines, as you call them, that are always dashing about the country—*nouveaux riches*, with the finest horses in the country.'

'I like the *nouveaux riches* for that,' said Phil (he did not go wrong in his French, which was a great consolation to Elinor), 'they like to have the best of everything. Your poor swell has to take what he can get, but the *parvenu*'s the man in these days; and then there was a dog-cart, which she pronounced to be from the station, but which turned out to be the butcher, or the baker, or the candlestick-maker——'

'It is really too far off to make sure of anything, except white horses.'

'Ah, there's no mistaking them. I see something sweeping along, but that's a country waggon, I suppose. It gives me a great deal of diversion to see the people on the road—which perhaps you will think a vulgar amusement.'

'Not at all,' said Mrs. Dennistoun politely, but she thought within herself how empty the brain must be, which sought diversion from the distant carriages passing two miles off: to be sure across the combe, as the crow flies, it was not a quarter part so far as that.

'Phil thinks some one may possibly come to him on business—to explain things,' said Elinor, anxious on her part to make it clear that it was

not out of mere vacancy that her lover had watched so closely the carriages on the road.

'Unfortunately, there is something like a smash,' he said: 'they'll keep it out of the papers if they can, but you may see it in the papers; the manager has run away, and there's a question about some books. I don't suppose you would understand—they may come to me here about it, or they may wait till I go back to town.'

'I thought you were going to Ireland, Phil.'

'So I shall, probably, just for three days—to fill up the time. One wants to be doing something to keep one's self down. You can't keep quiet and behave yourself when you are going to be married in a week: unless you're a little chit of a girl without any feelings,' he said with a laugh. And Elinor laughed too; while Mrs. Dennistoun sat as grave as a judge at the head of the table. But Phil was not daunted by her serious face: so long as the road was quite clear he had all the appearance of a perfectly easy mind.

'We have been talking about literature,' he said. 'I am a stupid fellow, as perhaps you know, for that sort of thing. But Nell is to indoctrinate me. We mean to take a big box of

books, and I'm to be made to read poetry and all sorts of fine things in my honeymoon.'

'That is a new idea,' said Mrs. Dennistoun. 'I thought Elinor meant to give up reading, on the other hand, to make things square.'

There was a little breath of a protest from Elinor, 'Oh, mamma!' but she left the talk (he could do it so much better) in Compton's hand.

'I expect to figure as a sort of prodigy in my family,' he said; 'we're not bookish. The Jew goes in for French novels, but I don't intend to let Nell touch them, so you may be easy in your mind.'

'I have no doubt Lady Mariamne makes a good selection,' said Mrs. Dennistoun.

'Not she! she reads whatever comes, and the more salt the better. The Jew is quite an emancipated person. Don't you think she'll bore you rather in this little house? She carries bales of rubbish with her wherever she goes, and her maid, and her dog, and I don't know what. If I were you I'd write, or better wire, and tell her there's a capital train from Victoria will bring her here in time for the wedding, and that it's a thousand pities she should disturb herself to come for the night.'

'If your sister can put up with my small accommodation, I shall of course be happy to have her, whatever she brings with her,' Mrs. Dennistoun said.

'Oh! it's not a question of putting up—she'd be delighted, I'm sure: but I think you'll find her a great bore. She is exceedingly fussy, when she has not all her things about her. However, you must judge for yourself. But if you think better of it, wire a few words, and it'll be all right. I'm to go to the old Rectory, Nell says.'

'It is not a particularly old Rectory; it is a very nice, pleasant house. I think you will find yourself quite comfortable—you and the gentleman——'

'Dick Bolsover, who is going to see me through it: and I daresay I should not sleep much, if I were in the most luxurious bed in the world. They say a man who is going to be hanged sleeps like a top, but I don't think I shall; what do you say, Nell?'

'Elinor, I should think, could have no opinion on the subject,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, pale with anger. 'You will all dine here, of course. Some other friends are coming, and a cousin, Mr. Tatham, of Tatham's Cross.'

'Is that,' said Phil, 'the Cousin John?'

'John, I am sorry to say, is abroad; the long vacation is the worst time. It is his father who is coming, and his sister, Mary Tatham, who is Elinor's bridesmaid—she and Miss Hudson at the Rectory.'

'Only two; and very sensible, instead of the train one sees, all thinking how best to show themselves off. Dick Bolsover is man enough to tackle them both. He expects some fun, I can tell you. What is there to be after we are gone, Nell?' He stopped and looked round with a laugh. 'Rather close quarters for a ball,' he said.

'There will be no ball. You forget that when you take Elinor away I shall be alone. A solitary woman living in a cottage, as you remark, does not give balls. I am much afraid that there will be very little fun for your friend.'

'Oh, he'll amuse himself well enough; he's the sort of fellow who always makes himself at home. A Rectory will be great fun for him; I don't suppose he was ever in one before, unless perhaps when he was a boy at school. Yes, as you say—what a lot of trouble it will

be for you to be sure: not as if Nell had a sister to enjoy the fun after. It's a thousand pities you did not decide to bring her up to town, and get us shuffled off there. You might have got a little house for next to nothing at this time of the year, and saved all the row, turning everything upside down in this nice little place, and troubling yourself with visitors and so forth. But one always thinks of that sort of thing too late.'

'I should not have adopted such an expedient in any case. Elinor must be married among her own people, wherever her lot may be cast afterwards. Everybody here has known her ever since she was born.'

'Ah, that's a thing ladies think of, I suppose,' said Compton. He had stuck his glass into his eye and was gazing out of the window. 'Very jolly view,' he continued, 'and what's that, Nell, raising clouds of dust? I haven't such quick eyes as you.'

'I should think it must be a circus or a menagerie, or something, mamma.'

'Very likely,' said Mrs. Dennistoun. 'They sometimes come this way on the road to Portsmouth, and give little representations in all the

villages, to the great excitement of the country folk.'

'We are country folk, and I feel quite excited,' said Phil, dropping his glass. 'Nell, if there's a representation, you and I will go to-night.'

'Oh, Phil, what——' Elinor was about to say 'folly': but she paused, seeing a look in his eye which she had already learned to know, and added 'fun,' in a voice which sounded almost like an echo of his own.

'There is nothing like being out in the wilderness like this to make one relish a little fun, eh? I daresay you always go. The Jew is the one for every village fair within ten miles when she is in the country. She says they're better than any play. Hallo! what is that?'

'It is some one coming round the gravel path.'

A more simple statement could not be, but it made Compton strangely uneasy. He rose up hastily from the table. 'It is, perhaps, the man I am looking for. If you'll permit me, I'll go and see.'

He went out of the room, calling Elinor by a look and slight movement of his head, but when he came out into the hall was met by a trim

clerical figure and genial countenance, the benign yet self-assured looks of the Rector of the parish: none other could this smiling yet important personage be.

CHAPTER X.

THE Rector came in with his smiling and rosy face. He was, as many of his parishioners thought, a picture of a country clergyman. Such a healthy colour, as clear as a girl's, limpid blue eyes, with very light eyelashes and eyebrows; a nice round face, 'beautifully modelled,' according to Miss Sarah Hill, who did a little in that way herself, and knew how to approve of a Higher Sculptor's work. And then the neatest and blackest of coats, and the whitest and stiffest of collars. Mr. Hudson, I need scarcely say, was not so left to himself as to permit his clerical character to be divined by means of a white tie. He came in, as was natural among country neighbours, without thinking of any bell or knocker on the easily opened door, and was about to peep into the drawing-room with,

'Anybody in?' upon his smiling lips, when he saw a gentleman approaching, picking up his hat as he advanced. Mr. Hudson paused a moment in uncertainty. 'Mr. Compton, I am sure,' he said, holding out both of his plump pink hands. 'Ah, Elinor too! I was sure I could not be mistaken. And I am exceedingly glad to make your acquaintance.' He shook Phil's hand up and down in a sort of see-saw. 'Very glad to make your acquaintance! though you are the worst enemy Windyhill has had for many a day—carrying off the finest lamb in all the fold.'

'Yes, I'm a wolf, I suppose,' said Phil. He went to the door and took a long look out while Elinor led the Rector into the drawing-room. Then Mr. Compton lounged in after them, with his hands in his pockets, and placed himself in the bow-window, where he could still see the white line across the combe of the distant road.

'They'll think I have stolen a march upon them all, Elinor,' said the Rector, 'chancing upon Mr. Compton like this, a quite unexpected pleasure. I shall keep them on the tenterhooks, asking them whom they suppose I have met.

and they will give everybody but the right person. What a thing for me to have been the first person to see your intended, my dear! and I congratulate you, Elinor,' said the Rector, dropping his voice; 'a fine handsome fellow, and such an air! You are a lucky girl——' he paused a little and said, with a slight hesitation, in a whisper, 'so far as meets the eye.'

'Oh, Mr. Hudson, don't spoil everything,' said Elinor, in the same tone.

'Well, I cannot tell, can I, my dear?—the first peep I have had.' He cleared his throat and raised his voice. 'I believe we are to have the pleasure of entertaining you, Mr. Compton, on a certain joyful occasion (joyful to you, not to us). I need not say how pleased my wife and I and the other members of the family will be. There are not very many of us—we are only five in number—my son, and my daughter, and Miss Dale, my wife's sister, but much younger than Mrs. Hudson—who has done us the pleasure of staying with us for part of the year. I think she has met you somewhere, or knows some of your family, or—something. She is a great authority on noble families. I don't know whether it is because she has been a good

deal in society, or whether it is out of Debrett——'

'Nell, come and tell me what this is,' Compton said.

'Oh, Phil! it is nothing, it is a carriage. I don't know what it is. Be civil to the Rector, please.'

'So I am, perfectly civil.'

'You have not answered a single word, and he has been talking to you for ten minutes.'

'Well, but he hasn't said anything that I can answer. He says Miss Something or other knows my family. Perhaps she does. Well, much good may it do her! but what can I say to that? I am sure I don't know hers. I didn't come here to be talked to by the Rector. Could we slip out and leave him with your mother? That would suit his book a great deal better. Come, let's go.'

'Oh! he is speaking to you, Phil.'

Compton turned round and eyed the Rector. 'Yes?' he said in so marked an interrogative that Mr. Hudson stopped short and flushed. He had been talking for some time.

'Oh! I was not precisely asking a question,' he said, in his quiet tones. 'I was saying that we believe and hope that another gentleman is coming with you—for the occasion.'

'Dick Bolsover,' said Compton, 'a son of Lord Freshfield's; perhaps Miss ——, the lady you were talking of, may know his family too. His brother got a little talked of in that affair about Fille d'Or, don't you know, at Newmarket. But Dick is a rattling good fellow, doesn't race, and has no vices. He is coming to stand by me and see that all's right.'

'We shall be happy to see Mr. Bolsover, I am sure.' The Rector rubbed his hands and said to himself with pleasure that two Honourables in his quiet house was something to think of, and that he hoped it would not turn the heads of the ladies, and make Alice expect—one couldn't tell what. And then he said, by way of changing yet continuing the subject, 'I suppose you've been looking at the presents. Elinor must have shown you her presents.'

'By Jove, I never thought of the presents. Have you got a lot, Nell?'

'She has got, if I may be allowed to answer for her, having known her all her life, a great many pretty things, Mr. Compton. We are not rich, to be sure, her old friends here. We have to content ourselves with but a small token of a great deal of affection; but still there are a

number of pretty things. Elinor, what were you thinking of, my dear, not to show Mr. Compton the little set-out which you showed us? Come, I should myself like to look them over again.'

Phil gave another long look at the distant road, and then he thrust his arm into Elinor's and said, 'To be sure, come along, Nell. It will be something to do.' He did not wait for the Rector to pass first, which Elinor thought would have been better manners, but thrust her before him quite regardless of the older people. 'Let's see the trumpery,' he said.

'Don't use such a word, Phil; the Rector will be so hurt.'

'Oh, will he? did he work you an—anti-macassar or something?'

'Phil, speak low at least. No, but his daughter did; and they gave me——'

'I know: a card-case or a button-hook, or something. And how many biscuit-boxes have you got, and clocks, and that sort of thing? I advise you to have an auction as soon as we get away. Hallo! that's a nice little thing; look pretty on your pretty white neck I should say, Nell. Who gave you that?' He took John's necklace out of its box where it had lain un-

disturbed until now, and pulled it through his fingers. 'Cost a pretty bit of money that, I should say. You can raise the wind on it when we're down on our luck, Nell.'

'My cousin John, whom you have heard me speak of, gave me that, Phil,' said Elinor with great gravity. She thought it necessary, she could scarcely tell why, to make a stand for her cousin John.

'Ah, I thought it was one of the disappointed ones,' said Phil, flinging it back carelessly on to the bed of white velvet where it had been fitted so exactly. 'That's how they show their spite; for of course I can't give you anything half as good as that.'

'There was no disappointment in the matter,' said Elinor, almost angry with the misconceptions of her lover.

'You are a nice one,' said Compton, taking her by the chin, 'to tell me! as if I didn't know the world a long sight better than you do, my little Nell.'

The Rector, who was following slowly, for he did not like to go upstairs in a hurry, saw this attitude and drew back, a little scandalised. 'Perhaps we were indiscreet to—to follow them

too closely,' he said, disconcerted. 'Please to go in first, Mrs. Dennistoun—the young couple will not mind you.'

Mr. Hudson was prim, but he was rather pleased to see that 'the young couple' were, as he said, so fond of each other. He went into the room under the protection of the mother—blushing a little. It reminded him, as he said afterwards, of his own young days; but it was only natural that he should walk up direct to the place where his kettle stood conspicuous, waiting only the spark of a match to begin to boil the water for the first conjugal tea. It appeared to him a beautiful idea as he put his head on one side and looked at it. It was like the inauguration of the true British fireside, the cosy privacy in which, after the man had done his work, the lady awaited him at home, with the tea-kettle steaming. A generation before Mr. Hudson there would have been a pair of slippers airing beside the fire. But neither of these preparations supplies the ideal of perfect happiness now.

'I say, where did you get these hideous things?' said Compton, approaching the table on which 'the silver' was laid out. By a special dispensation it was Lady Mariamne's dishes

which caught Phil's attention. 'Some old grandmother, I suppose, that had 'em in the house. Hallo! if it isn't the Jew! Nell, you don't mean to tell me you got these horrors from the Jew?'

'They are supposed to be—quite handsome,' said Elinor, with a suppressed laugh. 'We must not criticise. It is very kind of people to send presents at all. We all know it is a very severe tax—to those who have a great many friends——'

'The stingy old miser,' said Compton. 'Rolling in money, and to send you these! By Jove! there's a neat little thing now that looks what it is; probably one of your nice country friends, Nell.—(It was the kettle, as a kind Providence decreed; and both the ladies breathed an internal thanksgiving.)—'Shows like a little gem beside that old, thundering, mean-spirited Jew!'

'That,' said the Rector, bridling a little and pink with pleasure, 'is our little offering: and I'm delighted to think that it should please so good a judge. It was chosen with great care. I saw it first myself, and the idea flashed upon me—quite an inspiration—that it was the very thing for Elinor; and when I went home I told my wife—the very thing—for her boudoir, should she not be seeing company—or just for your

little teas when you are by yourselves. I could at once imagine the dear girl looking so pretty in one of those wonderful white garments that are in the next room.'

'Hallo!' said Compton, with a laugh, 'do you show off your things in this abandoned way, Nell, to the killingest old cov——'

She put her hand up to his mouth with a cry of dismay and laughter, but the Rector, with a smile and another little blush, discreetly turned his back. He was truly glad to see that they were so fond of each other, and thought it was pretty and innocent that they should not mind showing it—but it was a little embarrassing for an old and prim clergyman to look on.

'What a pleasure it must be to you, my dear lady,' he said, when the young couple had gone: which took place very soon, for Phil soon grew tired of the presents, and he was ill at ease when there was no window from which he could watch the road—'what a pleasure to see them so much attached! Of course, family advantage and position is always of importance—but when you get devoted affection, too——'

'I hope there is devoted affection,' said Mrs. Dennistoun; 'at all events, there is what we are

all united in calling "love," for the present. He is in love with Elinor—I don't think there can be much doubt of that.'

'I did not of course know that he was here,' said the Rector, with some hesitation. 'I came with the intention of speaking—I am very sorry to see in the papers to-day something about that Joint-Stock Company of which Mr. Compton was a director. It's rather a mysterious paragraph; but it's something about the manager having absconded, and that some of the directors are said to be involved.'

'Do you mean my future son-in-law?' she said, turning quickly upon him.

'Good heavens, no! I wouldn't for the world insinuate—it was only that one felt a desire to know. Just upon the eve of a marriage it's—it's alarming to hear of a business the bridegroom is involved in being—what you may call broken up.'

'That was one of the things Mr. Compton came to tell us about,' said Mrs. Dennistoun. 'He said he hoped it might be kept out of the papers, but that some of the books have got lost or destroyed. I am afraid I know very little about business. But he has lost very little

—nothing to speak of—which was all that concerned me.'

'To be sure,' said the Rector, but in a tone not so assured as his words. 'It is not perhaps quite a nice thing to be director of a company that—that collapses in this way. I fear some poor people will lose their money. I fear there will be things in the papers.'

'On what ground?' she said. 'Oh, I don't deny there may be some one to blame; but Mr. Compton was, I suspect, only on the Board for the sake of his name. He is not a business man. He did it, as so many do, for the sake of a pretence of being in something. And then, I believe, the directors got a little by it; they had a few hundreds a year.'

'To be sure,' said Mr. Hudson, but still doubtfully, and then he brightened up. 'For my part, I don't believe there is a word of truth in it. Since I have seen him, indeed, I have quite changed my opinion—a fine figure of a man, looking an aristocrat every inch of him. Such a contrast and complement to our dear Elinor—and so fond of her. A man like that would never have a hand in any sham concern. If it was really a bogus company, as people say, he must

be one of the sufferers. That is quite my decided opinion; only the ladies, you know—the ladies who have not seen him, and who are so much more suspicious by nature (I don't know that you are, my dear Mrs. Dennistoun), would give me no rest. They thought it was my duty to interfere. But I am sure they are quite wrong.'

To think that it was the ladies of the Rector's family who were interfering made Mrs. Dennistoun very wrath. 'Next time they have anything to say, you should make them come themselves,' she said.

'Oh, they would not do that. They say it is the clergyman's business, not theirs. Besides, you know, I have not time to read all the papers. We get the *Times*, and Mary Dale has the *Morning Post*, and another thing that is all about stocks and shares. She has such a head for business—far more than I can pretend to. She thought——'

'Mr. Hudson, I fear I do not wish to know what was thought by Miss Dale.'

'Well, you are perhaps right, Mrs. Dennistoun. She is only a woman, of course, and she may make mistakes. It is astonishing, though, how often she is right. She has a head for business

that might do for a Chancellor of the Exchequer. She made me sell out my shares in that Red Gulch—those American investments have the most horrible names—just a week before the smash came, all from what she had read in the papers. She knows how to put things together, you see. So I have reason to be grateful to her, for my part.'

'And what persuaded you, here at Windyhill, a quiet clergyman, to put money in any Red Gulch? It is a horrible name!'

'Oh, it was Mary, I suppose,' said Mr. Hudson. 'She is always looking out for new investments. She said we should all make our fortunes. We did not, unfortunately. But she is so clever, she got us out of it with only a very small loss indeed.'

'No doubt she is very clever. I wish, though, that she would let us know definitely on what ground——'

'Oh, there is no ground,' cried the Rector. 'Now that I have seen Mr. Compton I am certain of it. I said to her before I left the Rectory, "Now, my dear Mary, I am going like a lamb to the slaughter. I have no reason to give if Mrs. Dennistoun should ask me, and you have

no reason to give. And she will probably put me to the door." If I said that before I started, you may fancy how much more I feel it now, when I have made Mr. Compton's acquaintance. A fine aristocratic face, and all the ease of high breeding. There are only three lives—and those not very good ones—between him and the title, I believe?'

'Two robust brothers, and an invalid who will probably outlive them all; that is, I believe, the state of the case.'

'Dear me, what a pity!' said the Rector, 'for our little Elinor would have made a sweet little Countess. She would grow a noble lady, like the one in Mr. Tennyson's poem. Well, now I must be going, and I am extremely glad to have been so lucky as to come in just in time. It has been the greatest pleasure to me to see them together—such a loving couple. Dear me, like what one reads about, or remembers in old days, not like the commonplace pairs one has to do with now.'

Mrs. Dennistoun accompanied the Rector to the garden gate. She was half inclined to laugh and half to be angry, and in neither mood did Mr. Hudson's insinuations, which he made so

innocently, have much effect upon her mind. But when she took leave of him at the gate and came slowly back among her brilliant flower-beds, pausing here and there mechanically to pick off a withered leaf or prop up the too heavy head of a late rose, her mind began to take another turn. She had always been conscious of an instinctive suspicion in respect to her daughter's lover. Probably only, she said to herself, because he was her daughter's lover, and she was jealous of the new devotion that withdrew from her so completely the young creature who had been so fully her own. That is a hard trial for a woman to undergo. It is only to be borne when she, too, is fascinated by her future son-in-law, as happens in some fortunate cases. Otherwise, a woman with an only child is an alarming critic to encounter. She was not fascinated at all by Phil. She was disappointed in Elinor, and almost thought her child not so perfect as she had believed, when it proved that she could be fascinated by this man. She disliked almost everything about him—his looks, the very air which the Rector thought so aristocratic, his fondness for Elinor, which was not reverential enough to please the mother, and his

indifference, nay, contempt for herself, which was not calculated to please any woman. She had been roused into defence of him in anger at the interference, and at the insinuation which had no proof; but as that anger died away, other thoughts came into her mind. She began to put the broken facts together which already had roused her to suspicion: his sudden arrival, so unexpected; walking from the station—a long, very long walk —carrying his own bag, which was a thing John Tatham did, but not like Phil Compton. And then she remembered, suddenly, his anxiety about the carriage on the distant road, his care to place himself where he could see it. She had thought with a little scorn that this was a proof of his frivolity, of the necessity of seeing people, whoever these people might be. But now there began to be in it something that could have a deeper meaning. For whom was he looking? Who might be coming? Stories she had heard of fugitives from justice, of swindlers taking refuge in the innocence of their families, came up into her mind. Could it be possible that Elinor's pure name could be entangled in such a guilty web as this?

CHAPTER XI.

'FUNNY old poop!' said Compton. 'And that is your Rector, Nell. I shall tell Dick there's rare fun to be had in that house: but not for me. I know what I shall be thinking of all the time I'm there. Odious little Nell! to interfere like this with a fellow's fun. But I say, who's that woman who knows me or my family?—much good may it do her, as I said before. Tell me, Nell, did she speak ill of me?'

'Oh, Phil, how could you ask? or what would it matter if she spoke ever so ill?

'She did then,' he said with a graver face. 'Somebody was bound to do it. And what did she say?'

'Oh, what does it matter, Phil? I don't remember; nothing of any consequence. We paid no attention, of course, neither mamma nor I.'

'That was plucky of the old girl,' said Compton. 'I didn't suppose you would give ear, my Nell. Ain't so sure about her. If I'd been your father, my pet, I should never have given you to Phil Compton. And that's the fact: I wonder if the old lady would like to reconsider the situation now.'

'Phil!' said Elinor, clinging to his arm.

'Perhaps it would be best for you if you were to do so, Nell, or if she were to insist upon it. Eh! You don't know me, my darling, that's the fact. You're too good to understand us. We're all the same, from the old governor downwards —a bad lot. I feel a kind of remorseful over you, child, to-day. That rosy old bloke, though he's a snob, makes a man think of innocence somehow. I do believe you oughtn't to marry me, Nell.'

'Oh, Phil! what do you mean? You cannot mean what you say.'

'I suppose I don't, or I shouldn't say it, Nell. I shouldn't certainly, if I thought you were likely to take my advice. It's a kind of luxury to tell you we're a bad lot, and bid you throw me over, when I know all along you won't.'

'I should think not indeed,' she said, clinging

to him and looking up in his face. 'Do you know what my cous—— I mean a friend, said to me on that subject?'

'You mean your cousin John, whom you are always quoting. Let's hear what the fellow said.'

'He said—that I wasn't a girl to put up with much, Phil. That I wasn't one of the patient kind, that I would not bear—— I don't know what it was I would not bear; but you see you must consider my defects, which you can understand well enough, whether I can understand yours or not.'

'That you could not put up with—that you could not bear?—that meant me, Nell. He had been talking to you on the same subject, me and my faults. Why didn't you listen to him? I suppose he wanted you to have him instead of me.'

'Phil! how dare you even think of such a thing? It is not true.'

'Wasn't it? Then he is a greater fool than I took him for, and his opinion's no good. So you're a spitfire, are you? Can't put up with anything that doesn't suit you? I don't know that I should have found that out.'

'I am afraid though that it is true,' she said, half-laughingly looking up at him. 'Perhaps you will want to reconsider too.'

'If you don't want it any more than I want it, Nell—— What's that?' he cried hastily, changing his expression and attitude in a moment. 'Is that one of your neighbours at the gate?'

Elinor looked round, starting away a little from his side, and saw some one—a man she had never seen before—approaching along the path. She was just about to say she did not know who it was when Phil, to her astonishment, stepped past her, advancing to meet the newcomer. But as he did so he put out his hand and caught her as he passed, leading her along with him.

'Mind what I said, and stick to me,' he said in a whisper; then—

'Stanfield!' he cried with an air of perfect ease and cordiality, yet astonishment. 'I thought it looked like you, but I could not believe my eyes.'

'Mr. Compton!' said the other. 'So you are here. I have been hunting after you all over the place. I heard only this morning this was a likely spot.'

'A very likely spot!' said Phil. 'I suppose you know the good reason I have for being in these parts. Elinor, this is Mr. Stanfield, who has to do with our company, don't you know. But I say, Stanfield, what's all this row in the papers? Is it true that Brown's bolted? I should have taken the first train to see if I could help; but my private affairs are most urgent just at this moment, as I suppose you know.'

'I wish you had come,' said the other; 'it would have looked well, and pleased the rest of the directors. There has been some queer business —some of the books abstracted or destroyed, we can't tell which, and no means of knowing how we stand.'

'Good heavens!' said Phil, 'to cover that fellow's retreat.'

'If you mean Brown, it was not he. They were all there safe enough after he was gone; somebody must have got in by night and made off with them, some one that knew all about the place; the watchman saw a light, but that's all. It's supposed there must have been something compromising others besides Brown. He could not have cheated the company to such an extent by himself.'

'Good heavens!' cried Phil again in natural horror; 'I wish I had followed my impulse and gone up to town straight: but it was very vague what was in the papers; I hoped it might not have been our place at all. And I say, Stanfield —Who's the fellow they suspect?' Elinor had disengaged herself from Compton's arm; she perceived vaguely that the stranger paused before he replied, and that Phil, facing him with a certain square attitude of opposition which affected her imagination vaguely, though she did not understand why—was waiting with keen attention for his reply. She said, a little oppressed by the situation, 'Phil, perhaps I had better go.'

'Don't go,' he said; 'there's nothing secret to say. If there's anyone suspected it must very soon be known.'

'It's difficult to say who is suspected,' said the stranger confused. 'I don't know that there's much evidence. You've been in Scotland?'

'Yes, till the other day, when I came down here to see——' He paused and turned upon Elinor a look which gave the girl the most curious incomprehensible pang. It was a look of love; but, oh! heaven, was it a look called up

that the other man might see? He took her hand in his, and said lightly yet tenderly, 'Let's see, what day was it? the sixth, wasn't it the sixth, Nell?'

A flood of conflicting thoughts poured through Elinor's mind. What did it mean? It was yesterday, she was about to say, but something stopped her, something in Phil's eye—in the touch of his hand. There was something warning, almost threatening, in his eye. Stand by me; mind you don't contradict me; say what I say. All these things which he had repeated again and again were said once more in the look he gave her. 'Yes,' she said timidly, with a hesitation very unlike Elinor, 'it was the sixth.' She seemed to see suddenly as she said the words that calendar with the date hanging in the hall: the big 6 seemed to hang suspended in the air. It was true, though she could not tell how it could be so.

'Oh,' said Stanfield, in a tone which betrayed a little surprise, and something like disappointment, 'the sixth? I knew you had left Scotland, but we did not know where you had gone.'

'That's not to be wondered at,' said Phil with a laugh, 'for I should have gone to Ireland, to

tell the truth; I ought to have been there now. I'm going to-morrow, ain't I, Nell? I had not a bit of business to be here. Winding up affairs in the bachelor line, don't you know; but I had to come on my way west to see this young lady first. It plays the deuce and all with one's plans when there's such a temptation in the way.'

'You could have gone from Scotland to Ireland,' said Stanfield gravely, 'without coming to town at all.'

'Very true, old man. You speak like a book. But, as you perceive, I have not gone to Ireland at all; I am here. Depends upon your motive, I suppose, which way you go.'

'It is a good way round about,' said the other, without relaxing the intent look on his face.

'Well,' said Phil, 'that's as one feels. I go by Holyhead wherever I may be—even if I had nowhere else to go to on the way.'

'And Mr. Compton got here on the sixth?—this is the eighth,' said the stranger pointedly. He turned to Elinor, and it seemed to the girl that his eyes, though they were not remarkable eyes, went through and through her. He spoke very slowly, with a curious meaning. 'But it

was on the sixth, you say, that he got here?'

That big 6 on the calendar stood out before her eyes; it seemed to cover all the man's figure that stood before her. Elinor's heart and mind went through the strangest convulsion. Was it false—was it true? What was she saying? What did it all mean? She repeated mechanically, 'It was on the sixth—' And then she recovered a kind of desperate courage, and throwing off the strange spell that seemed to be upon her, 'Is there any reason,' she asked suddenly, with a little burst of impatience, looking from one to another, 'why it should not be the sixth, that you repeat it so?'

'I beg your pardon,' said the stranger, visibly startled. 'I did not mean to imply—I only thought—— Pray, Mr. Compton, tell the lady I had no intention of offending. I never supposed ——'

Phil's laugh, loud and clear, rang through the stillness of the afternoon. 'He's so used to fibs, he thinks everybody's in a tale,' said Phil, 'but I can assure you he is a very good fellow, and a great friend of mine, and he means no harm, Nell.'

Elinor made Mr. Stanfield an extremely dignified bow. 'I ought to have gone away at once, and left you to talk over your business,' she said turning away, and Phil did not attempt to detain her. Then the natural rural sense of hospitality came over Elinor. She turned back to find the two men looking after her, standing where she had left them. 'I am sure,' she said, 'that mamma would wish me to ask the gentleman if he would stay to dinner—or at least come in with you, Phil, to tea.'

Mr. Stanfield took off his hat with anxious politeness, and explained hastily that he must go back to town by the next train, and that the cab from the station was waiting to take him. And then she left them, and walked quietly away. She was almost out of hearing before they resumed their conversation; that is, she was beyond the sound, not of their voices, but of what they said. The murmur of the voices was still audible when she got to her favourite seat on the side of the copse looking down the combe. It was a very retired and silent place, not visible from either the cottage or the garden. And there Elinor took refuge in the quiet and hush of the declining day. She was in a great tremor

of agitation and excitement as she sat down upon the rustic seat—so great a tremor that she had scarcely been able to walk steadily down the roughly made steps—a tremor which had grown with every step she took. She did not in the least understand the transaction in which she had been engaged. It was something altogether strange to her experiences, without any precedent in her life. What was it she had been called upon to do? What had she said, and why had she been made to say it? Her heart beat so that she put her two hands upon it crossed over her breast to keep it down, lest it should burst away. She had the sensation of having been brought before some tribunal, put suddenly to the last shift, made to say—what, what? She was so bewildered that she could not tell. Was it the truth, said with the intention to deceive—was it——? She could not tell. There was that great numeral waving in the air, stalking along with her like a ghost. 6—. She had read it in all innocence, they had all read it, and nobody had said it was wrong. No one was very careful about the date in the cottage. If it was right, if it was wrong, Elinor could not tell. But yet somehow she was conscious that the man to

whom she had spoken had been deceived. And Phil! and Phil! what had he meant, adjuring her to stick to him, to stand by him, not to contradict him? Elinor's mind was in such a wild commotion that she could not answer these inquiries. She could not feel that she had one solid step of ground to place herself upon in the whirlwind which swept her about and about. Had she—lied? And why had he asked her to lie? And what, oh, what did it all mean?

One thing that at last appeared to her in the chaos which seemed like something solid that she could grasp at was that Phil had never changed in his aspect. The other man had been very serious, staring at her as if to intimidate her, like a man who had something to find out; but Phil had been as careless, as indifferent, as he appeared always to be. He had not changed his expression. It is true there was that look in which there was at once an entreaty and a command—but only she had seen that, and perhaps it was merely the emotion, the excitement, the strange feeling of having to face the world for him, and say——what, what? Was it simply the truth, nothing but the truth, or was it——? Again Elinor's mind began to whirl. It was the

truth: she could see now that big 6 on the calendar distinct as the sunshine. And yet it was only yesterday—and there was 8 this morning. Had she gone through an intervening dream for a whole day without knowing it; or had she, Elinor—she who would not have done it to save her life—told—a lie for Phil? And why should he want her to tell a lie?

Elinor got up from her seat, and stood uncertain, with a cold dew on her forehead, and her hands clasping and holding each other. Should she go back to them and say there must be some mistake—that though she had said the truth it was not true, that there was some mistake, some dreadful mistake? There was no longer any sound of voices where she was. The whole incident seemed to have died out. The sudden commotion of Phil's visit and everything connected with it had passed away. She was alone in the afternoon, in the hush of nature, looking over the combe, listening to the rustle of the trees, hearing the bees drone homeward. Had Phil ever been here at all? Had he watched the distant road winding over the slopes for some one whom he had expected to come after him all the time? Had he ever told

her to stand by him? to say what he said, to back him up? Had there ever been another man standing with that big 6, wavering between her and him like a ghost? Had all that been at all, or was it merely a foolish dream? And ought she to go back now, and find the man before he disappeared, and tell him it was all true, yet somehow a dreadful, dreadful mistake?

Elinor sat down again abruptly on her seat, and put her handkerchief to her forehead and pushed back the damp clusters of her hair, turning her face to the wind to get a little refreshment and calm, if that were possible. She heard in the sunny distance behind her, where the garden and the peaceful house lay in the light, the clang of the gate, a sound which could not be mistaken. The man then had gone—if there was anything to rectify in what she said it certainly could not be rectified now—he was gone. The certainty came to her with a feeling of relief. It had been horrible to think of standing before the two men again and saying—what could she have said? She remembered now that it was not her assertion alone, but that it all hung together, a whole structure of incidents, which would be put wrong if she had said it was

a mistake—a whole account of Phil's time, how it had been passed—which was quite true, which he had told them on his arrival; how he had been going to Ireland, and had stopped, longing for a glimpse of her, his bride, feeling that he must have her by him, see her once again before he came for her to fetch her away. He had told the ladies at the cottage the very same, and of course it was true. Had he not come straight from Scotland with his big bundle of game, the grouse and partridges which had already been shared with all the friends about? Was he not going off to Ireland to-morrow to fulfil his first intention? It was all quite right, quite true, hanging perfectly together—except that curious falling out of a day. And then again Elinor's brain swam round and round. Had he been two days at the cottage instead of one, as he said? Was it there that the mistake lay? Had she been in such a fool's paradise having him there, that she had not marked the passage of time—had it all been one hour of happiness flying like the wind? A blush, partly of sweet shame to think that this was possible, that she might have been such a happy fool as to ignore the divisions of night and day, and partly of stimu-

lating hope that such might be the case, a wild snatch at justification of herself and him flushed over her from head to foot, wrapping her in warmth and delight; and then this all faded away again and left her as in ashes—black and cold. No! everything, she saw, now depended upon what she had been impelled to say; the whole construction, Phil's account of his time, his story of his doings—all would have fallen to pieces had she said otherwise. Body and soul, Elinor felt herself become like a machine full of clanging wheels and beating pistons, her heart, her pulses, her breath, all panting, beating, bursting. What did it mean? What did it mean? and then everything stood still in a horrible suspense and pause.

She began to hear voices again in the distance and raised her head, which she had buried in her hands—voices that sounded so calmly in the westering sunshine, one answering another, everything softened in the golden outdoor light. At first as she raised herself up she thought with horror that it was the man, the visitor whom she had supposed to be gone, returning with Phil to give her the opportunity of contradicting herself, of bringing back that whirlwind of doubt and

possibility. But presently her excited senses perceived that it was her mother who was walking calmly through the garden talking with Phil. There was not a tone of excitement in the quiet voices that came gradually nearer and nearer, till she could hear what they were saying. It was Phil who was speaking, while her mother now and then put in a word. Elinor did not wish on ordinary occasions for too many private talks between her mother and Phil. They rubbed each other the wrong way, they did not understand each other, words seemed to mean different things in their comprehension of them. She knew that her lover would laugh at 'the old girl,' which was a phrase which offended Elinor deeply, and Mrs. Dennistoun would become stiffer and stiffer, declaring that the very language of the younger generation had become unintelligible to her. But to hear them now together was a kind of anodyne to Elinor; it stayed and calmed her. The cold moisture dried from her forehead. She smoothed her hair instinctively with her hand, and put herself straight in mind as she did with that involuntary action in outward appearance, feeling that no sign of agitation, no trouble of demeanour, must meet her mother's eye. And

then the voices came so near that she could hear what they were saying. They were coming amicably together to her favourite retreat.

'It's a very queer thing,' said Phil, 'if it is as they think, that somebody went there the night before last and cleared off the books. Well, not all the books, some that are supposed to contain the secret transactions. Deucedly cleverly done it must have been, if it was done at all, for nobody saw the fellow, or fellows, if there were more than one——'

'Why do you doubt?' said Mrs. Dennistoun. 'Is there any way of accounting for it otherwise?'

'Oh, a very good way—that Brown, the manager, simply took them with him, as he would naturally do, if he wasn't a fool. Why should he go off and leave papers that would convict him, for the pleasure of involving other fellows, and ruining them too?'

'Are there others, then, involved with him?' Oh, how calm, how inconceivably calm, was Mrs. Dennistoun's voice! Had she been asking the gardener about the slugs that eat the young plants it would have been more disturbed.

'Well, Stanfield seemed to think so. He's a

sort of head clerk, a fellow enormously trusted. I shouldn't wonder if he was at the bottom of it himself, they're so sure of him,' said Phil with a laugh. 'He says there's a kind of suspicion of two or three. Clumsy wretches they must be if they let themselves be found out like that. But I don't believe it. I believe Brown's alone in it, and that it's him that's taken everything away. I believe it's far the safest way in those kind of dodges to be alone. You get all the swag, and you're in no danger of being rounded on, don't you know—till you find things are getting too hot, and you cut away.'

'I don't understand the words you use, but I think I know what you mean,' said Mrs. Dennistoun. 'How dreadful it is to think that in business, where honesty is the very first principle, there should be such terrible plots and plans as those!'

''Tis awful, isn't it?' said Phil, with a laugh that seemed to ring all down the combe, and came back in echoes from the opposite slope, where in the distance the cab from the station was seen hastening back towards the railway in a cloud of dust. The laugh was like a trumpet of triumph flung across the distance at the dis-

comfited enemy thus going off drooping in the hurry of defeat. He added, 'But you may imagine, even if I had known anything, he wouldn't have got much out of me. I didn't know anything, however, I'm very glad to say.'

'That is always the best,' said Mrs. Dennistoun with a certain grave didactic tone. 'And here is Elinor, as I thought. When one cannot find her anywhere else she's sure to be found here.'

CHAPTER XII.

'WELL,' said Compton, placing himself beside her, 'here you are, Nell; kind of the old lady to bring me, wasn't it? I should never have found you out by myself.'

'Has he gone, Phil?' Elinor raised her scared face from her hands and gave him a piteous look.

'Why, Nell! you are trembling like a leaf. Was it frightened, my pretty pet, for Stanny? Stanny's gone off with his tail between his legs. Not a bit of starch left in him. As limp a lawyer as ever you saw.'

'Was he a lawyer?' she said, not knowing why she said it, for it mattered nothing at all to Elinor what the man was.

'Not exactly; and yet, I suppose, something of the kind. He is the one that knows about

law points, and such things. But now he's as quiet as a lamb, thanks to you.'

'Phil,' she cried, 'what did you make me say? I don't know what I have done. I have done something dreadful—deceived the man, as good as told him a lie.'

'You told him the truth,' said Phil with a laugh, 'in the most judgmatical way. You stuck to it like a—woman. There's nothing like a woman for sticking to a text. You didn't say a word too much. And I say, Nell, that little defiant bit of yours—"Was there any reason why it shouldn't be the sixth?" was grand. That was quite magnificent, my pet. I never thought you had such spirit in you.'

'Oh, Phil,' she cried, 'why did you make me say it? What was it I said? I don't know; I don't understand a bit. Whatever it was, I know that it was wrong. I deceived the man.'

'That's not so great a sin,' he said; 'I've known worse things done. Put an old reynard off the scent to save his prey. I don't see what's wrong in that, especially as the innocent chicken to be saved was your own poor old Phil.'

'Phil, Phil,' she cried, 'what could that man have done to you? What had put you in his

power? You have made me lose all my innocence. I have got horrible things in my head. What could he have done to you that you made me tell a lie?'

'What lie did I make you tell?—be reasonable. I did arrive on the sixth, you know that just as well as I do. Don't you really remember the calendar in the hall? You saw it, Nell, as well as I.'

'I know, I know,' she cried, putting her hands up to her eyes, 'I see it everywhere staring at me, that big, dreadful 6. But how is it the eighth now? There is something in it—something I don't understand.'

He laughed loudly and long; one of those boisterous laughs which always jarred upon Elinor. 'I don't in the least mind how it was,' he said. 'It was, and that's quite enough for me; and let it be for you too, Nell. I hope you're not going to search into the origin of things like this; we've quite enough to do in this world to take things as they come.'

'Oh, Phil! if at least I could understand—I don't understand: or if I had not been made to say what is so mysterious—what must be false.'

'Hush, Nell; how could it be false when you saw with your own eyes it was true? Now let us be done with this, my darling. The incident is terminated, as the French say. I came here as fast as I could come to have a good laugh with you over it, and lo! you're nearer crying. Why should you have Stanny on your conscience, Nell? a fellow that would like no better than to hang me if he could get the chance.'

'But Phil, Phil—oh tell me, what could this man have done to you? Why are you afraid of him? Why, why have you made me tell him——'

'Now, Nell, no exaggerated expression. It was a fact you told him, according to the best of evidence; and what he could have done to me is just this—he might have given me a deal of trouble, and put off our marriage. I should have had to go back to town, and my time would have been taken up with finding out about those books, and our marriage would have been put off; that's what he could have done.'

'Is that all?' cried Elinor, 'was that all?'

'All!' he said, with that loud laugh again, 'you don't mind a bit how you hurt a fellow's pride, and his affections, and all that. Do you

mean to say, you hard-hearted little coquette, that you wouldn't mind? I don't believe you would mind! Here am I counting the hours, and you, you little cold puss, you aggravating little——'

'Oh, Phil, don't talk such nonsense. If we were to be separated, for a week or a month, what could that matter, in comparison with saying what wasn't——'

'Hush,' he said, putting his hand to her mouth. 'It's not nice of you to take it so easily, Nell. I'd tell as many what-d'ye-call-'ems as you like, rather than put it off an hour. Why, feeling apart (and I don't think you've any feeling, you little piece of ice), think how inconvenient it would have been; the people all arriving; the breakfast all ready; the Rector with his surplice on, and no wedding! Fancy the Jew, with all her fallals, on the old lady's hands, and your cousin John——'

'I have told you already, Phil, my cousin John will not be there.'

'So much the better,' he said with a laugh, 'I don't want him to be there—shows his sense, when his nose is put out of joint, to keep out of the way.'

'I wish you would understand,' she said with a little vexation, 'that John is not put out of joint, as you say in that odious way. He has never been anything more to me, nor I to him, than we are now—like brother and sister.'

'The more fool he,' said Compton, 'to have the chance of a nice girl like you, Nell, and not to go in for it. But I don't believe a bit in the brother and sister dodge.'

'We will be just the same all our lives,' cried Elinor.

'Not if I know it,' said Phil. 'I'm an easy-going fellow in most ways, but you'll find I'm an old Turk about you, my little duck of a Nell. No amateur brother for me. If you can't get along with your old Phil, without other adorers——'

'Phil! as if I should ever think or care whether there was another man in the world!'

'Oh, that's going too far,' he said laughing. 'I shan't mind a little flirtation. You may have a man or two in your train to fetch and carry, get your shawl for you, and call your carriage and so forth; but no serious old hand, Nell—nothing to remind you that there was a time when you didn't know Phil Compton.' His

laugh died away at this point, and for a moment his face assumed that grave look which changed its character so much. 'If you don't come to repent before then that you ever saw that fellow's ugly face, Nell——'

'Phil, how could I ever repent? Nobody but you should dare to say such a thing to me!'

'I believe that,' he said. 'If that old John of yours tried it on—— Well, my pet, he is your old John. You can't change facts, even if you do throw the poor fellow over. Now, here's a new chance for all of them, Nell. I shouldn't wonder a bit if you had another crop of letters bidding you look before you leap. That Rectory woman, what's her name? that knows my family. You'll see she'll have some new story before we're clear of her. They'll never stop blackguarding me, I know, until you're Phil Compton yourself, my beauty. I wish that day was come. I'm afraid to go off again and leave you, Nell. They'll be putting something into your head, or the old lady's. Let's get it over to-morrow morning, and come to Ireland with me; you've never been there.'

'Phil, what nonsense! mamma would go out of her senses.'

'My pet, what does it matter? She'd come back to them again as soon as we were gone, and think what a botheration spared her! All the row of receiving people, turning the house upside down. And here I am on the spot. And what do you want with bridesmaids and so forth? You've got all your things. Suppose we walk out to church to-morrow before breakfast, Nell——'

'Phil, you are mad, I think; and why should we do such a thing, scandalising everybody? But of course you don't mean it. You are excited after seeing that man.'

'Excited about Stanny! — not such a fool; Stanny is all square, thanks to—— But what I want is just to take you up in my arms, like this, and run off with you, Nell. Why should we call the whole world to watch us while we take that swing off—into space?'

'Phil!'

'So it is, for you, Nell. You don't know a bit what's going to happen. You don't know where I'm going to take you, and what I'm going to do with you, you little innocent lamb in the wolf's grip. I want to eat you up, straight off. I shall be afraid up to the last moment that you'll escape me, Nell.'

'I did not know that you were so fond of innocence,' said Elinor, half afraid of her lover's vehemence, and trying to dispel his gravity with a laugh. 'You used to say you did not believe in the *ingénue*.'

'I believe in you,' he said with an almost fierce pressure of her arm; then, after a pause, 'No, I don't believe in women at all, Nell, only you. They're rather worse than men, which is saying a good deal. What would the Jew care if we were all drawn and quartered, so long as she had all her paraphernalia about her, and got everything she wanted? For right-down selfishness commend me to a woman. A fellow may have gleams of something better about him, like me, warning you against myself.'

'It is a droll way of warning me against yourself to want to carry me off to-morrow.'

'It's all the same thing,' he said. 'I've warned you that those old hags are right and I'm not good enough for you, not fit to come near you, Nell. But if the sacrifice is to be, let's get it over at once, don't let us stand and think of it. I'm capable of jilting you,' he said, 'leaving you *plantée là*, all out of remorse of conscience; or else just catching you up in my arms, like

this, and carrying you off, never to be seen more.'

'You are very alarming,' said Elinor. 'I don't know what you mean. You can be off with your bargain if you please, Phil; but you had better make up your mind at once, so that mamma may countermand her invitations, and stop Gunter from sending the cake.'

(It was Gunter who was the man in those days. I believe people go to Buszard now.)

He gave her again a vehement hug, and burst into a laugh. 'I might jilt you, Nell; such a thing is on the cards. I might leave you in the lurch at the church door; but when you talk of countermanding the cake, I can't face that situation. Society would naturally be up in arms about that. So you must take your chance like the other innocents. I'll eat you up as gently as I can, and hide my tusks as long as it's possible. Come on, Nell, don't let us sit here and get the mopes, and think of our consciences. Come and see if that show is in the village. Life's better than thinking, old girl.'

'Do you call the show in the village life?' she said, half pleased to rouse him, half sorry to be thus carried away.

'Every show is life,' said Phil, 'and everywhere that people meet is better than anywhere where you're alone. Mind you take in that axiom, Nell. It's our rule of life, you know, among the set you're marrying into. That's how the Jew gets on. That's how we all get on. By this time next year you'll be well inured into it like all the rest. That's what your Rector never taught you, I'll be bound; but you'll see the old fellow practises it whenever he has a chance. Why, there they begin, tootle-te-too. Come on, Nell, and don't let us lose the fun.'

He drew her along hastily, hurrying while the flute and the drum began to perform their parts. Sound spreads far in that tranquil country, where no railway was visible, and where the winds for the moment were still. It was Pan's pipes that were being played, attracting a few stragglers from the scattered houses. Within a hundred yards from the church, at the corner of four roads, stood the Bull's Head, with a cottage or two linked on to its long straggling front. And this was all that did duty for a village at Windyhill. The Rectory stood back in its own copse, surrounded by a growth of young birches and oak near the church. The Hills dwelt intermediate

between the Bull's Head and the ecclesiastical establishment. The school and schoolmaster's house were behind the Bull. The show was surrounded by the children of the place, who looked on silent with ecstasy while a burly showman piped his pipes and beat his drum. A couple of ostlers, with their shirt-sleeves rolled up to their shoulders, and one of them with a pail in his hand, stood arrested in their work. And in the front of the spectators was Alick Hudson, a sleepy-looking youth of twenty, who started and took his hands out of his pockets at sight of Elinor. Mr. Hudson himself came walking briskly round the corner, swinging his cane with the air of a man who was afraid of being too late.

'Didn't I tell you?' said Compton, pressing Elinor's arm.

As the tootle-te-too went on, other spectators appeared—the two Miss Hills, one putting on her hat, the other hastily buttoning her jacket as they hurried up. 'Oh, you here, Elinor! What fun! We all run as if we were six years old. I'm going to engage the man to come round and do it opposite Rosebank to amuse mother. She likes it as much as any of us,

though she doesn't see very well, poor dear, nor hear either. But we must always consider that the old have not many amusements,' said the elder Miss Hill.

'Though mother amuses herself wonderfully with her knitting,' said Miss Sarah. 'There's a sofa-cover on the stocks for you, Elinor.'

It appeared to be only at this moment that the sisters became aware of the presence of 'the gentleman' by whom Elinor stood. They had been too busy with their uncompleted toilettes to observe him at first. But now that Miss Hill's hat was settled to her satisfaction, and the blue veil tied over her face as she liked it to be, and Miss Sarah had at last succeeded, after two false starts, in buttoning her jacket straight, their attention was released for other details. They both gave a glance over Elinor at the tall figure on the other side, and then looked at each other with a mutual little 'Oh!' and nod of recognition. Then Miss Hill took the initiative as became her dignity. 'I hope you are going to introduce us to your companion, Elinor,' she said. 'Oh, Mr. Compton, how do you do? We are delighted to make your acquaintance, I am sure. It is charming to have an opportunity of seeing a

person of so much importance to us all, our dear Elinor's intended. I hope you know what a prize you are getting. You might have sought the whole country over and you wouldn't have found a girl like her. I don't know how we shall endure your name when you carry her away.'

'Except, indeed,' said Miss Sarah, 'that it will be Elinor's name too.'

'So here we all are again,' said the Rector, gazing down tranquilly upon his flock, 'not able to resist a little histrionic exhibition—and Mr. Compton too, fresh from the great world. I daresay our good friend Mrs. Basset would hand us out some chairs. No Englishman can resist Punch. Alick, my boy, you ought to be at your work. It will not do to neglect your lessons when you are so near your exam.'

'No Englishman, father, can resist Punch,' said the lad: at which the two ostlers and the landlord of the Bull's Head, who was standing with his hands in his pockets in his own doorway, laughed loud.

'Had the old fellow there,' said Compton, which was the first observation he had made. The ladies looked at him with some horror, and

Alick a little flustered, half pleased, half horrified, by this support, while the Rector laughed, but stiffly *au bout des lèvres.* He was not accustomed to be called an old fellow in his own parish.

'The old fellows, as you elegantly say, Mr. Compton, have always the worst of it in a popular assembly. Elinor, here is a chair for you, my love. Another one please, Mrs. Basset, for I see Miss Dale coming up this way.'

'By Jove,' said Compton under his breath. 'Elinor, here's the one that knows society. I hope she isn't such an old guy as the rest.'

'Oh, Phil, be good!' said Elinor, 'or let us go away, which would be the best.'

'Not a bit,' he said. 'Let's see the show. I say, old man, where are you from last?'

'Down from Guildford ways, guv'nor—awful bad trade; not taken a bob, s' help me, not for three days, and bed and board to get off o' that, me and my mate.'

'Well, here is a nice little party for you, my man,' said the Rector, 'it is not often you have such an audience—nor would I encourage it, indeed, if it were not so purely English an exhibition.'

'Master,' said the showman, 'worst of it is,

nobody pays till we've done the show, and then they goes away, and they've got it, don't you see, and we can't have it back once it's in their insides, and there ain't nothink then, neither for my mate nor me.'

'Here's for you, old fellow,' said Phil. He took a sovereign from his waistcoat pocket and chucked it with his thumbnail into the man's hand, who looked at it with astonished delight, tossed it into the air with a grin, a 'thank'ee, gentleman!' and a call to his 'mate,' who immediately began the ever-exciting, ever-amusing drama. The thrill of sensation which ran through the little assembly at this incident was wonderful. The children all turned from Punch to regard with large open eyes and mouths the gentleman who had given a gold sovereign to the showman. Alick Hudson looked at him with a grin of pleasure, a blush of envy on his face; the Rector, with an expression of horror, slightly shaking his head; the Miss Hills with admiration yet dismay. 'Goodness, Sarah, they'll never come now and do it for a shilling to amuse mother!' the elder of the sisters said.

Miss Dale came hurrying up while still the sensation lasted. 'Here is a chair for you,

Mary,' said her brother-in-law, 'and the play is just going to begin. I can't help shaking my head when I think of it, but still you must hear what has just happened. Mr. Compton, let me present you to my sister-in-law, Miss Dale. Mr. Compton has made the widow's heart, nay, not the widow's, but the showman's, heart to sing. He has presented our friend with a——'

'Mind you,' said Phil, from behind Elinor's shoulders, 'I've paid the fellow only for two.'

At which the showman turned and winked at the Rector. To think that such a piece of audacity could be! A dingy fellow in a velveteen coat, with a spotted handkerchief round his neck, and a battered hat on his unkempt locks, with Pan's pipes at his mouth and a drum tied round his waist—winked at the Rector! Mr. Hudson fell back a step, and his very lips were livid with the indignity. He had to support himself on the back of the chair he had just given to Miss Dale.

'I think we are all forgetting our different positions in this world,' he said.

'I ain't,' said the showman, 'not taking no advantage through the gentleman's noble ways. He's a lord, he is, I don't make no doubt. And

we're paid. Take the good of it, guv'nor, and welcome; all them as is here is welcome. My mate and I are too well paid. A gentleman like that good gentleman, as is sweet upon a pretty young lady, and an open 'eart a-cause of her, I just wish we could find one at every station; don't you, Joe?'

Joe assented, in the person of Mr. Punch, with a horrible squeak from within the tent.

The sensations of Elinor during this episode were peculiar and full of mingled emotion. It is impossible to deny that she was proud of the effect produced by her lover. The sovereign chucked into the showman's hand was a cheap way of purchasing a little success, and yet it dazzled Elinor, and made her eyelids droop and her cheek light up with the glow of pleasure. Amid all the people who would search for pennies, or perhaps painfully and not without reluctance produce a sixpence to reward the humble artists, there was something in the careless familiarity and indifference which tossed a gold coin at them which was calculated to charm the youthful observer. Elinor felt the same mixture of pleasure and envy which had moved Alick Hudson; yet it was not envy, for was not he

her own who did this thing which she would have liked to have done herself, overwhelming the poor tramps with delight? Elinor knew, as Alick also did, that it would never have occurred to her to do it. She would have been glad to be kind to the poor men, to give them a good meal, to speak to Basset at the Bull's Head in their favour that they might be taken in for the night and made comfortable, but to open her purse and take a real sovereign from it, a whole potential pound, would not have come into her head. Had such a thing been done, for instance, by the united subscriptions of the party, in case of some peculiarly touching situation, the illness of a wife, the loss of a child, it would have been done solemnly, the Rector calling the men up, making a little speech to them, telling them how all the ladies and gentlemen had united to make up this, and how they must be careful not to spend it unworthily. Elinor thought she could see the little scene, and the Rector improving the occasion. Whereas Phil spun the money through the air into the man's ready hand as if it had been a joke, a trick of agility. Elinor saw that everybody was much impressed with the incident, and her heart went forth upon a flood

of satisfaction and content. And it was no premeditated triumph. It was so noble, so accidental, so entirely out of his good heart!

When he hurried her home at the end of the performance, that Mrs. Dennistoun might not be kept waiting, the previous events of the afternoon, and all that happened in the copse and garden, had faded out of Elinor's mind. She forgot Stanfield and the sixth and everything about it. Her embarrassment and trouble were gone. She went in gaily and told her mother all about this wonderful incident. 'The Rector was trying for a sixpence. But, mamma, Phil must not be so ready with his sovereigns, must he? We shall have nothing to live upon if he goes chucking sovereigns at every Punch and Judy he may meet.'

CHAPTER XIII.

PHIL COMPTON went off next morning by an early train, having in the meanwhile improved the impression of him left upon the family in general, and specially upon Mrs. Dennistoun, to whom he had talked with enthusiasm about Elinor, expressed indeed in terms unusual to her ears, but perhaps only more piquant on that account, which greatly conciliated the mother. 'Don't you think,' said the Honourable Phil, 'because I speak a little free and am not one for tall talk, that I don't know what she is. I've got no poetry in me, but for the freest goer and the highest spirit, without a bit of vice in her, there never was one like Nell. The girls of my set, they're not worthy to tie her shoes—thing I most regret is taking her among a lot that are not half good enough for her. But you can't help your relations,

can you? and you have to stick to them for dozens of reasons. There's the Jew, when you know her she's not such a bad sort—not generous, as you may see from what she's given Nell, the old screw: but yet in her own way she stands by a fellow, and we'll need it, not having just the Bank of England behind us. Her husband, old Prestwich, isn't bad for a man that has made his own money, and they've got a jolly house, always something going on.'

'But I hope,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, 'that as soon as these autumn visits are over you will have a house of your own.'

'Oh, that!' said Compton, with a wave of his hand, which left it in some doubt whether he was simply throwing off the suggestion, or treating it as a foregone conclusion of which there could be no doubt. 'Nell,' he went on, 'gets on with the Jew like a house on fire—you see they don't clash. Nell ain't one of the mannish sort, and she doesn't flirt—at least not as far as I've seen——'

'I should hope not, indeed,' said Mrs. Dennistoun.

'Oh, I'm not one of your curmudgeons. Where's the harm? But she don't, and there's an end of it. She keeps herself to herself, and

lets the Jew go ahead, and think she's the attraction. And she'll please the old lord down to the ground. For he's an old-fashioned old coon, and likes what he calls *tenue*, don't you know: but the end is, there ain't one of them that can hold a candle to Nell. And I should not wonder a bit if she made a change in the lot of us. Conversion of a family by the influence of a pious wife, don't you know. Sort of thing that they make tracts out of. Capital thing, it would be,' said Phil, philosophically, 'for some of us have been going a pace——'

'Mr. Compton,' said Mrs. Dennistoun solemnly, 'I don't understand very well what you mean by these phrases. They may be much more innocent than they seem to a country lady's ears. But I implore you to keep my Elinor clear of anything that you call going the pace. It must mean something very unlike her, whatever it means. She has been used to a very quiet, orderly life. Don't hurry her off into a whirl of society, or among noisy gay people. Indeed I can assure you that the more you have her to yourself the more you will be happy in her. She is the brightest companion, the most entertaining —— Oh, Mr. Compton!'

'I think it's about time, now, mater, to call me Phil.'

She smiled, with the tears in her eyes, and held out her hand. 'Philip, then,' she said, 'to make a little difference. Now remember what I say. It is only in the sacredness of her home that you will know what is in Elinor. One is never dull with her. She has her own opinions—her bright way of looking at things—as you know. It is, perhaps, a strange thing for a mother to say, but she will amuse you, Philip; she is such company. You will never be dull with Elinor: she has so much in her, which will come out in society, it is true, but never so brightly as between you two alone.'

This did not seem to have quite the effect upon the almost-bridegroom which the mother intended. 'Perhaps' (she said to herself) 'he was a little affected by the thought' (which she kept so completely out of the conversation) 'of the loss she herself was about to undergo.' At all events, his face was not so bright as in the vision of that sweet prospect held before him it ought to have been.

'The fact is,' he said, 'she knows a deal more than I do, or ever will. It's she that will be the

one to look blue when she finds herself alone with a fool of a fellow that doesn't know a book from a brick. That's the thing I'm most afraid —— As for society, she can have her pick of that,' he added, brightening up, 'I'll not bind her down.'

'You may be sure she'll prefer you to all the world.'

He shrugged his shoulders a little.

'They say it's always a leap in the dark,' he said, 'for how's she to know the sort of fellow I am with what she sees of me here? But I promise you I'll do my best to take her in, and keep her in that delusion, for her good—making believe to be all that's virtuous: and perhaps not a bad way—some of it may stick. Come, mater, don't look so horrified. I'm not of the Cousin John sort, but there may be something decent in me after all.'

'I am sure,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, 'that you will try to make her happy, Philip.' She was crying by this time, which was a thing very odious to Phil. He took her by both hands and gave her a hearty kiss, which was a thing for which she was not at all prepared.

'I'll do by her——' he said, with a murmur

which sounded like an oath, 'as well as I know how.'

Perhaps this was not the very greatest comfort to her mother, but it was the best she was at all likely to get from a man so entirely different in all ways from her own species. She had her cry out quietly while he went off to get his bag. The pony carriage was at the door in which Elinor was to drive him to the station, and a minute after Mrs. Dennistoun heard his voice in the hall calling to his Nell, his old girl, in terms which went against all the mother's prejudices of soft and reverent speech. To have her carefully-trained child, her Elinor, whom every one had praised and honoured, her maiden-princess so high apart from all such familiarity, addressed so, gave the old-fashioned lady a pang. It meant nothing but love and kindness, she said to herself. He reverenced Elinor as much as it was in such a man to do. He meant with all his heart to do by her as well as he knew how. It was as fantastic to object to his natural language as it would be to object to a Frenchman speaking French. That was his tongue, the only utterance he knew—— She dried her eyes and went out to the door to see them start. The

sun was blazing over all the brilliant autumnal colours of the garden, though it was still full and brilliant summer in the September morning, and only the asters and dahlias replacing the roses betrayed the turn of the season. And nothing could be more bright than the face of Elinor as she sat in the homely little carriage, with the reins gathered up in her hand. He was going away, indeed, but in a week he was coming back. Philip, as Mrs. Dennistoun now called him with dignity, yet a little beginning of affection, packed up his long limbs as well as he could in the small space. 'I believe she'll spill us on the road,' he said, 'or bring back the shandrydan with a hole in it.'

'There is too much of you, Phil,' said Elinor, giving the staid pony a quiet touch.

'I should like some of those fellows to see me,' he said, 'joggled off to market like a basket of eggs; but don't smash me, Nell, on the way.'

Mrs. Dennistoun stood on the steps looking after them, or rather, listening after them, for they had soon turned the corner of the house and were gone. She heard them jogging over the stony road, and the sound of their voices in the air for a long time after they were out of

sight—the air was so still and so close, nothing in it to break the sound. The atmosphere was all sunshine, not a cloud upon the sky, scarcely a breath stirring over those hill-tops, which had almost the effect of a mountainous landscape, being the highest ground in all the visible space. Along the other side of the combe, where the road became visible, there were gleams of heather brilliant under the dark foliage of the firs. She sat down in the porch and waited to see them pass; there was a sorrowful background to her thoughts, but for the moment she was not actually sad, if perhaps a little forlorn. They had gone away leaving her alone, but yet in an hour or two Elinor was coming back. Time enough to think of the final parting. Next week Elinor would go and would not return. Mrs. Dennistoun held on by both hands to to-day and would not think of that future, near as it was. She waited in a hush of feeling, so near to great commotions of the heart and mind, but holding them at a distance in a suspense of all thought, till the shandrydan appeared in the opening of the road. They were thinking of her, for she saw a gleam of white, the waving of a handkerchief, as the little carriage trundled along the

road, and for a moment the tears again blinded her eyes. But Mrs. Dennistoun was very reasonable. She got up from the cottage porch after the pony carriage had passed in the distance, with that determination to make the best of it, which is the inspiration of so many women's lives.

And what a drive the others had through the sunshine—or at least Elinor! You can never tell by what shadows a man's thoughts may be haunted, who is a man of the world, and has had many other things to occupy him besides this vision of love. But the girl had no shadows. The parting which was before her was not near enough to harm as yet, and she was still able to think, in her ignorance of the world, that even parting was much more in appearance than in reality, and that she would always be running home, always going upon long visits brightening everything, instead of saddening. But even had she been going to the end of the world with her husband next week, Elinor would still have been happy to-day. The sunshine itself was enough to go to any one's head, and the pony stepped out so that Phil had the grace to be ashamed of his reflections upon 'the old girl.' They got

to the station too early for the train, and had half an hour's stroll together, with all the railway porters looking on admiring. They all knew Miss Dennistoun from her childhood, and they were interested in her 'young man.'

'And to think you will be in Ireland to-morrow,' said Elinor, 'over the sea, with the Channel between us—in another island!'

'I don't see much that's wonderful in that,' said Phil, 'the boat goes every day.'

'Oh, there's nothing wonderful about the boat. Hundreds might go, and I shouldn't mind, but you—— It's strange to think of you going off into a world I don't know at all—and then coming back.'

'To take you off to that world you don't know, Nell; and then the time will come when you will know it as well as I do, and more too; and be able to set me down in my proper place.'

'What is your proper place? Your place will always be the same. Phil, you've been so good to me this time; you've made everybody like you so. Mamma—that's the best of all. She was a little—I can't say jealous, that is not the right word, but uncertain and frightened—which just means that she did not know you, Phil;

now you've condescended to let yourself be known.'

'Have I, Nell? I've had more luck than meaning if that's so.'

''Tis that you've condescended to let yourself be known. A man has such odious pride. He likes to show himself all on the wrong side, to brave people's opinions—as if it was better to be liked for the badness in you than for the goodness in you!'

'What's the goodness in me, Nell? I'd like to know, and then I can have it ready in other emergencies and serve it out as it is wanted.'

'Oh, Phil! the goodness in you is—yourself. You can't help being nice when you throw off those society airs. When you are talking with Mariamne and all that set of people——'

'Why can't you call her Jew? life is too short to say all those syllables.'

'I don't like you to call her Jew. It's unkind. I don't think she deserves it. It's a sort of an insult.'

'Shut up, Nell. It's her name and that's enough. Mar-ry-am-ne! It's a beast of a name to begin with. And do you think any of us has got time to say as much as that for one woman?

Oh, I suppose I'm fond of her—as men are of their sisters. She is not a bad sort—mean as her name, and never fond of parting with her money—but stands by a fellow in a kind of a way all the same.'

'I'll never call her Jew,' said Elinor; 'and, Phil, all this wonderful amount of things you have to do is simply—nothing. What do you ever do? It is the people who do things that have time to spare. I know one——'

'Don't come down on me, Nell, again with that eternal Cousin John.'

'Phil! I never think of him till you put him into my head. I was thinking of a gentleman who writes——'

'Rubbish, Nell! What have I to do with men that write, or you either? We are none of us of that sort. I do what my set do, and more—for there was this director business; and I should never mind a bit of work that was well paid, like attending Board meetings and so forth, or signing my name to papers.'

'What, without reading them, Phil?'

'Don't come over a fellow with your cleverness, Nell! I am not a reader, but I should take good care I knew what was in the papers

before I signed them, I can tell you. Eh! you'd like me to slave, to get you luxuries, you little exacting Nell.'

'Yes, Phil,' she said, 'I'd like to think you were working for our living. I should indeed. It seems somehow so much finer—so real a life. And I should work at home.'

'A great deal you would work,' he said laughing, 'with those scraps of fingers! Let's hear what you would do—bits of little pictures, or impossible things in pincushions, or so forth—and walk out in your most becoming bonnet to force them down some poor shopkeeper's throat?'

'Phil!' she said, 'how contemptuous you are of my efforts. But I never thought of either sketches or pincushions. I should work at home to keep the house nice—to look after the servants, and guide the cook, and see that you had nice dinners.'

'And warm my slippers by the parlour fire,' said Phil. 'That's too domestic, Nell, for you and me.'

'But we are going to be very domestic, Phil.'

'Are we? Not if I know it; yawn our heads off, and get to hate one another. Not for me, Nell. You'll find yourself up to the eyes in

engagements before you know where you are. No, no, old girl, you may do a deal with me, but you don't make a domestic man of Phil Compton. Time enough for that when we've had our fling.'

'I don't want any fling, Phil,' she said, clinging a little closer to his arm.

'But I do, my pet, in the person of Benedick the married man. Don't you think I want to show all the fellows what a stunning little wife I've got? and all the women I used to flirt with——'

'Did you use to flirt much with them, Phil?'

'You didn't think I flirted with the men, did you? like you did,' said Phil, who was not particular about his grammar. 'I want to show you off a bit, Nell. When we go down to the governor's, there you can be as domestic as you like. That's the line to take with him, and pays too if you do it well.'

'Oh, don't talk as if you were always calculating for your advantage,' she said, 'for you are not, Phil. You are not a prudent person, but a horrid extravagant spendthrift; if you go on chucking sovereigns about as you did yesterday.'

'Well,' he said, laughing, 'wasn't it well spent?

Didn't I make your Rector open his old eyes, and stop the mouths of the old maids? I don't throw away sovereigns in a general way, Nell, only when there's a purpose in it. But I think I did them all finely that time—had them on toast, eh?'

'You made an impression, if that is what you mean; but I confess I thought you did it out of kindness, Phil.'

'To the Punch and Judy? catch me! Sovereigns ain't plentiful enough for that. You little exacting thing, ain't you pleased, when I did it to please you, and get you credit among your friends?'

'It was very kind of you, I'm sure, Phil,' she said, very soberly, 'but I should so much rather you had not thought of that. A shilling would have done just as well, and they would have got a bed at the Bull's Head, and been quite kindly treated. Is this your train coming? It's a little too soon, I think.'

'Thanks for the compliment, Nell. It is really late,' he said, looking at his watch, 'but the time flies, don't it, pet, when you and I are together? Here, you fellow, put my bag in a smoking carriage. And now, you darling, we've got to part; only for a little time, Nell.'

'Only for a week,' she said, with a smile and a tear.

'Not so long—a rush along the rail, a blow on the sea, and then back again. I shall only be a day over there, and then—bless you, Nell. Good-bye—take care of yourself, my little duck; take care of yourself for me.'

'Good-bye,' said Elinor, with a little quiver of her lip. A parting at a roadside station is a very abrupt affair. The train stops, the passenger is shoved in, there is a clanging of the doors, and in a moment it is gone. She had scarcely realised that the hour had come before he was whirled off from her, and the swinging line of carriages disappeared round the next curve. She stood looking vaguely after it till the old porter came up, who had known her ever since she was a child.

'Beg your pardon, miss, but the pony is a-waiting,' he said. And then he uttered his sympathy in the form of a question: 'Coming back very soon, miss, ain't the gentleman?' he said.

'Oh, yes; very soon,' she said, rousing herself up.

'And if I may make bold to say it, miss,' said the porter, 'an open-hearted gentleman as ever I

see. There's many as gives us a threepenny for more than I've done for 'im. And look at what he's give me,' he said, showing the half-crown in his hand.

Did he do that from calculation to please her, ungracious girl as she was, who was so hard to please? But he never could have known that she would see it. She walked through the little station to the pony carriage, feeling that all the eyes of the people about were upon her. They were all sympathetic, all equally aware that she had just parted with her lover: all ready to cheer her, if she had given them an opportunity, by reminding her of his early return. The old porter followed her out, and assisted at her ascent into the pony carriage. He said solemnly, 'And an 'andsome gentleman, miss, as ever I see,' as he fastened the apron over her feet. She gave him a friendly nod as she drove away.

How dreadful it is to be so sensitive, to receive a wound so easily! Elinor was vexed more than she could say by her lover's denial of the reckless generosity with which she had credited him. To think that he had done it in order to produce the effect which had given her so distinct a sensation of pleasure changed that effect into absolute pain.

And yet, in the fantastic susceptibility of her nature, there was something in old Judkin's half-crown which soothed her again. A shilling would have been generous, Elinor said to herself, with a feminine appreciation of the difference of small things as well as great, whereas half-a-crown was lavish—ergo, he gave the sovereign also out of natural prodigality as she had hoped, not out of calculation as he said. She drove soberly home, thinking over all these things, in a mood very different from that triumphant happiness with which she started from the cottage with Phil by her side. The sunshine was still as bright, but it had taken an air of routine and commonplace to Elinor. It had come to be only the common day, not the glory and freshness of the morning. She felt herself, as she had never done before, on the edge of a world unknown, where everything would be new to her, where—it was possible—that which awaited her might not be unmixed happiness, might even be the reverse. It is seldom that a girl on the eve of marriage either thinks this or acknowledges to herself that she thinks it. Elinor did so involuntarily, without thinking upon her thought. Perhaps it would not be unmixed happiness. Strange clouds

seemed to hang upon the horizon, ready to roll up in tragic darkness and gloom. Oh, no, not tragic, only commonplace, she said to herself; opaqueness, not blackness. But yet it was ominous and lowering, that distant sky.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE days of the last week hurried along like the grains of sand out of an hour-glass when they are nearly gone. It is true that almost everything was done — a few little bits of stitching, a few things still to be 'got up' alone remaining, a handkerchief to mark with Elinor's name, a bit of lace to arrange, just enough to keep up a possibility of something to do for Mrs. Dennistoun in the blank of all other possibilities—for to interest herself or to occupy herself about anything that should be wanted beyond that awful limit of the wedding-day was of course out of the question. Life seemed to stop there for the mother, as it was virtually to begin for the child; though indeed to Elinor also, notwithstanding her love, it was visible more in the light of a point at which all the known and certain ended, and where the unknown and almost inconceivable began. The

curious thing was that this barrier which was placed across life for them both, got somehow between them in those last days which should have been the most tender climax of their intercourse. They had a thousand things to say to each other, but they said very little. In the evening after dinner, whether they went out into the garden together to watch the setting of the young moon, or whether they sat together in that room which had witnessed all Elinor's commencements of life, free to talk as no one else in the world could ever talk to either of them, they said very little to each other, and what they said was of the most commonplace kind. 'It is a lovely night; how clear one can see the road on the other side of the combe!' 'And what a bright star that is close to the moon! I wish I knew a little more about the stars.' 'They are just as beautiful,' Mrs. Dennistoun would say, 'as if you knew everything about them, Elinor.' 'Are you cold, mamma? I am sure I can see you shiver. Shall I run and get you a shawl?' 'It is a little chilly: but perhaps it will be as well to go in now,' the mother said. And then indoors: 'Do you think you will like this lace made up as a jabot, Elinor?' 'You are giving me all your

pretty things, though you know you understand lace much better than I do.' 'Oh, that doesn't matter,' Mrs. Dennistoun said hurriedly; 'that is a taste which comes with time. You will like it as well as I do when you are as old as I am.' 'You are not so dreadfully old, mamma.' 'No, that's the worst of it,' Mrs. Dennistoun would say, and then break out into a laugh. 'Look at the shadow that handkerchief makes—how fantastic it is!' she cried. She neither cared for the moon, nor for the quaintness of the shadows, nor for the lace which she was pulling into dainty folds to show its delicate pattern—for none of all these things, but for her only child, who was going from her, and to whom she had a hundred, and yet a hundred, things to say: but none of them ever came from her lips.

'Mary Dale has not seen your things, Elinor: she asked if she might come to-morrow.'

'I think we might have had to-morrow to ourselves, mamma—the last day all by ourselves before those people begin to arrive.'

'Yes, I think so too; but it is difficult to say no, and as she was not here when the others came—— She is the greatest critic in the parish. She will have so much to say.'

'I daresay it may be fun,' said Elinor, brightening up a little, 'and of course anyhow Alice must have come to talk about her dress. I am tired of those bridesmaids' dresses; they are really of so little consequence.' Elinor was not vain, to speak of, but she thought it improbable that when she was there any one would look much at the bridesmaids' dresses. For one thing, to be sure, the bride is always the central figure, and then there were but two bridesmaids, which diminished the interest; and then—well, it had to be allowed at the end of all, that, though her closest friends, neither Alice Hudson nor Mary Tatham were, to look at, very interesting girls.

'They are of great consequence to them,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, with the faintest smile.

'I didn't mean that, of course,' said Elinor, with a blush; 'only I never should have worried about my own dress, which after all is the most important, as Alice does about hers.'

'Which nobody will look at,' Mrs. Dennistoun said.

'I did not say that: but to tell the truth, it is a pity for the girls that the men will not quite be—just of their world, you know. Oh, mamma, you know it is not that I think anything of that, but I

am sorry for Alice and Mary. Mr. Bolsover and the other gentlemen will not take that trouble which country neighbours, or—or John's friends from the Temple might have done.'

'Why do you speak of John's friends from the Temple, Elinor?'

'Mamma! for no reason at all. Why should I? They were the only other men I could think of.'

'Elinor, did John ever give you any reason to think——'

'Mamma,' cried Elinor again, with double vehemence, her countenance all ablaze, 'of course he never did! how could you think such foolish things?'

'Well, my dear,' said her mother, 'I am very glad he did not; it will prevent any embarrassment between him and you—for I must always believe——'

'Don't, please, oh, don't! it would make me miserable; it would take all my happiness away.'

Mrs. Dennistoun said nothing, but she sighed—a very small, infinitesimal sigh—and there was a moment's silence, during which perhaps that sigh pervaded the atmosphere with a sort of breath of what might have been. After a moment she spoke again:

'I hope you have not packed up your ornaments yet, Elinor. You must leave them to the very last, for Mary would like to see that beautiful necklace. What do you think you shall wear on the day?'

'Nothing,' said Elinor, promptly. She was about to add, 'I have nothing good enough,' but paused in time.

'Not my little star? It would look very well, my darling, to fix your veil on. The diamonds are very good, though perhaps a little old-fashioned; you might get them reset. But—your father gave it me like that.'

'I would not change it a bit, mamma, for anything in the world.'

'Thanks, my dearest. I thought that was how you would feel about it. It is not very big, of course, but it really is very good.'

'Then I will wear it, mamma, if it will please you, but nothing else.'

'It would please me: it would be like having something from your father. I think we had less idea of ornaments in my day. I cannot tell you how proud I was of my diamond star. I should like to put it in for you myself, Elinor.'

'Oh, mamma!' This was the nearest point

they had come to that outburst of two full hearts which both of them would have called breaking down. Mrs. Dennistoun saw it and was frightened. She thought it would be betraying to Elinor what she wished her never to know, the unspeakable desolation to which she was looking forward when her child was taken from her. Elinor's exclamation, too, was a protest against the imminent breaking down. They both came back with a hurry, with a panting breath, to safer ground.

'Yes, that's what I regret,' she said. 'Mr. Bolsover and Harry Compton will laugh a little at the Rectory. They will not be so—nice as young men of their own kind.'

'The Rectory people are just as well born as any of us, Elinor.'

'Oh, precisely, mamma: I know that; but we too—— It is what they call a different *monde*. I don't think it is half so nice a *monde*,' said the girl, feeling that she had gone further than she intended to do; 'but you know, mamma——'

'I know, Elinor: but I scarcely expected from you——'

'Oh,' cried Elinor again, in exasperation, 'if you think that I share that feeling! I think it

odious, I think their *monde* is vulgar, nasty, miserable! I think——'

'Don't go too far the other way, Elinor. Your husband will be of it, and you must learn to like it. You think, perhaps, all that is new to me?'

'No,' said Elinor, her bright eyes, all the brighter for tears, falling before her mother's look. 'I know, of course, that you have seen—all kinds——'

But she faltered a little, for she did not believe that her mother was acquainted with Phil's circle and their wonderful ways.

'They will be civil enough,' she went on, hurriedly, 'and as everybody chaffs so much nowadays, they will, perhaps, never be found out. But I don't like it for my friends.'

'They will chaff me also, no doubt,' Mrs. Dennistoun said.

'Oh, *you*, mamma! they are not such fools as that,' cried poor Elinor; but in her own mind she did not feel confident that there was any such limitation to their folly. Mrs. Dennistoun laughed a little to herself, which was, perhaps, more alarming than that other moment when she was almost ready to cry.

'You had better wear Lord St. Serf's ring,' she said, after a moment, with a tone of faint derision which Elinor knew.

'You might as well tell me,' cried the bride, 'to wear Lady Mariamne's revolving dishes. No, I will wear nothing, nothing but your star.'

'You have got nothing half so nice,' said the mother. Oh yes, it was a little revenge upon those people who were taking her daughter from her, and who thought themselves at liberty to jeer at all her friends; but as was perhaps inevitable it touched Elinor a little too. She restrained herself from some retort with a sense of extreme and almost indignant self-control: though what retort Elinor could have made I cannot tell. It was much 'nicer' than anything else she had. None of Phil Compton's great friends, who were not of the same *monde* as the people at Windyhill, had offered his bride anything to compare with the diamonds which her father had given to her mother before she was born. And Elinor was quite aware of the truth of what her mother said. But she would have liked to make a retort—to say something smart and piquant and witty in return.

And thus the evening was lost, the evening in

which there was so much to say, one of the three only, no more, that were left.

Miss Dale came next day to see 'the things,' and was very amiable: but the only thing in this visit which affected Elinor's mind was a curious little unexpected assault this lady made upon her when she was going away. Elinor had gone out with her to the porch, according to the courteous usage of the house. But when they had reached that shady place, from which the green combe and the blue distance were visible, stretching far into the soft autumnal mists of the evening, Mary Dale turned upon her and asked her suddenly, 'What night was it that Mr. Compton came here?'

Elinor was much startled, but she did not lose her self-possession. All the trouble about that date had disappeared out of her mind in the stress and urgency of other things. She cast back her mind with an effort and asked herself what the conflict and uncertainty of which she was dimly conscious had been? It came back to her dimly without any of the pain that had been in it. 'It was on the sixth,' she said quietly, without excitement. She could scarcely recall to her mind what it was that had moved her so

much in respect to this date only a little time ago.

'Oh, you must be mistaken, Elinor. I saw him coming up from the station. It was later than that. It was, if I were to give my life for it, Thursday night.'

This was four or five nights before and a haze of uncertainty had fallen on all things so remote. But Elinor cast her eyes upon the calendar in the hall and calm possessed her breast. 'It was the sixth,' she said with composed tones, as certain as of anything she had ever known in the course of her life.

'Well, I suppose you must know,' said Mary Dale.

CHAPTER XV.

'Look at that, Elinor,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, next day, when she had read, twice over, a letter, large and emblazoned with a very big monogram, which Elinor, well perceiving from whom it came, had furtively watched the effect of from behind an exceeding small letter of her own. Phil was not remarkable as a correspondent: his style was that of the primitive mind which hopes its correspondent is well, 'as this leaves me.' He had never much more to say.

'From Mariamne, mamma?'

'She takes great pains to make us certain of that fact at least,' Mrs. Dennistoun said; which indeed was very true, for the name of the writer was sprawled in gilt letters half over the sheet. And this was how it ran:—

'Dear Mrs. Dennistoun,

'I have been thinking what a great pity it would be to bore you with me, and my maid, and

all my belongings. I am so silly that I can never be happy without dragging a lot of things about with me—dogs, and people, and so forth. Going to town in September is dreadful, but it is rather *chic* to do a thing that is quite out of the way, and one may perhaps pick up a little fun in the evening. So, if you don't mind, instead of inflicting Fifine and Bijou and Leocadie, not to mention some people that might be with me, upon you, and putting your house all out of order, as these odious little dogs do when people are not used to them—I will come down by the train, which I hope arrives quite punctually, in time to see poor Phil turned off. I am sure you will be so kind as to send a carriage for me to the railway. We shall be probably a party of four, and I hear from Phil you are so hospitable and kind that I need not hesitate to bring my friends to breakfast after it's all over. I hope Phil will go through it like a man, and I wouldn't for worlds deprive him of the support of his family. Love to Nell. I am,

'Yours truly,

'MARIAMNE PRESTWICH.'

'The first name very big and the second very

small,' said Mrs. Dennistoun as she received the letter back.

'I am sure we are much obliged to her for not coming, mamma!'

'Perhaps—but not for this announcement of her not coming. I don't wish to say anything against your new relations, Elinor——'

'You need not put any restraint upon yourself in consideration of my feelings,' said Elinor, with a flush of annoyance.

And this made Mrs. Dennistoun pause. They ate their breakfast, which was a very light meal, in silence. It was the day before the wedding. The rooms downstairs had been carefully prepared for Phil's sister. Though Mrs. Dennistoun was too proud to say anything about it, she had taken great pains to make these pretty rooms as much like a fine lady's chamber as had been possible. She had put up new curtains, and a Persian carpet, and looked out of her stores all the pretty things she could find to decorate the two rooms of the little apartment. She had gone in on the way downstairs to take a final survey, and it seemed to her that they were very pretty. No picture could have been more beautiful than the view from the long low lattice window, in

which, as in a frame, was set the foreground of the copse with its glimpses of ruddy heather and the long sweep of the heights beyond, which stretched away into the infinite. That at least could not be surpassed anywhere; and the Persian carpet was like moss under foot, and the chairs luxurious—and there was a collection of old china in some open shelves which would have made the mouth of an amateur water. Well! it was Lady Mariamne's own loss if she preferred the chance of picking up a little fun in the evening, to spending the night decorously in that pretty apartment, and making further acquaintance with her new sister. It was entirely, Mrs. Dennistoun said to herself, a matter for her own choice. But she was much affronted all the same.

'It will be very inconvenient indeed sending a carriage for her, Elinor. Except the carriage that is to take you to church there is none good enough for this fine lady. I had concluded she would go in your uncle Tatham's carriage. It may be very fine to have a Lady Mariamne in one's party, but it is a great nuisance to have to change all one's arrangements at the last moment.'

'If you were to send the waggonette from the

Bull's Head, as rough as possible, with two of the farm horses, she would think it *genre*, if not *chic*——'

'I cannot put up with all this nonsense!' cried Mrs. Dennistoun, with a flush on her cheek. 'You are just as bad as they are, Elinor, to suggest such a thing! I have held my own place in society wherever I have been, and I don't choose to be condescended to or laughed at, in fact, by any visitor in the world!'

'Mamma! do you think any one would ever compare you with Mariamne—the Jew?'

'Don't exasperate me with those abominable nicknames. They will give you one next. She is an exceedingly ill-bred and ill-mannered woman. Picking up a little fun in the evening! What does she mean by picking up a little fun——'

'They will perhaps go to the theatre—a number of them; and as nobody is in town they will laugh very much at the kind of people, and perhaps the kind of play—and it will be a great joke ever after among themselves—for of course there will be a number of them together,' said Elinor, disclosing her acquaintance with the habits of her new family with downcast eyes.

'How can well-born people be so vulgar and

ill-bred?' cried Mrs. Dennistoun. 'I must say for Philip that though he is careless and not nearly so particular as I should like, still he is not like that. He has something of the politeness of the heart.'

Elinor did not raise her downcast eyes. Phil had been on his very good behaviour on the occasion of his last hurried visit, but she did not feel that she could answer even for Phil. 'I am very glad, anyhow, that she is not coming, mamma: at least we shall have the last night and the last morning to ourselves.'

Mrs. Dennistoun shook her head. 'The Tathams will be here,' she said; 'and everybody, to dinner—all the party. We must go now and see how we can enlarge the table. To-night's party will be the largest we have ever had in the Cottage.' She sighed a little and paused, restraining herself. 'We shall have no quiet evening—nor morning either—again; it will be a bustle and a rush. You and I will never have any more quiet evenings, Elinor: for when you come back it will be another thing.'

'Oh, mother!' cried Elinor, throwing herself into her mother's arms: and for a moment they stood closely clasped, feeling as if their hearts

would burst, yet very well aware, too, underneath, that any number of quiet evenings would be as the last, when, with hearts full of a thousand things to say to each other, they said almost nothing—which in some respects was worse than having no quiet evenings evermore.

In the afternoon Phil arrived, having returned from Ireland that morning, and paused only to refresh himself in the chambers which he still retained in town. He had met all his hunting friends during the three days he had been away; and though he retained a gallant appearance, and looked, as Alice Hudson thought, 'very aristocratic,' Mrs. Dennistoun caught with anxiety a worn-out look—the look of excitement, of nights without sleep, much smoke, and, perhaps, much wine, in his eyes. What a woman feels who has to hand over her spotless child, the most dear and pure thing upon earth, to a man fresh from those indulgences and dissipations which never seem harmless, and always are repellent to a woman, is not to be described. Fortunately the bride herself, in invincible ignorance and unconsciousness, seldom feels in that way. To Elinor her lover looked tired about the eyes, which was very well explained by his night journey, and by

the agitation of the moment. And, indeed, she did not see very much of Phil, who had his friends with him—his aide-de-camp, Bolsover, and his brother Harry. These three gentlemen carried an atmosphere of smoke and other scents with them into the lavender of the Rectory, which was too amazing in that hemisphere for words, and talked their own talk in the midst of the fringe of rustics who were their hosts, with a calm which was extraordinary, breaking into the midst of the Rector's long-winded, amiable sentences, and talking to each other over Mrs. Hudson's head. 'I say, Dick, don't you remember?' 'By Jove, Phil, you are too bad!' sounded, with many other such expressions and reminders, over the Rectory party, strictly silent round their own table, trying to make a courteous remark now and then, but confounded, in their simple country good manners, by the fine gentlemen. And then there was the dinner party at the Cottage in the evening, to which Mr. and Mrs. Hudson were invited. Such a dinner party! Old Mr. Tatham, who was a country gentleman from Dorsetshire, with his nice daughter, Mary Tatham, a quiet country young lady, accustomed, when she went into the world at all, to the

serious young men of the Temple, and John's much-occupied friends, who had their own asides about cases, and what So-and-so had said in court, but were much too well-bred before ladies to fall into 'shop'; and Mr. and Mrs. Hudson, who were such as we know them; and the bride's mother, a little anxious, but always debonair; and Elinor herself, in all the haze and sweet confusion of the great era which approached so closely. The three men made the strangest addition that can be conceived to the quiet guests; but things went better under the discipline of the dinner, especially as Sir John Huntingtower, who was a Master of the hounds and an old friend of the Dennistouns, was of the party, and Lady Huntingtower, who was an impressive person, and knew the world. This lady was very warm in her congratulations to Mrs. Dennistoun after dinner on the absence of Lady Mariamne. 'I think you are the luckiest woman that ever was to have got clear of that dreadful creature,' she said. 'Oh, there is nothing wrong about her that I know. She goes everywhere with her dogs and her *cavaliers servantes*. There's safety in numbers, my dear. She has always two of them at least hanging about her to fetch and

carry, and she thinks a great deal more of her dogs; but I can't think what you could have done with her here.'

'And what will my Elinor do in such a sphere?' the troubled mother permitted herself to say.

'Oh, if that were all,' said Lady Huntingtower, lifting up her fat hands—she was one of those who had protested against the marriage, but now that it had come to this point, and could not be broken off, the judicious woman thought it right to make the best of it—'Elinor need not be any the worse,' she said. 'Thank heaven, you are not obliged to be mixed up with your husband's sister. Elinor must take a line of her own. You should come to town yourself her first season, and help her on. You used to know plenty of people.'

'But they say,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, 'that it is so much better to leave a young couple to themselves, and that a mother is always in the way.'

'If I were you I would not pay the least attention to what they say. If you hold back too much they will say, "There was her own mother, knowing numbers of nice people, that never took the trouble to lend her a hand."'

'I hope,' said Mrs. Dennistoun, turning round immediately to this other aspect of affairs, 'that it never will be necessary for the world to interest itself at all in my child's affairs.'

'Well, of course, that is the best,' Lady Huntingtower allowed, 'if she just goes softly for a year or two till she feels her way.'

'But then she is so young, and so little accustomed to act for herself,' said the mother, with another change of flank.

'Oh, Elinor has a great deal of spirit. She must just make a stand against the Compton set and take her own line.'

Mrs. Hudson and Alice and Miss Tatham were at the other end of the room, exchanging a few criticisms under their breath, and disposed to think that they were neglected by their hostess for the greater personage with whom she was in such close conversation. And Lady Mariamne's defection was a great disappointment to them all. 'I should like to have seen a fine lady quite close,' said Mary (it was not, I think, usual to speak of 'smart' people in those days), 'one there could be no doubt about, a little fast and all that. I have seen them in town at a distance, but all the people we know are such country people.'

'My dear,' said Mrs. Hudson, primly, 'I don't like to hear you talk of any other kind. An English lady, I hope, whatever is her rank, can only be of one kind.'

'Oh, mamma, you know very well Lady Mariamne is as different from Lady Huntingtower as——'

'Don't mention names, my dear; it is not well-bred. The one is young, and naturally fond of gaiety; the other—well, is not quite so young, and stout, and all that.'

'Oh, that is all very well,' said Alice; 'but Aunt Mary says——'

Miss Dale was coming in the evening, and the Miss Hills, and the curate and the doctor, and various other people, who could not be asked to dinner, to whom it had been carefully explained (which, indeed, was a fact they knew) that to dine twelve people in the little dining-room of the Cottage was a feat which was accomplished with difficulty, and that more was impossible. Society at Windyhill was very tolerant and understanding on this point, for all the dining-rooms were small, except, indeed, when you come to talk of such places as Huntingtower—and they were very glad to be permitted to have a peep

of the bridegroom on these terms, or rather, if truth were told, of the bride, and how she was bearing herself so near the crisis of her fate. The bridegroom is seldom very interesting on such occasions. On the present occasion he was more interesting than usual, because he was the Honourable Philip, and because he had a reputation of which most people had heard something. There was a mixture of alarm and suspicion in respect to him which increased the excitement; and many remarks of varied kinds were made. 'I think the fellow's face quite bears out his character,' said the doctor to the Rector. 'What a man to trust a nice girl to!' Mr. Hudson felt that as the bridegroom was living under his roof he was partially responsible, and discouraged this pessimistic view. 'Mr. Compton has not, perhaps, had all the advantages one tries to secure for one's own son,' he said, 'but I have reason to believe that the things that have been said of him are much exaggerated.' 'Oh, advantages!' said the doctor, thinking of Alick, of whom it was his strongly expressed opinion that the fellow should be turned out to rough it, and not coddled up and spoiled at home. But while these remarks were going on, Miss Hill had been

expressing to the curate an entirely different view. 'I think he has a *beautiful* face,' she said with the emphasis some ladies use; 'a little worn, perhaps, with being too much in the world, and I wish he had a better colour. To me he looks delicate: but what delightful features, Mr. Whitebands, and what an aristocratic air!'

'He looks tremendously up to everything,' the curate said, with a faint tone of envy in his voice.

'Don't he just!' cried Alick Hudson. 'I should think there wasn't a thing he couldn't do —of things that men *do* do, don't you know,' cried that carefully trained boy, whose style was confused, though his meaning was good. But probably there were almost as many opinions about Phil as there were people in the room. His two backers-up stood in a corner—half intimidated, half contemptuous of the country people. 'Queer lot for Phil to fall among,' said Dick Bolsover. 'Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?' said Harry Compton, who had been about the world. 'Oh, bosh with your French, that nobody understands,' said the best man.

But in the meantime Phil was not there at all to be seen of men. He had stolen out into the

garden, where there was a white vision awaiting him in the milky moonlight. The autumn haze had come early this season, and the moon was misty, veiled with white amid a jumble of soft floating vapours in the sky. Elinor stood among the flowers, which showed some strange subdued tints of colours in the flooding of the white light, like a bit of consolidated moonlight in her white dress. She had a white shawl covering her from head to foot, with a corner thrown over her hair. What had they to say to each other that last night? Not much: nothing at all that had any information in it—whispers inaudible almost to each other. There was something in being together for this stolen moment, just on the eve of their being together for always, which had a charm of its own. After to-night, no stealing away, no escape to the garden, no little conspiracy to attain a meeting—the last of all those delightful schemings and devices. They started when they heard a sound from the house, and sped along the paths into the shadow like the conspirators they were—but never to conspire more after this last enthralling time.

'You're not frightened, Nell?'

'No—except a little. There is one thing——'

'What is it, my pet? If it's to the half of my kingdom, it shall be done.'

'Phil, we are going to be very good when we are together?—don't laugh—to help each other?'

He did laugh, low, not to be heard, but long. 'I shall have no temptation,' he said, 'to be anything but good, you little goose of a Nell,' taking it for a warning of possible jealousy to come.

'Oh, but I mean both of us—to help each other.'

'Why, Nell, I know you'll never go wrong——'

She gave him a little impatient shake. 'You will not understand me, Phil. We will try to be better than we've ever been. To be good—don't you know what that means?—in every way, before God.'

Her voice dropped very low, and he was for a moment overawed. 'You mean going to church, Nell?'

'I mean—yes, that for one thing; and many other things.'

'That's dropping rather strong upon a fellow,' he said, 'just at this moment, don't you think, when I must say yes to everything you say.'

'Oh, I don't mean it in that way: and I was

not thinking of church particularly; but to be good, very good, true and kind, in our hearts.'

'You are all that already, Nell.'

'Oh, no, not what I mean. When there are two of us instead of one we can do so much more.'

'Well, my pet, it's for you to make out the much more. I'm quite content with you as you are; it's me that you want to improve, and heaven knows there's plenty of room for that.'

'No, Phil, not you more than me,' she said.

'We'll choose a place where the sermon's short, and we'll see about it. You mean, little minx, to bind a man down to go to church, the night before his wedding day!'

And then there was a sound of movement indoors, and after a little while the bride appeared among the guests with a little more colour than usual, and an anxiously explanatory description of something she had been obliged to do; and the confused hour flew on with much sound of talking and very little understanding of what was said. And then all the visitors streamed away group after group into the moonlight, disappearing like ghosts under the shadow of the trees. Finally, the Rectory party went too, the three

mild ladies surrounded by an exciting circle of cigars; for Alick of course had broken all bounds, and even the Rector accepted that rare indulgence. Alice Hudson half deplored, half exulted for years after in the scent that would cling round one particular evening dress. Five gentlemen all with cigars, and papa as bad as any of them! There had never been such an extraordinary experience in her life.

And then the Tathams, too, withdrew, and the mother and daughter stood alone on their own hearth. Oh, so much, so much as there was to say! but how were they to say it?—the last moment, which was so precious and so intolerable —the moment that would never come again.

'You were a long time with Philip, Elinor, in the garden. I think all your old friends——the last night.'

'I wanted to say something to him, mamma, that I had never had the courage to say.'

Mrs. Dennistoun had been looking dully into the dim mirror over the mantelpiece. She turned half round to her daughter with an enquiring look.

'Oh, mamma, I wanted to say to him that we must be good! We're so happy. God is so

kind to us; and you—if you suppose I don't think of you! It was to say to him—building our house upon all this, God's mercy and your loss, and all—that we are doubly, doubly bound to serve—and to love—and to be good people before God; and like you, mother, like you!'

'My darling!' Mrs. Dennistoun said. And that was all. She asked no questions as to how it was to be done, or what he replied. Elinor had broken down hysterically, and sobbed out the words one at a time, as they would come, through the choking in her throat. Needless to say that she ended in her mother's arms, her head upon the bosom which had nursed her, her slight weight dependent upon the supporter and protector of all her life.

That was the last evening. There remained the last morning to come; and after that—what? The great sea of an unknown life, a new pilot, and a ship untried.

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