THE PRODIGALS

AND THEIR INHERITANCE

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CHAPTER XI

EDWARD came out to meet her, and took her hand and drew it through his arm. He led her in tenderly, holding that hand in his, without a vestige of the reserve and restraint in which they had been living of late. Winifred was greatly surprised. She drew away her hand, half-angry, half-astonished. "Why is this?" she said. "Is it because it is so early that you forget"—

"It is because there is no longer any need of precaution," he said very gravely, pressing her arm close to his side.

She gazed at him with an incapacity to

understand, which would have been incredible did it not happen so often at the great crises of life. "I don't know what you mean; nothing is changed," she said. "But you have not come to talk of you and me. Edward, how is my father?" She asked the question with scarcely a fear. Then suddenly looked in his face, flung his support from her, and flew upstairs without a word.

The door of her father's room was closed; she rushed at it breathless. It was half-opened after a little interval by old Hopkins, who barred the entrance.

"You can't come in yet, Miss Winifred, not yet," he said, shaking his head. Hopkins was full of the solemn importance and excitement of one who has suddenly become an actor in a great event. He closed the door upon her as he spoke, and there she stood, gazing at it blankly, her brain swim-

ming, her heart beating. That door had closed not only upon her father dead, but upon a completed chapter of her own life.

Edward had hurried upstairs after her, and was now close by to console her. But she would not give him her hand, which he sought. She walked before him to the door of her own sitting-room, which stood wide open, with an early glow of the newly-risen sun showing from the open windows. Then she sat down and motioned him to a chair, but not beside her. A more woeful countenance never lamented the most beloved of fathers. Her dark outer garment was wet with dew, and clung closely about her; her hair had a few drops of the same dew glimmering upon it; her face was entirely destitute of colour.

"Tell me how it was," she said.

"It was as I told you it would be. We must be thankful that no act of ours, no con-

tention of ours, quickened the catastrophe. He was in perfectly good spirits last night, I hear. By the time I arrived, all was over. Winifred"—

"Oh, do not touch me!" she said. "We deceived him, we lied to him! if not in words, yet in deeds. And now you are glad that he is dead."

"Not glad," said the young man.

"Not glad! and I?" she cried, with an exclamation of despair.

"Winnie, do not make yourself more miserable than you need be; you are not glad. And you will reproach yourself and be wretched for many a day, without reason. I declare before Heaven without reason, Winnie! All that you have done has been for his sake. And there is nothing for which you can justly blame yourself. All that has been done has been sacrifice on your part."

He came to her side and put his arm round her to console her. But his touch was more than she could bear. She put out her hand and put his away. He looked at her for a moment without saying anything, and then asked, with a little bitterness, "Do you mean to cast me off then, Winnie, because I denied myself for his sake?"

"Oh, Edward!" she said, giving him her hand; "don't say a word of you and me. I cannot tell you what I mean, or what I feel, not now. To be as strangers while he lived, and the moment—the very moment he is gone"—

She rose up and began to walk about the room in a feverish misery which was more like personal despair than the grief of a child for a father; angry, miserable even because of the very sense of deliverance which mingled with the anguish. The painful interview was broken by the rush into the room of Miss

Farrell, her white locks all disordered about her pretty old head, stumbling over her long dressing-gown, and throwing herself with tears and caresses upon Winifred's shoulder.

"Oh, my darling, your dear father! Oh, my child, come to me and let me comfort you!" she said.

Edward Langton withdrew without a word. There were a thousand ways in which he could serve Winifred without insisting upon the office of consoler, which indeed he gave up with a pang, yet heroically. A man, when he makes a sacrifice, perhaps does it more entirely, more silently than a woman. He made no stand for his rights, but gave up without a word, and went forth to the external matters which there was no one but he to manage. Mr. Chester had died as his young physician had known he would do. He had forgotten the rules of life which had been prescribed to him

in his triumph and satisfaction on the previous night. He had said to himself, "Soul, take thine ease," and the catastrophe had been as prompt as that of the parable. The alarmed and startled household was all up and about by this time, the maids huddled in a corner discussing the dreadful event, and comparing notes, now all was over, as to their respective apprehensions and judgment of master's looks. The men wandered about, sometimes paying a fitful attention to their ordinary work, but most frequently going up and downstairs to see if Mr. Hopkins wanted anything, or if something new to report could be gleaned anywhere. Dr. Langton took command of the household with instant authority, awakening at once a new interest in the bosoms of the little eager crowd. He was the new master, they all felt, some with a desire to oppose, and some to conciliate. He sent off telegrams.

with a sort of savage pleasure to the Dowager Countess and the other expected guests, and he summoned Mr. Babington, who was the official authority, under whose directions all immediate steps had to be taken. But Langton had no idea of abnegation in respect to his own rights, any more than he had any sense of guilt in respect to the dead man, out of consideration for whom he had temporarily ignored them. He had made a great sacrifice to preserve Mr. Chester's health and life, but now that this life was over, without any blame to any one, he did not deny that the relief was great. Alas! even to Winifred, whose sensations of self-reproach were so poignant, the smart was intensified while it was relieved, by a sense of deliverance too.

When she came a little to herself, she insisted that her brothers should be telegraphed for

instantly. This was before Mr. Babington's arrival, and it is possible that Edward would have objected had he been able to do so. He was not entirely above consideration of his own interests, and he had believed that Mr. Chester from his point of view had not behaved unwisely, nor even perhaps unkindly, in sending his sons away. That Winifred should relinquish all the advantages which her father's will had secured cost him perhaps a pang. It would not have been unpleasant to Edward Langton to find himself master of Bedloe. He knew he would have filled the post better than either of the two thoughtless and unintelligent young men whom their father himself had sent off, and who probably would have sold it before the year was out. For his own part, he should have liked to compromise, to give to each of them a sufficient compensation and keep the estate, and replace in Bedloe the old name that had been

associated with it so long. That he should have had this dazzling possibility before him, and yet have obeyed her wishes and sent off these telegrams, said much for Edward's self-denial. He knew that Mr. Babington when he came would probably have objected strongly to such a proceeding, and with reason. The doctor saw all the danger of it as he rode into the little town to carry out Winifred's instructions. The two brothers would hurry home, each with the conviction that he was the heir, and rage and disappointment would follow. Nevertheless, it seemed to him that the very objections that rose in his own mind pledged him all the more to carry out Winifred's wishes. He was not disinterested as she was. He did not feel any tie of affection to her brothers. He thought them much more supportable at the other side of the world than he had ever found them near. And there were few things

he would not have done, in honour, to secure Bedloe. All these arguments, however, made it more necessary that he should do without hesitation or delay what she wished. This was his part in the meantime, whether he entirely approved or not. Afterwards, when they were man and wife, he might have a more authoritative word to say. He telegraphed not only to George and Tom, but through the banker, that money should be provided for their return; and having done so, went back again with a mind full of anxiety, the sense of deliverance of which his heart had been full clouding over with this sudden return of the complications and embarrassments of life.

Mr. Babington did not arrive till next day. And he looked very grave when he heard what had been done.

"Of what use is it?" he said; "the poor

young fellows will find themselves out of it altogether. They will come thinking that the inheritance is theirs, and there is not a penny for them. Why did not you wait till I came?"

"I should have preferred to do so," said Langton; "but at such a moment Miss Chester's wish was above all."

"Miss Chester's wish?" said the lawyer, with a doubtful glance. "Perhaps you think Miss Chester can do what she pleases? Poor thing, it is very natural she should wish to do something for her brothers. But what if she were making a mistake?"

"If you mean that after all the money is not to be hers"— said Langton, with a slight change of colour.

"Before we go farther I ought to know—perhaps her father's death has brought about some change—between her and you?"

"No change at all. We were pledged to

each other two years ago without any opposition from him. I cannot say that he ever gave his formal consent."

"But it was all broken off—I heard as much from him—by mutual consent."

"It was never broken off. I saw what was coming, and I remained perfectly quiet on the subject, and advised Miss Chester to do the same."

"Ah! and he was taken in!" the lawyer said.

This brought the colour to Langton's face.

"I am not aware that there was any taking in in the case. I knew that agitation was dangerous for him. It was better for us to wait, at our age, than to have the self-reproach afterwards." This was all true, yet it was embarrassing to say.

"I see," said Mr. Babington; "a waiting game doesn't always recommend itself to the

lookers-on, Dr. Langton. It might have lasted for years."

"I did not think," said Langton hastily, "that it could have lasted for weeks. He has lived longer than I expected."

"And you were there at one side of him, and his daughter at the other, waiting. I think I'd rather not have my daughter engaged to a doctor, meaning no disrespect to you."

"It sounds like something more than disrespect," said Langton, with offence. "If you think I did not do my duty by my patient"—

"Oh no, I don't think that; but I think you will be disappointed, Dr. Langton. I don't quite see why you have sent for the boys. If the one was for your interest, the other was dead against it. It is a disagreeable business altogether. If they were to set up a plea against you of undue influence"—

"I think," said Langton, "that this is not a

subject to be discussed between us. You know very well that my influence with Mr. Chester was"—

"About the same as every other man's, and that was nothing at all," said the lawyer, with a laugh. It is unseemly to laugh in a house all draped and shrouded in mourning, and the sound seemed to produce a little stir of horror in the silent place, all the more that Winifred came in at the moment, as white as a spectre, in her black dress. Her look of astonished reproach made the lawyer in his turn change countenance.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Winifred, I beg you a thousand pardons. It was not any jest, I assure you, it was in very sober earnest. My dear young lady, I need not say how shocked I was and distressed"—

The sudden change of aspect, the gloom which came over Mr. Babington's cheerful

countenance, would have been more comical than melancholy to an unconcerned spectator; but Winifred accepted it without criticism. She said, "Did you know how ill he was?" with tears in her eyes.

"I—well, I cannot say that I thought he was strong; but a stroke like this is always unexpected. In the midst of life"—said Mr. Babington solemnly. But here he caught Langton's eye and was silenced. "I hear you have sent for your brothers."

"Oh, at once! What could I do else? I am sure *now* that he would have wished me to do it."

Mr. Babington shook his head. "I don't think he would have wished it, Miss Winifred. I don't think they would care to come if they knew the property is all left away from them."

"He said it was left to me. But what could that be for? only to be given back to them,"

said Winifred, with a faint smile. "My father knew very well what I should do. He will know now, and I know that he will approve," she said, with that exaltation which the wearied body and excited soul attain to by times, a kind of ecstasy. "Even," she cried, "if he did not see what was best in this life, he will see it *now*."

Mr. Babington looked on with a blank countenance. He did not realise easily this instant conversion of the man he knew so well to higher views. He could not indeed conceive of Mr. Chester at all except in the most ordinary human conditions; but he knew that it was right to speak and think in an exalted manner of those whom death had removed.

"We will hope so," he said; "but in the meantime, my dear young lady, you will find he has made it very difficult for you, as he had not then attained to these enlightened views.

Couldn't you send another telegram? They're expensive, but in the circumstances"—

"We have made up our minds," said Winifred, with a certain solemnity; "do you know what we had to do, Mr. Babington? We had to deceive him, to pretend that I would do as he wished. Oh, Edward, I cannot bear to think of it. I never said it in so many words. I did not exactly tell a lie, but I let him suppose—I wonder—do you think he hears what I say? surely he knows;" and here, worn out as she was, the tears which had been so near her eyes burst forth.

Langton brought her a chair, and made her sit down and soothed her; but his face was blank like that of the lawyer, who was altogether taken aback by this sudden spiritualising of his old friend.

"I daresay it will all come right," Mr. Babington said.

CHAPTER XII

MR. BABINGTON remained in the house, or at least returned to it constantly, passing most of his time there till the funeral was over; after which he read the will to the little company, consisting only of Winifred, Edward, and Miss Farrell, who remained in the house. It was a will which excited much agitation and distress, and awoke very different sentiments in the minds of the two who were chiefly concerned. Winifred received its stipulations like so many blows, while in the mind of her lover they raised a sort of involuntary elation, an ambition and eagerness of which he had not been hitherto sensible. The condition

under which Winifred inherited her father's fortune was, that she was not to divide or share it with her brothers; that Mr. Chester had meant to add many other bonds and directions which would have left her without any freedom of individual action at all, mattered little; but this one stipulation had been appended at once to the will, and was not to be avoided or ignored. In case she attempted to divide or share her inheritance, or alienate any part of it, she was to forfeit the whole. No latitude was allowed to her, no power of compromise. This information crushed Winifred's courage and spirits altogether. It made the gloom of the moment tenfold darker, and subdued in her the rising tide of life. That tide had begun to rise involuntarily even in the first week, while the windows were still shrouded and the house full of crape and darkness. She had shed those few natural tears, which are all that in many

cases the best parents have to look for, and, though moved by times with a compunction equally natural, was yet prepared to dry them and go on to the sunshine that awaited her, and the setting of all things right which had seemed to her the chief object in life. But when she saw this great barrier standing up before her, and knew that her brothers were both on their way, hoping great things, to be met on their arrival only by this impossibility, her heart failed her altogether. She had no courage to meet the situation. She felt ill, worn out by the agitations of the previous period and the blank despair of this, and for a time turned away from the light, and would not be comforted.

Upon Edward Langton a very different effect was produced; while Winifred's heart sank in her bosom, his rose with a boundless exhilaration and hope. What he saw before him was something so entirely unhoped for, so unthought of,

that it was no wonder if it turned his head, as the vulgar say. Mr. Chester, who had acquired the property of his ancestors in their moment of need, unrighteously as he believed, trading upon their necessities, seemed to him now, with all the force of a dead hand, to thrust compensation upon him. It was not to Winifred but to him that the fortune seemed to be given. That this was the reverse of the testator's intention, that he had meant something totally different, did not affect Langton's mind. It gave him even an additional grim satisfaction, as the jewels of gold and of silver borrowed from his Egyptian master might have satisfied the mind of a fierce Hebrew, defrauded for a lifetime of the recompense of his toil. The millionaire's plunder, his gain which had been extracted from the sweat of other men, was to return into the hands of one of the families at least of which he had taken advantage. For

once the revenges of time were fully just and satisfactory. He went about his parish work and visited his poor patients with this elation in his mind, instinctively making notes as to things which he would have done and improvements made. Mr. Chester, who had the practical instincts of a man whose first thought has always been to make money, had, indeed, done a great deal for the estate; but he had spent nothing, neither thought nor money, upon the condition of the poor, for whom he cared much less than for their cattle. Langton's interests were strong in the other way. He thought of sanitary miracles to be performed, of disease to be extirpated, of wholesome houses and wholesome faces in the little clusters of human habitation that were dotted here and there round the enclosure of the park. Different minds take their pleasures in different ways. He was not dull to the delights of a well-preserved cover;

but with a more lively impulse he anticipated a grand battue of smells and miasmas, draining of stagnant ponds, and destruction to the agues and fevers which haunted the surrounding country. This idea blended with the intense subdued pleasure of anticipation with which he thought of the estate returning to the old name, and himself to the house of his fathers: there was nothing ignoble in the elation that filled his mind. Perhaps, according to the sentiment of romance, it would have been a more lofty position had he endured tortures from the idea of owing this elevation to his marriage; or even had he refused, at the cost of her happiness and his own, to accept so much from his wife; but Langton was of a robust kind, and not easily affected by those prejudices, which after all are not very respectful to women. He would have married Winifred with nothing. Why should he withdraw from her when she had much? So

far as this went, he accepted the good fortune which she seemed about to bring him without a question, with a satisfaction which filled his whole being. Bedloe had not been the better of the Chesters hitherto, but it should be the better for him.

And if there came over him a little chill occasionally when he thought of the two helpless prodigals whom he despised, coming over the sea, each from his different quarter, full of hopes which were never to be realised, Langton found it possible to push them aside out of his mind, as it is always possible to put aside an unpleasant subject. Sometimes there would come over him a chill less momentary when the thought that Winifred might hold by her decision on this subject crossed his mind. But she was very gentle, very easily influenced, not the sort of woman to assert herself. She had yielded to him in respect to her father, even

when the course of conduct he recommended had been odious to her. That she should have felt so strongly on the subject had seemed somewhat ridiculous to him at the time, but, notwithstanding, she had yielded to his better judgment and had followed the directions he had given her. And there did not seem any reason to believe that she would not do the same again. She was of a very tender nature, poor Winnie! She could not bear to hurt any one. It was not to be expected, probably it was not even to be desired, that the real advantages of this arrangement should strike her as they did himself. She had a natural clinging to her brothers. She declined to see them in their true light. It was terrible to her to profit by their ruin. But Langton, though acknowledging all this, could not conceive the possibility that Winnie would actually resist his guidance, and follow her own conclusions. She

could not do it. She would do as he indicated, though it might cost her some tears, and perhaps a struggle with herself, tears which Langton was fully in the mind to repay by such love and care when she was his wife as would banish henceforward all other tears from her eyes. Like so many other clever persons, he shut his own in the meantime. He was aware that the position in which she was placed, the thought of the future, lay at the bottom of her illness, and even that until the constant irritation thus caused was withdrawn or neutralised, her mind would not recover its tone. At least he would have been fully aware of this had his patient been any other than Winifred. She was suffering, no doubt, he allowed, but by and by she would get over it, the disturbing influence would work itself out, and all would be well.

And in the meantime there were moments of

sweetness for both in the interval that followed. As Winifred recovered slowly, the subduing influence of bodily weakness hushed her cares. For the moment she could do nothing, and, anxious as she was, it was so soothing to have the company, and sympathy, and care of her lover, that she too pushed aside all disturbing influences, and almost succeeded while he was with her in forgetting. Instinctively she was aware that on this point his mind and hers would not be in accord—on every other point they were one, and she listened to the suggestions he made as to improvements and alterations with that sensation of pleasure ineffable which arises in a woman's mind when the man whom she loves shows himself at his best. He had too much discretion and good feeling to do more than suggest these beneficial changes, and above all he never betrayed the elation in his own views and intention in his own mind to

carry them out himself. But from her sofa, or from the terrace, where presently she was able to walk with the support of his arm, Winifred listened to his description of all that could be done, and looked at the little sketches he would make of improved houses, and new ways of effectual succour to the poor, with a pleasure which was more near what we may suppose to be angelic satisfaction than any other on earth. When he went away, a cloud would come over the landscape. She would say to herself that George would be little likely to carry out these plans, and again with a keener pang would be conscious that Edward was as yet unconvinced of her determination on the subject. But when he came back to her, all that could possibly come between them was by common instinctive accord put away, and there was a happiness in those days of waiting almost like the pathetic happiness which softens the ebbing out of life.

Miss Farrell, who was more than ever like a mother to the poor girl who had so much need of her, looked forward, as a mother so often does, with almost as much happiness as the chief actors in that lovers' meeting to Edward's coming. Every evening, when his work was over, the two ladies would listen for his quick step, or the sound of his horse's hoofs over the fallen leaves in the avenue. He came in, bringing the fresh air with him, and the movement and stir of life, with such news as was to be had in that rural quiet, with stories of his humble patients, and all the humours of the country-side. It was something to expect all day long and make the slow hours go by as on noiseless wings. There is perhaps nothing which makes life so sweet. This is half the charm of marriage to women; and before marriage there is a delicacy, a possibility of interruption, a voluntary and spontaneous character in the intercourse

which makes it even more delightful. In the moonlight evenings, when the yellow harvest moon was resplendent over all the country, and Winifred was well enough for the exertion, the two would stray out together, leaving the gentle old spectator of their happiness almost more happy than they, in the tranquillity of her age, to prepare the tea for them, or with Hopkins's assistance (given with a little contemptuous toleration of her interference) the "cup" which Langton had the bad taste to prefer to tea.

This lasted for several weeks, even months, and it was not till October, when the woods were all russet and yellow, and a little chill had come into the air, that the tranquillity was disturbed by a telegram which announced the arrival of Tom. It was dated from Plymouth, and even in the concise style demanded by the telegraph there was a ring of satisfaction and

triumph to Winifred's sensitive ear. She trembled as she read — "Shall lose no time expect me by earliest train to-morrow." This intimation came tingling like a shot into the calm atmosphere, sending vibrations everywhere. In the first moment it fell like a death-blow on Winifred, severing her life in two, cutting her off from all the past, even, it was possible, from Edward and his love. When he came in the evening she said nothing until they were alone upon the terrace in the moonlight, taking the little stroll which had become so delightful to her. It was the last time, perhaps, that, free from all interruption, they would spend the tranquil evening so. She walked about for some time leaning upon him, letting him talk to her, answering little or nothing. Then suddenly, in the midst of something he was saying, without sequence or reason, she said sud-

denly, "Edward, I have had a telegram from Tom."

He started and stopped short with a quick exclamation— "From Tom!"

"He is coming to-morrow," Winifred said; and then there fell a silence over them, over the air, in which the very light seemed to be affected by the shock. She felt it in the arm which supported her, in the voice which responded with a sudden emotion in it, and in the silence which ensued, which neither of them seemed able to break.

"I fear," said Edward at last, "that it will be very agitating and distressing for you, my darling. I wish I could do it for you. I wish I could put it off till you were stronger."

She shook her head. "I must do it myself," she said, "not even you. We have been very quiet for a long time—and happy."

"We shall be happy still, I hope," he said,—

"happier, since the time is coming when we are always to be together, Winnie."

She did not make any reply at first, but then said drearily, "I don't feel as if I could see anything beyond to-night. Life will go on again, I suppose, but between this and that there seems to me, as in the parable, a gulf fixed."

"Not one that cannot be passed over," he said.

But he did not ask her what she meant to say to her brother, nor had she ever told him. Perhaps he took it for granted that only one thing could be said, and that to be told what their father's will was, would be enough for the young men; or perhaps, for that was scarcely credible, he supposed that Mr. Babington would be called upon to explain everything, and the burden thus taken off her shoulders. Only when she was bidding him good-night he ventured upon a word.

"You must husband your strength," he said, "and not wear yourself out more than you can help. Remember there is George to come."

"I will have to say what there is to say at once, Edward. Oh, how could I keep them in suspense?"

"But you must think a little, for my sake, of yourself, dear."

She shook her head, and looked at him wistfully. "It is not I that have to be thought of, it is the boys that I have to think of. Oh, poor boys! how am I to tell them?" she cried.

And he went away with no further explanation. He could not ask in so many words, What do you intend to say to them? And yet he had made up his mind so completely what ought to be said. He said to himself as he went down the avenue that he had been a fool, that it was false delicacy on his part not

to have had a full explanation of her intentions. But, on the other hand, how could he suggest a mode of action to her? There was but one way—they must understand that she could not sacrifice herself for their sakes.

CHAPTER XIII

WINIFRED scarcely slept all that night. She had enough to think of. Her entire life hung in the balance. And, indeed, that was not all, for there remained the doubtful possibility that she might deprive herself of everything without doing any good by her sacrifice. The necessity to be falsely true seemed, once having been taken up, to pursue her everywhere. Unless she could find some way of accomplishing it deceitfully, and frustrating her father's will, while she seemed to be executing it, she would be incapable of doing anything for her brothers, and would either be compelled to accept an unjust advantage

over them, or give up everything that was in her own favour without advantaging them. She lay still in the darkness and thought and thought over this great problem, but came no nearer to any solution. And she was separated even from her usual counsellors in this great emergency. In respect to Edward, she divined his wishes with a pang unspeakable, yet excused him to herself with a hundred tender apologies. It was not that he was capable of wronging any one, but he felt—who could help feeling it?—that all would go better in his hands. She, too, felt it. She said to herself, it would be better for Bedloe, better for the people, that he, through her, should reign, instead of George or Tom, who, if they did well at all, would do well for themselves only, and who, up to this time, even in that had failed. To give it over to two bad or indifferent masters, careless of everything, save what it

produced; or to place it under the care of a wise and thoughtful master, who would consider the true advantage of all concerned: who, she asked herself, could hesitate as to which was best? But though it would be best, it would be founded on wrong, and would be impossible. Impossible! that was the only word. She was in no position to abolish the ordinary laws of nature, and act upon her own judgment of what was best. It was impossible, whatever good might result from it, that she should build her own happiness upon the ruin of her brothers. Even Miss Farrell did not take the same view of the subject. She had wept over the dethronement of the brothers, but she could not consent to Winifred's renunciation of all things for their sake. "You can always make it up to them," she had said, reiterating the words, without explaining how this was to be done. How was it to be done? Winifred tried very hard

through all to respect her father. She tried to think that he had only exposed her to a severe trial to prove her strength. She thought that now at least, even if never before, he must be enlightened, he must watch her with those "larger, other eyes than ours," with which natural piety endows all who have passed away, whether bad or good. Even if he had not intended well at the time, he must know better now. But how was she to do it? How succeed in thwarting yet obeying him? The problem was beyond her powers, and the hours would not stop to give her time to consider it. They flowed on, slow, yet following each other in a ceaseless current; and the morning broke which was to bring her perplexities to some sort of issue, though what she did not know.

Tom arrived by the early morning train. He also had not slept much in the night, and his eyes were red, and his face pale. He was

tremulous with excitement, not unmingled with anxiety; but an air of triumph over all, and elation scarcely controlled, gave a certain wildness to his aspect, almost like intoxication. It was an intoxication of the spirit, however, and not anything else, though, as he leapt out of the dog-cart and made a rush up the steps, Winifred, standing there to meet him, almost shrank from the careless embrace he gave her. "Well, Win, and so here we are back again," he said. He had no great reason, perhaps, to be touched by his father's death. It brought him back from unwilling work, it gave him back (he thought) the wealth and luxury which he loved, it restored him to all that had been taken from him. Why should he be sorry? And yet, at the moment of returning to his father's house, it seemed to his sister that some natural thought of the father, who had not always been harsh, should have touched his

heart. But Tom did not show any consciousness of what nature and good feeling required, which was, after all, as Winifred reflected next moment, better, perhaps, as being more true than any pretence at fictitious feeling. He gave nods of acknowledgment, half boisterous, half condescending, to the servants as he passed through the hall to the dining-room, which stood open, with the table prepared for breakfast. He laughed at the sight, and pointed to his sister. "It was supper you had waiting for me the last time I was here," he said, with a laugh, and went in before her, and threw himself down in the large easy chair, which was the seat Mr. Chester had always occupied. Probably Tom forgot, and meant nothing; but old Hopkins hastened to thrust another close to the table, indicating it with a wave of his hand.

"Here, sir, this is your place, sir," the old butler said.

"I am very comfortable where I am," cried Tom. "That's enough, Hopkins; bring the breakfast." Hopkins explained to the other servants when he left the room that Mr. Tom was excited. "And no wonder, considering all that's happened," he said.

"Well," repeated Tom, when he and his sister were left alone, "so here we are again. You thought it was for good when I went away, Winnie."

"I thought it would be—for a longer time, Tom."

"You thought it was for good; but you might have known better. The poor old governor thought better of it at the last?"

"I don't think that he changed—his opinion," Winifred said, hesitating, afraid to carry on the deception, afraid to undeceive him, tired and excited as he was.

"Well," said Tom, addressing himself to the good things on the breakfast table, "whatever

his opinion was, it don't matter much now, for here I am, at all events, and that horrible episode of New Zealand over. It didn't last very long, thank Heaven!"

It was, perhaps, only because the conversa- was so difficult that she asked him then suddenly whether, perhaps, on the way he had seen anything of George..

"Of George?" Tom put down his knife and fork and stared at her. "How, in the name of Heaven, could I see anything of George—on my way home?"

"I—don't know, Tom. I am not clear about the geography. I thought perhaps you might have come by the same ship."

"By the same ship?" It was only by degrees that he took in what she meant. Then he thrust back his chair from the table and exclaimed, "What! is George coming too?" in a tone full of disgust and dismay.

"I sent for him at the same time," she replied, in spite of herself, in a tone of apology. "How could I leave him out?"

"*You* sent for him?" said Tom, with evident relief. "Then I think you did a very silly thing, Winnie. Why should he come here, such an expensive journey, stopping his work and everything? Some one told me he was getting on very well out there."

"I thought it indispensable that he should come back, that we should all meet to arrange everything."

"To arrange everything?" There was a sort of compassionate impatience in Tom's tone. "I suppose that is how women judge," he said. "What can there be to arrange? You may be sure the governor had it all set down clear enough in black and white. And now you will have disturbed the poor beggar's mind all for nothing; for he is sure to build upon it, and

think there's something for him. I hope, at least, you made that point clear."

"Tom, if you would but listen to me! There is no point clear. I felt that I must see you both, and talk it all over, and that we must decide among us"—

"You take a great deal upon you, Winnie," said Tom. "You have got spoilt, I think. What is there to decide about? The thing that vexes me is for George's own sake. That you might like to see him, and give him a little holiday, that's no harm; and I suppose you mean to make it up to him out of your own little money, though I should think Langton would have a word to say on that subject. But how do you know what ridiculous ideas you may put into the poor beggar's head? He may think that the governor has altered his will again. He is sure to think something that's absurd. If it's not too late, it would be charity

to telegraph again and tell him it was not worth his while."

"Tom," said Winifred, faltering, "he is our brother, and he is the eldest. Whatever my father's will was, do you think it would be right to leave him out?"

"Oh, that is what you are after!" said Tom. "To work upon me, and get me to do something for him! You may as well understand once for all that I'll be no party to changing the governor's will—I'll not have him cheated, poor old gentleman! in his grave."

He had risen up from the table full of angry decision, pushing his chair away, while Winifred sat weak and helpless, more bewildered at every word, gazing at him, not knowing how to reply.

"He was a man of great sense, was the governor," said Tom. "He was a better judge of character than either you or I. To be sure, he made a little mistake that time about me;

but it hasn't done me any harm, and I wouldn't be the one to bring it up against him. And I'll be no party to changing his will. If you bring George here, it is upon your own responsibility. He need not look for anything from me."

"Tom, I don't ask anything from you; but don't you think—oh, is not your heart softer now that you know what it is to suffer hardship yourself?"

"That's all sentimental nonsense," said Tom hastily. He went to the fireplace and warmed himself, for there is always a certain chill in excitement. Then he returned to the table to finish his breakfast. He had a feverish appetite, and the meal served to keep in check the fire of expectation and restlessness in his veins. After a few minutes' silence he looked up with a hurried question. "Babington has been sent for to meet me, I suppose?

"He is coming on Monday. We did not

think you could arrive before Monday, and George perhaps by that time"—

"Always George!" he said, with an angry laugh.

"Always both of you, Tom. We are only three in the world, and to whom can I turn but to my brothers to advise me? Oh, listen a little! I want you to know everything, to judge everything, and then to tell me"—

It was natural enough, perhaps, that Tom should think of her personal concerns. "Oh, I see," he said; "you and Langton don't hit it off, Winnie? That's a different question. Well, he is not much of a match for you. No doubt you could do much better for yourself; but that's not enough to call George for, from the Antipodes. I'll advise you to the best of my ability. If you mean to trust for advice to George"—

"It is not about myself," said Winifred. "Oh, Tom, how am I to tell you? I cannot

find the words—my father—oh, listen to me for a little—don't go away!"

"If you say anything — to make me think badly of the governor, I will never forgive you, Winnie!" he said. His face grew pale and then almost black with gloom and excitement. "I've been travelling all night," he added. "I want a bath, and to make myself comfortable. It's too soon to begin about your business. Where have you put me? In the old room, I suppose?"

"All your things have been put there," replied Winifred. It was a relief to escape from the explanation, and yet a disappointment. He turned away without looking at her.

"Oh, all right! there is plenty of time to change when I have made up my mind which I like best," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

GEORGE arrived by the next mail. He did not travel all night, but came in the evening, driving up the avenue with a good deal of noise and commotion, with two flys from the station carrying him and the two children and the luggage they brought, in addition to the brougham which had been sent out of respect to the lady. She occupied it by herself, for it was a small carriage, and she was a large woman, and thus was the first to arrive, stumbling out with a large cage in her hand containing a pair of unhappy birds with drooping feathers and melancholy heads. She would not allow any one to take them from

her hand, but stumbled up the steps with them and thrust them upon Winnie, who had come out to the door to receive her brother, but who did not at first realise who this was.

"Here, take 'em," said Mrs. George; "they're for you, and they've been that troublesome! I've done nothing but look after them all the voyage. I suppose you're Winnie," she added, pausing with a momentary doubt.

"I hope you are not very tired," Winifred said, with that imbecility which extreme surprise and confusion gives. She took the cage, which was heavy, and set it on a table. "And George —where is George?" she said.

"Oh, George is coming fast enough; he's in the first fly with the children. But you don't look at what I've brought you. They're the true love-birds, the prettiest things in the world. I brought them all the way myself. I trusted

them to nobody. George said you would think a deal of them."

"So I shall — when I have time to think. It was very kind," said Winnie. "Oh, George!" She ran down to meet him as he stepped out with a child on his arm.

George was not fat, like his wife, but careworn and spare.

"How do you do, Winnie?" he said, taking her outstretched hand. "Would you mind taking the baby till I get Georgie and the things out of the fly?"

The baby was a fat baby, and like his mother. He gazed at her with a placid aspect, and did not cry. There was something ludicrous in the situation, which Winifred faintly perceived, though everything was so serious. George was not like the long-lost brother of romance. He had shaken hands with her as if he had parted from her yesterday. He scarcely cast a glance

at the house to which he was coming back, but turned quickly to the fly, and lifted out first a little fat boy of three, then parcel after parcel, with a slightly anxious but quite business-like demeanour.

"The maid and the boxes can go round to the other door," he said, paying serious attention to every detail. "I suppose I can leave these things to be brought upstairs, Winnie? Now, Georgie, come along. There's mamma waiting." He did not offer to take the baby, which was a serious weight upon Winifred's slight shoulder, but looked with a certain grave gratification at his progeny. "He is quite good with you," he said, with pleased surprise. There was nothing in the fact of his return home that affected George so much. "Look at baby, how good he is with Winnie! I told you the children would take to her directly."

"Well, I suppose it's natural your sister

should look to you first," said the wife; "but I've taken a great deal of trouble bringing the birds to her, and she hasn't given them hardly a glance."

"It was very kind," said Winnie; "but the children must come first. This is the way; don't you remember, George? Bring your wife here."

"I don't believe she knows my name, or perhaps she's proud, and won't call me by it, George?"

"Winnie proud? Look how good baby is with her!" said George.

They discussed Winifred thus, walking on either side of her, while she tottered under the weight of the big baby, from which neither dreamt of relieving her. Winifred began to feel a nervous necessity to laugh, which she could not control. She drew a chair near the fire for her sister-in-law, and put down the good-humoured baby, in whose contact there

seemed something consolatory, though he was very heavy, on the rug. "I should like to give the other one a kiss," she said—"is he George too?—before I give you some tea."

"Yes, I should like my tea," said Mrs. George; "I'm ready for it after that long journey. Have you seen after Eliza and the boxes, George? We've had a good passage upon the whole; but I should never make a good sailor if I were to make the voyage every year. Some people can never get over it. Don't you think, Miss Winnie, that you could tell that old gentleman to bring the birds in here?"

"Is it old Hopkins?" said George. "How do you do, Hopkins? There is a cage with some birds"—

"I hope I see you well, sir?" said the old butler. "I'm glad as I've lived to see you come home. And them two little gentlemen,

sir, they're the first little grandsons? and wouldn't master have been pleased to see them!" Hopkins had been growing feeble ever since his master's death, and showed a proclivity to tears, which he had never dared to indulge before.

"Well, I think he might have been," said George, with a dubious tone. But his mind was not open to sentiment. "They might have a little bread and butter, don't you think? —it wouldn't hurt them,—and a cup of milk."

"No, George," said his wife; "it would spoil their tea."

"Do you think it would spoil their tea? I am sure Winnie would not mind them having their tea here with us, the first evening, and then Eliza might put them to bed."

"Eliza has got my things to look to," said Mrs. George; "besides being put out a little with a new place, and all that houseful of

servants. I shouldn't keep up half of them, when once we have settled down and see how we are going to fit in."

"Some one must put the children to bed," said George, with an anxious countenance. This conversation was carried on without any apparent consciousness of Winnie's presence, who, what with pouring out tea and making friends with the children, did her best to occupy the place of spectator with becoming unconsciousness. Here, however, she was suddenly called into the discussion. "Oh, Winnie," said her brother, "no doubt you've got a maid, or some one who knows a little about children, who could put them to bed?"

"He is an old coddle about the children," said his wife; "the children will take no harm. Eliza must see to me first, if I'm to come down to dinner as you'd wish me to. But George is the greatest old coddle."

She ran into a little ripple of laughter as she spoke, which was fat and pleasant. Her form was soft and round, and prettily coloured, though her features, if she had ever possessed any, were much blunted and rounded into indistinctness. A sister is, perhaps, a severe judge under such circumstances; yet Winifred was relieved and softened by the new arrival. She made haste to offer the services of her maid, or even her own, if need were. The house was turned entirely upside down by this arrival. The two babies sent a thrill of excitement through all the female part of the household, from Miss Farrell downwards, and old Hopkins was known to have wept in the pantry over the two little grandsons, whom master would have been so proud to see. Winifred alone felt her task grow heavier and heavier. The very innocence and helplessness of the party whom she had thus taken in hand, and whom, after

all, she was likely to have so little power to help, went to her heart. She was not fitted to play the part of Providence. And certain looks exchanged between George and his wife, and a few chance words, had made her heart sick. They had pointed out to each other how this and that could be changed. "The rooms in the wing would be best for the nurseries," George had said and "There's just the place for you to practise your violin," his wife had added. They looked about them with a serene and satisfied consciousness (though George was always anxious) that they were taking possession of their own house. Winifred felt as she came back into the hall, where Mrs. George's present was still standing, the cage with the two miserable birds, laying their drooping heads together, that this simplicity was more hard to deal with than even Tom's discontent and sullen anger. She felt that she had

collected elements of mischief together with which she was quite unable to deal, and stood in the midst of them discouraged, miserable, feeling herself disapproved and unsupported. Not even Edward stood by her. Edward, least of all, whose want of sympathy she felt to her soul, though it had never been put into words. And Miss Farrell's attempts to make the best were almost worse than disapproval. She was entirely alone with those contending elements, and what was she to do?

Tom had chosen to be absent when his brother arrived; he did not appear even at dinner, to which Mrs. George descended, to the surprise of the ladies, decked in smiles and in an elaborate evening dress, which (had they but known) she had spent all the spare time on the voyage in preparing out of the one black silk which had been the pride of her heart. She had shoulders and arms which were

worth showing had they not been a trifle too fat, so white and rosy, so round and dimpled. She made a little apology to Winifred for the absence of crape. "It was such a hurry," she said, "to get away at once. George would not lose a day, and I wouldn't let him go without me, and such things as that are not to be got on a ship," she added, with a laugh. Mrs. George's aspect, indeed, did not suggest crape or gloom in any way.

"No, I wouldn't let him come without me," she continued, while they sat at dinner. "I couldn't take the charge of the children without him to help me, and then I thought he might be put upon if he came to take possession all alone. I didn't know that Miss Winnie was as nice as she is, and would stand his friend."

"She is very nice," said Miss Farrell, to whom this remark was addressed, looking across the table at her pupil with eyes that glistened, though

there was laughter in them. The sight of this pair, and especially of the wife with her innocence and good-humour, had been very consoling to the old lady. And she was anxious to awaken in Winifred a sense of the humour of the situation to relieve her more serious thoughts.

"But then I had never seen her," said Mrs. George; "and it's so natural to think your husband's sister will be nasty when she thinks herself a cut above the like of you. I thought she might brew up a peck of troubles for George, and make things twice as hard."

"I wish you wouldn't talk so much," her husband said under his breath.

"Why shouldn't I talk? I'm only saying what's agreeable. I am saying I never thought she would be so nice. I thought she might stand in George's way. I am sure it might make any one nasty that was likely to marry

and have children of her own, to see everything going past her to a brother that had behaved like George has done and taken his own way."

This innocent conversation went on till Winifred felt her part become more and more intolerable. Her paleness, her hesitating replies, and anxious air at last caught George's attention, though he had little to spare for his sister. "Have you been ill, Winnie?" he said abruptly, as he followed them into the drawing-room when dinner was over.

"Yes, George," she put her hand on his arm timidly; "and I am ill now with anxiety and trouble. I have something to say to you."

George was always ready to take alarm. He grew a little more depressed as he looked at her. "Is it anything about the property?" he said.

"I never thought to deceive you," she cried,

losing command of herself. "I did not know. I thought it would be all simple. George—oh, if you will hear me to the end! and let us all consult together and see what will be best."

George did not make her any reply. He looked across at his wife, and said, "I told you there would be something," with lips that quivered a little. Mrs. George got up instantly and came and stood beside him, all her full-blown softness reddening over with quick passion. "What is it? Have I spoke too fast? Is there some scheme against us after all?" she cried.

"George," said Winifred, "you know I am in no scheme against you. I want to give you your rights—but it seems I cannot. I want you to know everything, to help me to think. Tom will not hear me, he will not believe me; but you, George!"

"Tom?" George cried. The news seemed so unexpected that his astonishment and dismay were undisguised. "Is Tom here?"

"I sent for you both on the same day," said Winifred, bowing her head as if it were a confession of guilt.

"Oh," he said; he did not show excitement in its usual form, he grew quicter and more subdued, standing in a sort of grey insignificance against the flushed fulness of his astonished wife. "If it is Tom," he said, "you might as well have let us stay where we were. He never held up a finger for me when my father sent me away. You did your best, Winnie; oh, I am not unjust to you. Whatever it is, it's not your fault. But Tom—if Tom has got it! though I thought he had been sent about his business too."

"But, George, George!" cried his wife, almost inarticulate with eagerness to speak. "George,

you're the eldest son. I want to know if you're the eldest son, yes or no? And after that, who—who has any right? I'm in my own house and I'll stay. It's my own house, and nobody shall put me out," she cried, with a hysterical laugh, followed by a burst of tears.

"Stop that," said George, with dull quiet, but authoritatively. "I don't mean to say it isn't an awful disappointment, Winnie; but if it's Tom, why did you go and send for me?"

Winifred stood between the two, the wife sobbing wildly behind her, her brother looking at her in a sort of dull despair, and stretched out her hands to them with an appeal for which she could find no words. But at that moment the door opened harshly and Tom came in, appearing at the end of the room, with a pale and gloomy countenance, made only more gloomy by wine and fatigue, for he had ridden

far and wildly, dashing about the country to exhaust his rage and disappointment. All that he had done had been to increase both. "Oh, you have got here," he said, with an angry nod to his brother. "It is a nice home-coming ain't it, for you and me? Shake hands; we're in the same boat now, whatever we once were. And there stands the supplanter, the hypocrite that has got everything!" cried the excited young man, the foam flying from his mouth. And thereupon came a shriek from Mrs. George, which went through poor Winifred like a knife. For some minutes she heard no more.

CHAPTER XV

WINIFRED had never fainted before in her life, and it made a great commotion in the house. Hopkins, without a word to any one, sent off for Dr. Langton, and half the maids in the house poured into the room eagerly to help, bringing water, eau de Cologne, everything they could think of. Mrs. George's hysterics fled before the alarming sight, the insensibility, and pallor, which for a moment she took for death, and with a cry of horror and pity, and the tears still standing upon her flushed cheeks, she flung herself on her knees on the floor by Winifred's side. The two brothers stood and looked on, feeling very

uncomfortable, gazing with a half-guilty aspect upon the fallen figure. Would any one perhaps say that it was their fault? They stood near each other, though without exchanging a word, while the sudden irruption of women poured in. Winifred, however, was not long of coming to her senses. She woke to find herself lying on the floor, to her great astonishment, in the midst of a little crowd, and then struggled back into full consciousness again with a head that ached and throbbed, and something singing in her ears. She got to her feet with an effort and begged their pardon faintly. "What has happened?" she said; "have I done any thing strange? what have I done?"

"You have only fainted," said Miss Farrell, "that is all. Miss Chester is better now. She has no more need of you, you may all go. Yes, my dear, you have fainted, that is all. Some girls are always doing it; but it never happened

to you before, and it ought to be a proof to you, Winnie, that you are only mortal after all, and can't do more than you can."

Winifred smiled as best she could in the face of her old friend. "I did not know I could be so foolish," she said; "but it is all over now. Dear Miss Farrell, leave me with them. There is something I must say."

"Oh, put it off till to-morrow," said Mrs. George; "whether you've been our enemy or not, you are only a bit of a girl; and it can't hurt to wait till to-morrow. I know what nerves are myself, I've always been a dreadful sufferer. A dead faint like that, it is very frightening to other people. Don't send the old lady away."

"I am going to stay with you, Winnie—unless you will be advised by me, and by Mrs. George, who has a kind heart, I am sure she has—and go to bed."

Winifred placed herself in a deep easy-chair which gave her at least a physical support. She gave her hand to Miss Farrell, who stood by her, and turned to the brothers, who were still looking on uneasily, half-conscious that it was their fault, half-defiant of her and all that she could say. She lifted her eyes to them, in that moment of weakness and uncertainty before the world settled back into its place. Even their faces for a little while were but part of a phantasmagoria that moved and trembled in the air around her. She felt herself as in a dream, seeing not only what was before her, but many a visionary scene behind. She had been the youngest, she had always yielded to the boys; and as they stood before her thus, though with so few features of the young playfellows and tyrants to whom all her life she had been more or less subject, it became more and more impossible to her to

assume the different part which an ill fate had laid upon her. As she looked at them, so many scenes came back. They had been fond of her and good to her in their way, when she was a child. She suddenly remembered how George used to carry her up and down-stairs when she was recovering from the fever which was the great event in her childish life, and in how many rides and rows she had been Tom's companion, grateful above measure for his notice. These facts, with a hundred trivial incidents which she had forgotten, rushed back upon her mind. "Boys," she said, and then paused, her eyes growing clearer and clearer, but tears getting into her voice.

"Come, Winnie," said George, "Tom and I are a little too old for that."

"You will never be too old for that to me," she said. "Oh, if you would but look a little kind, as you used to do! It was against my

will and my prayers that it was left to me. I said that I would not accept it, that I would never, never, take what was yours. I never deceived him in that. Oh, boys! do you think it is not terrible for me to be put into your place, even for a moment? And that is not the worst. I thought when I sent for you that I could give it you back, that it would all be easy; but there is more to tell you."

They looked at her, each in his different way. Tom sullenly from under his eyebrows, George with his careworn look, anxious to get to an end of it, to consult with his wife what they were to do; but neither said a word.

"After," she said with difficulty, struggling against the rising in her throat, "after—it was found that I could not give it you back. If I did so, I too was to lose everything. Oh, wait, wait, till I have done! What am I to do? I put it in your hands. If I try to give you any

part, it is lost to us all three. What am I to do? I can take no advice from any but you. What I wish is to restore everything to you; but if I attempt to do so, all is lost. What am I to do? What am I to do?"

"Winnie, what you will do is to make yourself ill in the meantime."

"What does it matter?" she cried wildly; "if I were to die, I suppose it would go to them as my heirs."

The blank faces round her had no pity in them for Winnie. They were for the moment too deeply engrossed with the news which they had just heard. Miss Farrell alone stooped over her, and stood by her, holding her hand. Mrs. George, who had been listening, bewildered, unable to divine what all this could mean, broke the silence with a cry.

"She don't say a word of Georgie. Is there nothing for Georgie? I don't know what you

mean, all about giving and not giving—it's our right. George, ain't it our right?"

"There are no rights in our family," said George; "but I don't know what it means any more than you."

Here Tom stepped forward into the midst of the group, lifting his sullen eyebrows. "I know what it means," he said. "It is easy enough to tell what it means. If she takes you in, she can't take me in. I saw how things were going long ago. First one was got out of the house and then another, but she was always there, saying what she pleased, getting over the old man. Do you think if he had been in his right senses, he would have driven away his sons, and put a girl over our heads? I'll tell you what," he cried with passion, "I am not going to stand it if you are. She was there always at one side of him, and the doctor at the other. The daughter and the doctor

and nobody else. Every one knows how a doctor can work upon your nerves; and a woman that is always nursing you, making herself sweet. If there ever was undue influence, there it is. And I don't mean to stand it for one."

George was not enraged like his brother: he looked from one to another with his anxious eyes. "If you don't stand it, what can you do?" he said.

"I mean to bring it to a trial. I mean to take it into court. There isn't a jury in England but would give it in our favour," said Tom. "I know a little about the law. It is the blackest case I ever knew. The doctor, Langton, he is engaged to Winnie. He has put her up to it; I don't blame her so much. He has stood behind her making a cat's-paw of her. Oh, I've found out all about it. He belongs to the old family that

used to own Bedloe, and he has had his eye on this ever since we came here. The governor was very sharp," said Tom, "he was not one to be beaten in the common way. But the doctor, that was always handy, that came night and day, that cured him—the *first* time," he added significantly.

Tom, in his fury, had not observed, nor had any of his agitated hearers, the opening of the door behind, the quiet entry into the room of a new-comer, who, arrested by the words he heard, had stood there listening to what Tom said. At this moment he advanced quickly up the long room. "You think perhaps that I killed him—the second time?" he said, confronting the previous speaker.

Winifred rose from her chair with a low cry, and came to his side, putting her arm through his.

"Edward! Edward! he does not know what he is saying," she cried.

The other pair had stood bewildered during all this, Mrs. George gasping with her pretty red lips apart, her husband, always careworn, looking anxiously from one face to another. When she saw Winnie's sudden movement, Mrs. George copied it in her way. She was cowed by the appearance of the doctor, who was so evidently a gentleman, one of those superior beings for whom she retained the awe and admiration of her youth.

"Oh, George, come to bed! don't mix yourself up with none of them—don't get yourself into trouble!" she cried, doing what she could to drag him away.

"Let alone, Alice," he said, disengaging himself. "I suppose you are Dr. Langton. My brother couldn't mean that; but if things are as he says, it's rather a bad case."

A fever of excitement, restrained by the habit of self-command, and making little appearance, had risen in Langton's veins. "Winifred," he cried, with the calm of passion, "you have been breaking your heart to find out a way of serving your brothers. You see how they receive it. Retire now, you are not able to deal with them, and leave it to me."

She was clinging to him with both hands, clasping his arm, very weak, shaken both in body and mind, longing for quietness and rest; but she shook her head, looking up with a pathetic smile in his face.

"No, Edward," she said.

"No?" he looked at her, not believing his ears. She had never resisted him before, even when his counsels were most repugnant to her. A sudden passionate offence took possession of him. "In that case," he said, "perhaps it is I that ought to withdraw, and allow your

brother to accuse me of every crime at his ease."

"Oh, Edward, don't make it harder! It is hard upon us all, both them and me. It is desperate, the position we are in. I cannot endure it, and they cannot endure it. What are we to do?"

"Nor can I endure it," he said. "Let them contest the will. It is the best way; but in that case they cannot remain under your roof."

"Who gave you the right to dictate what we are to do?" cried Tom, who was beside himself with passion. "This is my father's house, not yours. It is my sister's, if you like, but not yours. Winnie, let that fellow go; what has he got to do between us? Let him go away; he has got nothing to do here."

"You are of that opinion too?" Langton said, turning to her with a pale smile. "Be

it so. I came to look after Miss Chester's health, not to disturb a family party."

"Edward!" Winifred cried. The name he gave her went to her heart. He had detached himself from her hold; he would not see the hand which she held out to him. His ear was deaf to her voice. She had deserted him, he said to himself. She had brought insult upon him, and an atrocious accusation, and she had not resented it, showed no indignation, rejected his help, prepared to smooth over and conciliate the miserable cad who had permitted himself to do this thing. Beneath all this blaze of passion, there was no doubt also the bitterness of disappointment with which he saw the destruction of those hopes which he had been foolishly entertaining, allowing himself to cherish, although he knew all the difficulties in the way. He saw and felt that, right or wrong, she would give all away, that Bedloe

was farther from him than ever it had been. He loved Winifred, it was not for Bedloe he had sought her; but everything surged up together at this moment in a passion of mortification, resentment, and shame. She had not maintained his cause, she had refused his intervention, she had allowed these intruders to regard him as taking more upon him than she would permit, claiming an authority she would not grant. He neither looked at her, nor listened to the call which she repeated with a cry that might have moved a savage. A man humiliated, hurt in his pride, is worse than a savage.

"Take care of her," he said, wringing Miss Farrell's hand as he passed her, and without another look or word went away.

Winifred, standing, following with her eyes, with consternation unspeakable, his departing figure, felt the strength ebb out of her as he

disappeared. But yet there was relief in his departure, too. A woman has often many pangs to bear between her husband and her family. She has to endure and maintain often the authority which she does not acknowledge, which in her right he assumes over them, which is a still greater offence to her than to them; and an instinctive sense that her lover should not have any power over her brothers was strong in her notwithstanding her love. Her agitated heart returned after a moment's pause to the problem which was no nearer solution than before. She said softly—

"All that I can do for your sake I will do, whatever I may suffer. There is one thing I will not do, and that is, defend myself or him. If you do not know that neither I nor he have done anything against you, it is not for me to say it. It is hard, very hard for us all. If you will advise with me like friends what to

do, I shall be very, very thankful; but if not, you must do what you will, and I will do what I can, and there is no more to say."

The interruption, though it had been hard to bear, had done her good. She went back to her chair, and leant back, letting her head rest on good Miss Farrell's faithful shoulder. A kind of desperation had come to her. She had sent her lover away, and nothing remained for her, but only this forlorn duty.

"Edward will not come back," she said in Miss Farrell's ear.

"To-morrow, my darling, to-morrow," the old lady said, with tears in her eyes.

Winifred shook her head. No one could deceive her any more. She seemed to have come to that farthest edge of life on which everything becomes plain. After a while she withdrew, leaving the others to their consultation; they had been excited by Edward's

coming, but they were cowed by his going away. It seemed to bring to all a strange realisation, such as people so often reach through the eyes of others, of the real state of their affairs.

CHAPTER XVI

ENOUGH had been done and said that night. They remained together for some time in the drawing-room, having the outside aspect of a family party, but separated, as indeed family parties often are. Winifred, very pale, with the feeling of exhaustion both bodily and mental, sat for a time in her chair, Miss Farrell close to her, holding her hand. They said nothing to each other, but from time to time the old lady would bend over her pupil with a kiss of consolation, or press between her own the thin hand she held. She said nothing, and Winifred, indeed, was incapable of intercourse more articulate. On the

other side of the fireplace George and his wife sat together, whispering and consulting. She was very eager, he careworn and doubtful, as was his nature. Sometimes he would shake his head, saying, "No, Alice," or "It is not possible." Sometimes her eager whispering came to an articulate word. Their anxious discussion, the close union of two beings whose interests were one, the life and expectation and anxiety in their looks, made a curious contrast to the exhaustion of Winnie lying back in her chair, and the sullen loneliness of Tom, who sat in the centre in front of the fire, receiving its full blaze upon him in a sort of ostentatious resentment and sullenness, though his hand over his eyes concealed the thought in his face. The only sound was the whispering of Mrs. George, and the occasional low word with which her husband replied. Further, no communication passed between the different members of this

strange party. They separated after a time with faint good-nights, Mrs. George eager, indeed, to maintain the forms of civility, but the brothers each in his way withdrawing with little show of friendship. After this, Winifred too went upstairs. Her heart was very full.

"Did you ever," she said to her companion "feel a temptation to run away, to bear no more?"

"Yes, I have felt it; but no one can run away. Where could we go that our duty would not follow us? It is shorter to do it anyhow at first hand."

"Is it so?" said Winifred, with a forlorn look from the window into the night where the stars were shining, and the late moon rising. "'Oh that I had the wings of a dove!' —I don't think I ever understood before what that meant."

"And what does it mean, Winnie? The

dove flies home, not into the wilds, which is what you are thinking of."

"That is true," said the girl, "and I have no home, except with you. I have still you"—

"He will come back to-morrow," Miss Farrell said.

"No, he will not come back. They insulted him, and I—did not want him. That is true. I did not want him. I wanted none of his advice. I preferred to be left to do what I had to do myself. It is true, Miss Farrell. Can a man ever forgive that? It would have been natural that he should have done everything for me, and instead of that— Are not these all great mysteries?" said Winifred after a pause. "A woman should not be able to do so. She should put herself into the hands of her husband. Am I unwomanly?—you used to frighten me with the word; but I could not do it. I did not want him. My

heart rose against his interference. If I knew that he felt so to me, I—I should be wounded to death. And yet—it was so—it is quite true. I think he will never forgive me."

"It is a mystery, Winnie. I don't know how it is. When you are married everything changes, or so people say. But love forgives everything, dear."

"Not that," Winifred said.

She sat by her fire, when her friend left her, in a state of mind which it is impossible to describe in words. It was despair. Despair is generally tragical and exalted; and perhaps that passion is more easy to bear with the excitement that belongs to it than the quiet consciousness that one has come to a dead pause in one's life, and that neither on one side or the other is there any outlet. Winifred was perfectly calm and still. She sat amid all the comfort of her chamber, gazing dimly

into the cheerful fire. She was rich. She was highly esteemed. She had many friends. And yet she had come to a pass when everything failed her. Her brothers stood hostile about her, feeling her with justice to be their supplanter, to stand in their way. Her lover had left her, feeling with justice that she wronged his love and rejected his aid. With justice—that was the sting. To be misunderstood is terrible, yet it is a thing that can be surmounted; but to be guilty, whether by any fault of yours, whether by terrible complication of events, whether by the constitution of your mind, which is the worst of all, this is despair. And there was no way of deliverance. She could not make over her undesired wealth to her brothers, which had at first seemed to be so easy a way; and also, far worse, far deeper, far more terrible, she could not make Edward see how she could put him away from her,

yet love him. She felt herself to sit alone, as if upon a pinnacle of solitude, regarding all around and seeing no point from which there could come any help. It is seldom that the soul is thus overwhelmed on all sides. When one hope fails, another dawns upon the horizon; rarely, rarely is there no aid near. But to Winifred it seemed that everything was gone from her. Her lover and friends stood aloof. Her life was cut off. To liberate every one and turn evil into good, the thing best to be done seemed that she should die. But she knew that of all aspirations in the world that is the most futile. Death does not come to the call of misery. Those who would die, live on: those who would live are stricken in the midst of their happiness. Perhaps to a more cheerful and buoyant nature the crisis would have been less terrible; but to her it seemed that everything was over, and life come

to a standstill. She was baffled and foiled in all that she wished, and that which she did not desire was forced upon her. There seemed no strength left in her to fight against all the adverse forces around. Her heart failed altogether, and she felt in herself no power even to meet them, to begin again the discussion, to hear again, perhaps, the baseless threat which had driven Edward away. Ah, it was not that which had driven him away. It was she herself who had been the cause; she who had not wanted him, who even now, in the bitterness of the loss, which seemed to her as if it must be for ever, still felt a faint relief in the thought that at least no conflict between his will and hers would embitter the crisis, and that she should be left undisturbed to do for her brothers all that could be done, alone.

Next day she was so shaken and worn out with the experiences of that terrible evening,

that she kept her room and saw no one, save Miss Farrell. Edward made no appearance; he did not even inquire for her, and till the evening, when Mr. Babington arrived, Winifred saw no one. The state of the house, in which George and his family held a sort of encampment on one side, and Tom a hostile position on the other, was a very strange one. There was a certain forlorn yet tragi-comic separation between them. Even in the dining-room, where they sat at table together, Mrs. George kept nervously at one end, as far apart as she could place herself from her brother-in-law. The few words that were interchanged between the brothers she did everything in her power to interrupt or stop. She kept George by her side, occupied him with the children, watched over him with a sort of unquiet care. Tom had assumed his father's place at the foot of the table before the others perceived what

that meant. They established themselves at the head, George and his wife together, talking to each other in low voices, while there was no one with whom Tom could make up a faction. The servants walked with strange looks from the one end to the other, serving the two groups who were separated by the white stretch of flower-decorated table. Old Hopkins groaned, yet so reported the matter that the company in the housekeeper's room shook their sides with mirth. "It was for all the world like one of them big hotels as I've been to many a time with master. Two lots, with a scoff and a scowl for everything that each other did." Notwithstanding this disunion, however, the two brothers had several conferences in the course of the day. They had a common interest, though they thus pitted themselves against each other. It was Tom who was the chief spokesman in these almost stealthy

interviews. Tom was so sore and resentful against his sister, that he was willing to make common cause with George against her.

"If it is as she says," he said, "there's no jury in England but would find undue influence, and perhaps incapacity for managing his own affairs. We have the strongest case I ever heard of."

"I don't believe you'll get a jury against Winnie," said George, shaking his head.

"Why shouldn't we get a jury against Winnie? She has stolen into my place and your place, and set the governor against us."

"Perhaps she has," said George; "but you won't get a jury against her."

"Why not? There is no man in the world that would say otherwise than that ours was a hard case."

"Oh yes, it is a very hard case; but you would not get a jury against Winnie," George

repeated, with that admirable force of passive resistance and blunted understanding which is beyond all argument.

This was what they talked of when they walked up and down the conservatory together in the afternoon. Tom was eager, George doubtful; but yet they were more or less of accord on this subject. It was a hard case —no one would say otherwise; and though George could not in his heart get himself to believe that any argument would secure a verdict against Winnie, yet it was a case, it was evident, in which something ought to be done, and he began to yield to Tom's certainty. When Mr. Babington arrived, they both met him with a certain expectation.

"We can't stand this, you know," said Tom. "It is not in nature to suppose that we could stand it."

"Oh, can't you?" Mr. Babington said.

"Tom thinks," his brother explained in his slow way, "that there has been undue influence."

"The poor old governor must have been going off his head. It is as clear as daylight: he never could have made such a will if he hadn't been off his head; and Winnie and this doctor one on each side of him. Such a will can never stand," said Tom.

"But I say he'll never get a jury against Winnie," said George, with his anxious eyes fixed on Mr. Babington's face.

The lawyer listened to this till they had done, and then he said, "Oh, that is what you think!" and burst into a peal of laughter. "Your father was the sort of person, don't you think, to be made to do what he didn't want to do? I don't think I should give much for your chance if that is what you build upon."

This laugh, more than all the reasoning in

the world, took the courage out of Tom, and George had never had any courage. They listened with countenances much cast down to Mr. Babington's narrative of their father's proceedings, and of how Winnie was bound, and how Mr. Chester had intended to bind her. They neither of them were clever enough to remark that there were some points upon which he gave them no information, though he seemed so certain and explicit. But they were both completely lowered and subdued after an hour of his society, recognising for the first time the desperate condition of affairs.

That evening, when Winnie, weary of her day's seclusion, sick at heart to feel her own predictions coming true, and to realise that Edward had let the day pass without a word, was sitting sadly in her dressing-gown before her fire, there came a knock softly at her door, late in the evening, when the household in

general had gone to bed. She turned round with a little start and exclamation, and her surprise was not lessened when she perceived that her visitor was Tom. He came in with scarcely a word, and drew a chair near her, and sat down in front of the fire.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE is, among the members of many families, a frank familiarity which dispenses with all those forms which keep life on a level of courtesy with persons not related to each other. Tom did not think it necessary to ask his sister how she was, or to show any anxiety about her health. He drew his chair forward and seated himself near her, without any formulas.

"You know how to make yourself comfortable," he said, with a glance round the room, which indeed was very luxuriously furnished, like the rest of the house, and with some taste, which was Winifred's own. The tone in which

he spoke conveyed a subtle intimation that Winifred made herself comfortable at his expense, but he did not say so in words. He stretched out his feet towards the fire. Perhaps he found it a little difficult to come to the point.

"I am sorry," said Winifred, "to have been shut up here. If I had been stronger—but you must remember I have had an illness, Tom; and to feel that you were both against me"—

"Oh, it doesn't matter about that," said Tom, with a wave of his hand. Then, after a pause, "In that you're mistaken, Winnie. I'm not against you. A fellow could not but be disappointed to find what a different position he was in, after the telegram and all. But when one comes to hear all about it, I'm not against you: I'm rather — though perhaps you won't believe me—on your side."

"Oh, Tom!" cried Winifred, laying her hand

upon his arm; "I am too glad to believe you. If you will only stand by me, Tom"—

"Oh yes," he said, "I'll stand by you. I've been thinking it over since last night. You want some one to be on your side, Winnie. When I saw the airs of— But never mind, I have been thinking it all over, and I am on your side."

"If that is so, I shall be able to bear almost anything," said Winifred faintly.

"You will have George to bear and his wife. They say women never can put up with other women. And, good heavens, to think that for a creature like that he should have stood out and lost his chances with the governor! I never was a fool in that way, Winnie. If I went wrong, it was for nobody else's sake, but to please myself. I should never have let a girl stand in my way—not even pretty, except in a poor sort of style, and fat at that age." Here

Tom made a brief pause. "But of course you know I shall want something to live on," he said.

"I know that you shall have everything that I can give you," Winifred cried.

"Ah! but that's easier said than done. We must not run against the will, that is clear. I've been thinking it over, as I tell you, and my idea is, that after a little time, when you have taken possession and got out of Mr. Babington's hands and all that, you might make me a present, as it were. Of course your sense of justice will make it a handsome present, Winnie."

"You shall have half, Tom. I have always meant you should have half."

"Half?" he said. "It's rather poor, you'll allow, to have to come down to that after fully making up one's mind that one was to have everything!"

"But, Tom, you would not have left George out—you would not have had the heart!"

"Oh, the heart!" said Tom. "I shouldn't have stood upon ceremony, Winnie; and besides, I always had more respect for the poor old governor than any of you. It suits my book that you should go against him, but I shouldn't have done it, had it been me. Well, half! I suppose that's fair enough. You couldn't be expected to do more. But you must be very cautious how you do it, you know. It's awfully unbusiness-like, and would have made the governor mad to think of. You must just get the actual money, sell out, or realise, or whatever they call it, and give it to me. Nothing that requires any papers or settlements or anything. You will have to get the actual money and give it me. You had better do it at different times, so many thousand now, and so many thousand then. It will feel awfully queer getting so much money actually in one's hand—but nice," Tom added, with a little laugh. He

got up and stood with his back to the fire, looking down upon her. "Nice in its way, if one could forget that it ought to have been so much more."

"Tom, you will be careful and not spend too much—you will not throw it all away?"

"Catch me!" he said. "I'll tell you what I mean to do, Winnie. I'll go on the Stock Exchange. The governor's old friends will lend me a hand, thinking mine a hard case, as it is. And then it's easy to make them believe I've been lucky, or inherit (as I believe I do) the governor's head for business. It would be droll if some of us hadn't got that, and I am sure it's neither George nor you. Well, then, that's settled, Winnie. It will be easy to find out from Babington what the half is: a precious big figure, I don't doubt," he added, with a triumph which for the moment he forgot to disguise. Then he added after a moment, in a

more indifferent tone, "There is no telling what may happen when a man is once launched. If you give me your share to work the markets with, you can do anything on the Stock Exchange with a lot of money. I'll double your money for you in a year or two, which will be as good as giving it all back."

"I don't know anything about the Stock Exchange, Tom; only don't lose your money speculating."

"Oh, trust me for that!" he said. "I tell you I am the one that has got the governor's head." Then it seemed to strike him for the first time that it would not be amiss to show some regard for his sister. He brought his hand down somewhat heavily on her shoulder, which made her start violently.

"Come," he said, "you must not be downhearted, Win. If I was a little nasty at first, can't you understand that? And now I've

made up my mind to it, there's nothing to look so grave about. I'll stand by you whatever happens."

"Thank you, Tom," she said faintly.

"You needn't thank me; it's I that ought to thank you, I suppose. I might have known you would behave well, for you always did behave well, Winnie. And look here, you must not make yourself unhappy about everybody as you do. George, for instance: I would be very careful of what I gave him, if I were you. Let them go out to their own place again, they will be far better there than here. And don't give them too much money: enough to buy a bit of land is quite enough for them; and when the boys are big enough to help him to work it, he'll do very well." This prudent advice Tom delivered as he strolled, pausing now and then at the end of a sentence, towards the door. He was, perhaps, not very sure that it was

advice that would commend itself to Winnie, or that it came with any force from his mouth; nevertheless he had a sort of conviction, which was not without reason, that it was sensible advice. "By the bye," he added, turning short round and standing in the half dark in the part of the room which was not illuminated by the lamp—"by the bye, I suppose you will have to sell Bedloe, before you can settle with me?"

"Sell Bedloe!" Winifred was startled out of the quiescence with which she had received Tom's other proposals. "Why should there be any occasion to do that, Tom?"

"My dear," he said, with a sort of amiable impatience, "how ignorant you are of business! Don't you see that before you halve everything with me as you promise, all the property must be realised? I mean to say, if you don't understand the word, sold. That is the very first step."

"Sell Bedloe?" she repeated. "Dear Tom, that is the very last thing my father would have consented to do. Oh no, I cannot sell Bedloe. He hoped it was to descend to his children, and his name remain in the county; he intended"—

"Do you think he intended to preserve the name of the Langtons in the county, Winnie? You can't be such a fool as that. And, as I suppose your children, when you have them, will be Langtons, not Chesters"—

She interrupted him eagerly, her face covered with a painful flush. "I am going to carry out my father's will against his will, Tom; and, oh, I feel sure where he is now he will forgive me. He has heirs of his own name—I mean them to have Bedloe. Where he is he knows better," she said, with emotion; "he will understand, he will not be angry. Bedloe must be for George."

Tom came forward close to her, within the light of the lamp, with his lowering face. "I always knew you were a fool, but not such a fool as that, Winnie. Bedloe for George! a fellow that has disgraced his family, marrying a woman that—why, even Hopkins is better than she is; they wouldn't have her at table in the housekeeper's room. I thought you were a lady yourself, I thought you knew—why, Bedloe, Winnie!" he seized her by the arm; "if you do this you will show yourself an utter idiot, without any common sense, not to be trusted. If you don't sell Bedloe, how are you to pay me?" he cried, with an honest conviction that in saying this righteous indignation had reached its climax, and there was nothing more to add.

"Tom," said Winifred, "leave me for to-night. I am not capable of anything more to-night. Don't you feel some pity for me,"

she cried, "left alone with no one to help me?"

But how was he to understand this cry which escaped from her without any will of hers?

"To help you? whom do you want to help you? I should have helped you if you had shown any sense. Bedloe to George! Then it is the half of the *money* only that is to be for me? Oh, thank you for nothing, Miss Winnie, if you think I am to be put off with that. Look here! I came to you thinking you meant well, to show you a way out of it. But I've got a true respect for the governor's will, if no one else has. Don't you know that for years and years he had cut George out of it altogether, and that it was just Bedloe —Bedloe above everything—that he was not to have?"

Winifred shrank and trembled as if it were she who was the criminal. "Yes," she said

almost under her breath, "I know; but, Tom, think. He is the eldest, he has children who have done no wrong."

"I don't think anything about it," said Tom. "The governor cut him out; and what reason have you got for giving him what was taken from him? What can you say for yourself? that's what I want to know."

"Tom," said Winifred, trembling, with tears in her eyes, "there are the children: little George, who is called after my father, who is the real heir. His heart would have melted, I am sure it would, if he had seen the children."

"Oh, the children! that woman's children, and the image of her! Can't you find a better reason than that?"

"Tom," said Winifred again, "my father is dead, he can see things now in a different light. Oh, what is everything on the earth, poor bits of property and pride, in comparison with right

and justice? Do you think *they* don't know better and wish if they could to remedy what has been wrong here?"

"I don't know what you mean by *they*," said Tom sullenly. "If you mean the governor, we don't know anything about him; whether —whether it's all right, you know, or if"— Here he paused for an appropriate word, but, not finding one, cried out, as with an intention of cutting short the subject, "That's all rubbish! I'll tell you what I'll do. If you go on with this folly, to drag the governor's name through the mud, by Jove! I'll tell Babington. I'll put him up to what you're after. Against my own interest? What do I care? I'll tell Babington, by Jove! to spite you if nothing more!"

"I think you will kill me!" cried Winifred, at the end of her patience; "and that would be the easiest of all, for you would be my heirs, George and you."

He stared at her for a moment as if weighing the suggestion, then, saying resentfully, "Always George," turned and left her, shutting the door violently behind him. The noise echoed through the house, which was all silent and asleep, and Winifred, very lonely, deserted on all sides, leaned back in her chair and cried to herself silently, in prostration of misery and weakness. What was she to do? to whom was she to turn? She had nobody to stand by her. There was nothing but a blank and silence on every side wherever she could turn.

CHAPTER XVIII

THIS interview did not calm the nerves of the agitated girl or bring her soothing or sleep. It was almost morning before the calm of exhaustion came, hushing the thoughts in her troubled brain and the pulses in her tired body. She slept without comfort, almost without unconsciousness, carrying her cares along with her, and when she awoke suddenly to an unusual sound by her bedside, could scarcely make up her mind that she had been asleep at all, and believed at first that the little babbling voice close to her ear was part of a feverish dream. She started up in her bed, and saw on the carpet close to her the

little three-year-old boy, a small, square figure with very large wide-open blue eyes, who was altogether new to her experiences, and whom she only identified after a moment's astonished consideration as little George, her brother's child. The first clear idea that flashed across her mind was that, as Tom said, he was "the image of his mother," not a Chester at all, or like any of her family, but the picture, in little, of the very overblown beauty of George's wife. This sensation checked in Winifred's mind, mechanically, without any will of hers, the natural impulse of tenderness towards the child, who, staring at her with his round eyes, had been making ineffectual pulls at the counterpane, and calling at intervals, "Auntie Winnie!" in a frightened and reluctant tone. Little George had "got on" very well with his newly-found relative on the night of his arrival, but to see an unknown lady in bed, with long hair

framing her pale face, and that look of sleep which simulates death, had much disturbed the little boy. He fulfilled his *consigne* with much faltering bravery, but he did not like it; and when the white lady with the brown hair started up suddenly, he recoiled with a cry which was very nearly a wail. She recovered and came to herself sooner than he did, and, smiling, held out a hand to him.

"Little George, is it you? Come, then, and tell me what it is," she said.

Here the baby recoiled a step farther, and stared with still larger eyes, his mouth open ready to cry again, the tears rising, his little person drawn together with that instinctive dread of some attack which seems natural to the helpless. Winnie stretched out her arm to him with a smile of invitation.

"Come to me, little man, come to me," she cried. Tears came to her eyes too, and a

softening to her heart. The little creature belonged to her after a fashion; he was her own flesh and blood; he was innocent, not struggling for gain. She did not ask how he came there, nor notice the straying of his eyes to something behind, which inspired yet terrified him. She was too glad to feel the unaccustomed sensation of pleasure loosen her bonds. "It is true I am your Aunt Winnie. Come, Georgie, don't be afraid of me. Come, for I love you," she said.

Half attracted, half forced by the influence behind, which was to Winnie invisible, the child made a shy step towards the bed. "Oo send Georgie away," he stammered. "Oo send Georgie back to big ship. Mamma ky. Georgie no like big ship."

"Come and tell me, Georgie." She leant towards him, holding out arms in which the child saw a refuge from the imperative signs

which were being addressed to him from behind the bed. He came forward slowly with his little tottering steps, his big eyes full of inquiry, wonder, and suspicion.

"Oo take care of Georgie?" he said, with a little whimper that went to Winifred's heart; then suffered himself to be drawn into her arms. The touch of the infant was like balm to her.

"Yes, dear," she cried, with tears in her eyes; "as far as I can, and with all my heart I will take care of Georgie." It was a vow made, not to the infant, who had no comprehension, but to Heaven and her own heart.

But there was some one else who heard and understood after her fashion. As Winifred said these words with a fervour beyond description, a sudden running fire of sobs broke forth behind the head of her bed. Then with a rush and sweep something heavy and soft fell down by

her side, almost crushing Georgie, who began to cry with fright and wonder.

"Oh, Miss Winnie! God bless you! I knew that was what you would say," cried Mrs. George, clasping Winifred's arm with both her hands, and laying down her wet, soft cheek upon it. "*He* thought not; he said we should have to go back again in that dreadful ship; but oh, bless you! I knew you weren't one of that kind!"

"Is it you, Mrs. George?" said Winifred faintly. The sudden apparition of the mother gave her a shock; and she began to perceive that the little scene was melodramatic, got up to excite her feelings. She drew back a little coldly; but the baby gazing at her between his bursts of crying, and pressing closer and closer to her shoulder, frightened by his mother's onslaught, was no actor. She began to feel after a moment that the mother herself, crying

volubly like a schoolgirl, and clutching her arm as if it were that of a giant, was, if an actor so very simple an actor, with devices so transparent and an object so little concealed, that moral indignation was completely misplaced against her artless wiles, and that nature was far stronger in her than guile. In the first revulsion she spoke coldly; but after a moment, with a truer insight, "Stand up," she said. "Don't cry so. Get a chair and come and sit by me. You must not go on your knees to me."

"Oh, but that I will," cried Mrs. George, "as if you were the Queen, Miss Winnie; for you have got our lives in your hands. Look at that poor little fellow, who is your own flesh and blood. Oh, will you listen to what worldly folks say, and send him away to be brought up as if he was nobody, and him your own nephew and just heir?—oh, I don't mean that!

It appears he's got no rights, though I always thought—the eldest son's eldest son! But no; I don't say that. George pleased himself marrying me, and if he lost his place for that, ain't it more than ever my duty to do what I can for him? And I don't make no claim. I don't talk about rights. You've got the right, Miss Winnie, and there's an end of it. Whoever opposes, it will never be George and me. But oh," cried the young woman, rising from her knees, and addressing to Winifred all the simple eloquence of her soft face, her blue eyes blurred with tears, which flowed in half a dozen channels over the rosy undefined outline of her cheeks,—"oh, if you only knew what life was in foreign parts! It don't suit George. He was brought up a gentleman, and he can't abear common ways. And the children!—oh, Miss Winnie, the little boys! Would you stand by and see them brought up to hold horses and to

run errands—them that are your own flesh and blood?"

Little Georgie had ceased to whimper. The sight of his mother's crying overawed the baby. He was too safe and secure in Winifred's arms to move at once—but, reflecting in his infant soul, with his big eyes turned to his mother all the while she spoke, was at last touched beyond his childish capacity of endurance, forsook the haven in which he had found shelter, and, flinging his arms about her knees, cried out, "Mamma, don't ky, mamma, me love you!" burying his face in the folds of her dress. Mrs. George stooped down and gathered him up in her arms with a sleight of hand natural to mothers, and then, child and all, precipitated herself once more on the carpet at the bedside.

Winifred, too, was carried out of herself by this little scene. She dried the fast-flowing tears from the soft face so near to her as if the

young mother had been no more serious an agent than Georgie. "You shall not go back. You shall want nothing that I can do for you," she cried, soothing them. It was some time before the tumult calmed; but when at last the fit of crying was over, Mrs. George began at once to smile again, with an easy turn from despair to satisfaction. She held her child for Winifred to kiss, her own lips trembling between joy and trouble.

"I don't ask you to kiss me, for I'm not good enough for you to kiss; but Georgie—he is your own flesh and blood."

"Do not say so," said Winifred, kissing mother and child. "And now sit beside me and talk to me, and do not call me miss, for I am your sister. I am sure you have been a good wife to George."

"I should be that and more: since he lost his fortune, and his 'ome, and all, for me," she cried.

The scene which ensued was the most unexpected of all. Mrs. George placed the child upon Winifred's bed and began, without further ado, a baby game of peeps and transparent hidings, her excitement turning to laughter, as it had turned to tears. Winifred, too, though her heart was heavy enough, found herself drawn into that sudden revulsion. They played with little Georgie for half an hour in the middle of all the care and pain that surrounded them, the one woman with her heart breaking, the other feeling, as far as she could feel anything, that the very life of her family hung in the balance—moving the child to peals of laughter, in which they shared after their fashion, as women only can, interposing this episode of play into the gravest crisis. It was only when Georgie's laughter began to show signs of that over-excitement that leads to tears, that Winifred suddenly said, almost to herself,

"But how am I to do it? how am I to do it?" with an accent of weary effort which almost reached the length of despair.

"Oh dear! you that are so good and kind," cried Mrs. George, changing also in a moment, "just let us stay with you, dear Winnie — it's a liberty to call you Winnie; but oh dear, dear! why can't we just live all together? That would do nobody any harm. That would go against no one's will. It wasn't said you were not to give me and George and the children an 'ome. Oh, only think! it's such a big, big house! If you didn't like the noise of the children,—but you aren't one of that sort, not to like the noise of the children, and so I told George,—they could have their nursery where you would never hear a sound. And George would be a deal of use to you in managing the estate, and I would do the housekeeping, and welcome, and save you any trouble. And why, why—oh,

why shouldn't we just settle down all together, and be, oh, so comfortable, Miss Winnie, dear?"

This suggestion, it need scarcely be said, struck Winifred with dismay. The face, no longer weeping, no longer elevated by the passionate earnestness of the first appeal, dropping to calculations which, perhaps, were more congenial to its nature, gave her a chill of repulsion while still her heart was soft. She seemed to see, with a curious second sight, the scene of family life, of family tragedy, which might ensue were this impossible plan attempted. It was with difficulty that she stopped Mrs. George, who, in the heat of success, would have settled all the details at once, and it was only the entrance of Miss Farrell, tenderly anxious about her pupil's health, and astounded to find Mrs. George and her child established in her room, that finally delivered poor Winnie.

"You would have no need of strangers eating you up if you had us," her sister-in-law said, as she stooped to kiss her ostentatiously, and held the child up to repeat the salute ere she went away.

Winifred had kissed the young mother almost with emotion in the midst of her pleading; but somehow this return of the embrace gave a slight shock both to her delicacy and pride. She laughed a little and coloured when Miss Farrell, after the door closed, looked at her astonished. "You think I've have grown into wonderful intimacy with Mrs. George?" she said.

"I do indeed, Winnie. My dear, I would not interfere, but you must not let your kind heart carry you too far."

"Oh, my kind heart!" cried the girl, feeling a desperate irony in the words. "She suggests that they should live with me," she added, turning her head away.

"Live with you? Winnie! my dear!" Miss Farrell gasped, with a sharp break between each word.

"She thinks it will arrange itself so, quite simply—oh, it is quite simple! Dear Miss Farrell, don't say anything. I have been pushing it off. I have been pretending to be ill because I was miserable. Let me get up now—and don't say anything," she added after a moment, with lips that trembled in spite of herself. "There are no—letters; no one—has been here?"

"Nothing, Winnie." Her friend did not look at her; she dared not betray her too profound sympathy, her personal anguish, even by a kiss.

When Winifred came downstairs she found Mr. Babington waiting for her. He was a very old acquaintance, whom she had not been used to think of as a friend; but trouble makes strange changes in the aspect of things around

us, turning sometimes those whom we have loved most into strangers, and lighting up faces that have been indifferent to us with new lights of compassion and sympathy. Mr. Babington's formal manner, his well-known features, so composed and commonplace, his grey, keen eyes under their bushy eyebrows, suddenly took a new appearance to Winifred. They seemed to shine upon her with the warmth of ancient friendship. She had known him all her life, yet, it seemed, had never known him till to-day. He came to meet her, holding out his hand, with some kind, ordinary questions about her health, but all the while a light put out, as it were, at the windows of his soul, to help her, another poor soul stumbling along in the darkness. It was not anything that he said, nor that she said. She did not ask for any help, nor he offer it; and yet in a moment Winifred felt herself, in her mind, clinging to

him with the sense that here was an old, old friend, somebody, above all doubt and uncertainty, in whom she could trust.

"Miss Winifred," he said, "I am afraid, though you don't seem much like it, that we must talk of business."

"Yes; I wish it, Mr. Babington. I am only foolish and troubled—not ill at all."

"I am not so sure about that; but still—Your brother Tom has been warning me, Miss Winifred—I hope to save you from a false step; that you are thinking of—going against your father's will"—

"Did Tom tell you so, Mr. Babington?"

"He did. I confess that I was not surprised. I have expected you to do so all along; but so fine a fortune as you have got is not to be lightly parted with, my dear young lady. Think of all the power it gives you, power to do good, to increase the happiness, or at least

the comfort, perhaps of hundreds of people. If it was in your brothers' hands, do you think it would be used as well? We must think of that, Miss Winifred, we must think of that."

"If it was in my power," she said, looking at him wistfully, "I should think rather of what is just. Can anything be good that is founded upon injustice? Oh, Mr. Babington, put yourself in my place! Could you bear to take away from your brother, from any one, what was his by nature — to put yourself in his seat, to take it from him, to rob him?"

"Hush, hush, my dear girl! I am afraid I have not a conscience so delicate as yours. I could bear a great deal which does not seem bearable to you. And you must remember it is no doing of yours. Your father thought, and I agree with him, that you would make a better use of his money, and do more credit to his name, than either of your brothers. It

throws a fearful responsibility upon you, we may allow; but still, my dear Miss Winifred"—

"Mr. Babington," she cried, interrupting him, "you are my oldest friend—oh yes, my oldest friend! You know, if I am forced to do this, it will only be deceiving from beginning to end. I will only pretend to obey. I will be trying all the time, as I am now, to find out ways of defeating all his purposes, and doing —what he said I was not to do!"

Her eyes shone almost wildly through the tears that stood in them. She changed colour from pale to red, from red to pale; her weakness gave her the guise of impassioned strength.

"Miss Winifred," said the lawyer very gravely, "do you know that you are guilty of the last imprudence in saying this, of all people in the world, to me?"

"Oh," she cried, "you are my friend, my old friend! I never remember the time when

I did not know you. It is not imprudent, it is my only hope. Think a little of me first, whom you knew long before this will was made. Tell me how I can get out of the bondage of it. Teach me, teach me how to cheat everybody, for that is all that is left to me! how to keep it from them so as best to give it to them. Teach me! for there is no one I can ask but you."

The lawyer looked at her with a very serious face. Her great emotion, her trembling earnestness, the very force of her appeal, as of one consulting her only oracle, hurt the good man with a sympathetic pain. "My dear," he said, "God forbid I should refuse you my advice, or misunderstand you, you who are far too good for any of them. But, Miss Winifred, think again, my dear. Are you altogether a free agent? Is there not some one else who has a right to be consulted before you take a

step—which may change the whole course of your life?"

Winifred grew so pale that he thought she was going to faint, and got up hurriedly to ring the bell. She stopped him with a movement of her hand. Then she said firmly, "There is no one; no one can come between me and my duty. I will consult nobody—but you."

"My dear young lady, excuse me if I speak too plainly; but want of confidence between two people that are in the position of"—

"You mean," she said faintly yet steadily, "Dr. Langton? Mr. Babington, he has no duty towards George and Tom. I love them—how can I help it? they are my brothers; but he—why should he love them? I don't expect it—I can't expect it. I must settle this by myself."

"And yet he will be the one to suffer," said

the lawyer reflectively in a parenthesis. "My dear Miss Winifred, take a little time to think it over, there is no cause for hurry; take a week, take another day. Think a little"—

"I have done nothing but think," she said, "since you told me first. Thinking kills me, I cannot go on with it; and you can't tell—oh, you can't tell how it harms *them*, what it makes them do and say! Tom"— (here her voice was stifled by the rising sob in her throat) "and all of them," she cried hastily. "Oh, tell me how to be done with it, to settle it so that there shall be no more thinking, no more struggling!" She clasped her hands with a pathetic entreaty, and looked imploringly at him. And she bore in her face the signs of the struggle which she pleaded to be freed from. Her face had the parched and feverish look of anxiety, its young, soft outline had grown pinched and hollow, and all the

cheerful glow of health had faded. The lawyer looked at her with genuine tenderness and pity.

"My poor child," he said, "one can very well see that this great fortune, which your poor father believed was to make you happy, has brought anything but happiness to you."

She gave him a little pathetic smile, and shook her head; but she was not able to speak.

"Then, Miss Winifred," he said cheerfully, "since you are certain that you don't want it, and won't have it, and have made up your mind to do nothing but scheme and plot to frustrate the will, even when you are seeming to obey it, — I think I know a better way. Write down what you mean to do with the property, and leave the rest to me."

She looked at him, roused by his words, with an awakening thrill of wonder. "Write down—what I mean to do? But that will

make me helpless to do it; that will risk everything; or so you said."

"I said true. Nevertheless, if you are sure you wish, at the bottom of your heart, to sacrifice yourself to your brothers"—

She shook her head half angrily, with a gesture of impatience. "To give them back their rights."

"That means the same thing in your phraseology. If that is what you really wish, do what I say, and leave the rest to me."

She looked at him for a moment, bewildered, then rose up hastily and flew to the writing-table. How easy it was to do it! how blessed if only it were possible to throw this weight once for all off her shoulders, and be free!

CHAPTER XIX

THIS was in the morning, and nothing further happened until the afternoon. Winifred, though she was tremulous with weakness, had her pony carriage brought round, and went out, taking Miss Farrell with her. They went sometimes slowly, sometimes like the wind, as their conversation flagged or came to a point of interest. They had much to say to each other, and argued over and over again the same question. They went round and round the park, and along a bit of road between the Brentwood gate and the one that was called the Hollyport. Winifred's ponies seemed to take that way without any will of hers. Was

it without her will? But, if not, it was quite ineffectual. The long road stretched white on either side, disappearing here and there round the corner of the woods; but there was no one visible, one way or the other—no one whom the ladies wished to see. Once, indeed, as they approached the farthest gate on their return, some one riding quickly, at a pace only habitual to one person they knew, appeared on the brow of the Brentwood hill coming towards them. The reins shook in Winifred's hands. She let her ponies fall into a walk, not so much of set purpose as because her wrists had lost all power; and the reins lay on the necks of the little pair, who, like other pampered servants, did no more work than they were obliged to do. The horseman came steadily down the hill, and disappeared in the hollow, from which he would naturally reappear again and meet them before many minutes. But he did not reappear.

The ladies lingered, the ponies took advantage of the moment of weakness to draw aside to the edge of the road and munch grass, as if they were uncertain of their daily corn. But no one came by that way. They had not said anything to each other, nor had either said a word to show that she was aware of any meaning in this pause. When, however, there was no disguising that it was futile, Winifred said, almost under her breath, "He must have gone round by the other way."

"I heard there was some one ill at the Manor Farm," said Miss Farrell, with a quick catching of her breath.

"That will be the reason," Winifred said, with a dreary calm, and she said no more, nor was any name mentioned between them as they drove quietly home. Old Hopkins came out to the steps as she gave the groom the reins.

"If you please, Miss Winifred, Mr. Babington

has been asking for you. He said, would you please step into the library as soon as you came back. The gentlemen," Hopkins added after a pause, with much gravity, "is both there."

"Will you come, Miss Farrell?" Winifred said.

"If I could be of any use to you, my darling; but I could not, and you would rather that no one was there."

"Perhaps," said Winifred, with a sigh. Yet it was forlorn to see her in her deep mourning, walking slowly in her weakness, alone and deserted, though with so much depending on her. She went into the library without even taking off her hat. Mr. Babington was seated there at what had been her father's writing-table, and Tom and George were both with him. Tom stood before the fire, with that air of assumption which he had never put off—the rightful-heir aspect, determined to stand upon his rights. George had his wife with him as

usual, and sat with her whispering and consulting at the other end of the room. Mr. Babington had been writing; he had a number of papers before him, but evidently, from the silence, only broken by the undertones of George and his wife, which prevailed, had put off all explanations until Winifred was present. Neither of the brothers stirred when she entered. George had forgotten, in the composure of a husband whose wife requires none of the delicacies of politeness from him, those civilities which men in other circumstances instinctively pay to women, and Tom was too much out of temper and too deeply opposed to his sister to show her any attention. Mr. Babington rose and gave her a chair.

"Sit here, Miss Winifred. I shall want to place various things very clearly before you," he said. "Now, will you all give me your attention?" His voice subdued Mrs. George, who

had sprung up to go to her sister-in-law with a beaming smile of familiarity. She fell back with a little alarm into her chair at her husband's side.

"You are all aware of the state of affairs up to this point," Mr. Babington said. "Your father's large fortune, left in succession, first to one and then to the other of his sons, to be withdrawn from both as they in turn displeased him, has been finally left to Miss Winifred, whom he thought the most likely of his three children to do him credit and spend his money fitly. Exception may be taken to what he did, but none, in my opinion, to the reason. He thought of that more than anything else, and he chose what seemed to him the best means to have what he wanted."

"He must have been off his head; I shall never believe anything else, though there may not be enough evidence," Tom said.

"I daresay my father was right," said George in his despondent voice.

"I think, from his point of view, your father was quite right; but there are many things that men, when they make their wills, don't take into consideration. They think, for one thing, that their heirs will feel as they do, and that they have an absolute power to make themselves obeyed. This, unfortunately, they very often fail to do. Miss Winifred becomes heir under a condition with which she refuses to comply."

"Mr. Babington!" Winifred said, putting her hand on his arm.

"You may trust to me, my dear. The condition is, that she is not, under any circumstances, to share the property with her brothers, or to interfere in any way with the testator's arrangements for them. This she refuses to do."

"Don't be a fool, Winnie!" cried Tom. "Pass over that, please. We all know what

you mean, and that she's to pose as our benefactor, and to receive our eternal gratitude, and so forth."

"I think it would be a great pity if Winnie took any rash step," George said.

Mr. Babington looked round upon them with a smile. "She wishes," he said, "to give the landed property, Bedloe, to her brother George, and to make up an equivalent to it in money for Mr. Tom there. These are the arrangements she proposes to me—the sole executor, you will observe, charged to carry your father's will into effect." He took up one of the papers as he spoke, and with a smile, caught in his own the hand which she once more tremulously put forth to interrupt him. "Here is the proposal written in her own hand," he said. "Miss Winifred, you must trust to me; I am acting for the best. Naturally this puts an end to her, as her father's heir."

Here there arose a confused tumult round the little group in the middle of the room. Mrs. George was the first to make herself heard. She burst forth into sobs and tears.

"Oh! after all she's promised to do for us! after all she's said for the children! Oh, George! go and do something, stand up for your sister. Don't let it be robbed away from her, after all she's promised. Oh, George! Oh, Miss Winnie! remember what you've promised!—and what is to become of Georgie?" the young mother cried.

"Mr. Babington," said George, "I don't think it's right to take advantage of my sister because she's foolish and generous. Who is it to go to if you take it from her? Let one of us at least have the good of it. I don't want her to give me Bedloe. She could be of use to us without that."

Tom had burst into a violent laugh of despite and despair. "If that's what it's to come to,"

he said, "we'll go to law all of us. Winnie too, by Jove! No one can say we're not a united family now."

Winifred sat with her eyes fixed on the old lawyer's face. She said nothing, and if there was a tremor in her heart too, did not express it, though already there began to arise dull whispers—Ought she to have done it? Was it her duty? Was this in reality the way to serve them best?

"The law is open to whoever seeks its aid—when they have plenty of money," said Mr. Babington quickly. "You ask a very pertinent question, Mr. George. It is one which never has been put to me before by any of the persons most concerned."

This statement fell among them with a thrill like an electric shock. It silenced Tom's nervous laughter and Mrs. George's sobs. They instinctively drew near with a bewildering ex-

pectation, although they knew not what their expectation was.

"Mr. Chester," said the lawyer, "like most men, thought he had plenty of time before him, and he did not understand much about the law. I am bound to add that in this particular he got little information from me; and the consequence was that he forgot, in God's providence, to assign any heirs, failing Miss Winifred. It was a disgrace to my office to let such a document go out of it," he added, with a twinkle in his eyes, "but so it was. He thought perhaps that he would live for ever, or that at least he'd see his daughter's children, or that she would do implicitly what he told her, or something else as silly—begging your pardon; all men are foolish where wills are concerned."

There was another pause. Mr. Babington leant back in his chair, so much at his ease

and leisure, that he looked like a benevolent grandfather discoursing to his children round him. They surrounded him, a group of silent and anxious faces. Tom was the one who thought he knew the most. He asked, with a voice which sounded parched in his throat, moistening his lips to get the words out, "Who gets the property, then?" bringing out the question with a rush.

Mr. Babington turned his back upon Tom. He addressed himself to George, whose face had no prevision in it, but was only dully, quietly anxious, as was habitual to him. George knew little about the law. He was not in the way of expecting much. Whatever new thing might come, it was in all likelihood a little worse than the old. He was vexed and grieved that Winnie, who certainly would have been kind to him and his children, was not to have the money; but he had not an idea in his mind as to what, failing her, its destination would be.

"Mr. George Chester," he said, "you are the eldest son; your father, I suppose, had his reasons for cutting you out, but those reasons I hope don't exist now. As your sister refuses to accept the condition under which the property comes to her, and as your father made no provision for such a contingency, it follows that the will is not worth the paper it is written on, and that Mr. Chester as good as died intestate, if you know what that means."

Tom, who had been listening intently over Mr. Babington's shoulder, threw up his clenched hands with a loud exclamation. Into George's blank face there crept a tremor as of light coming. Winifred and Mrs. George sat unmoved except by curiosity and wonder, unenlightened, trying to read, as women do, the meaning in the face of the speaker, but uninformed by the words.

"If I know what that means? Intestate? I don't think I do know what it means."

"You fool!" his brother cried.

"It means," said Mr. Babington, "a kind of natural justice more or less, at least in the present circumstances. When a man dies intestate, his landed property (I'll spare you law terms) goes without question to his eldest son—which you are—and natural representative. The personalty, that is the money, you know, is divided. Do you understand now what I mean? The personal property is far more than the real in this case, so it will make a very just and equal division. And now, Miss Winnie, tell me if I have not managed well for you? Are you satisfied now to have trusted yourself to your old friend?"

"George, George! I don't understand. What's to be divided? What do we get?" cried Mrs. George, standing up, the tears only half dried in her eyes, her rose tints coming back to her face.

George was so startled and overwhelmed by information which entered but slowly into an intelligence confused by ill-fortune, that for the moment he made his wife no reply; but Tom did, who had already fully savoured all the sweets and bitters of this astounding change of affairs.

"Mrs. Chester," he said, with an ironical bow, "you get Bedloe, my father's place, that he never would have let you set foot in, if he could have helped it, poor old governor. And the rest of us get—our due; oh yes, we get our due. I know I was a fool and didn't keep his favour when I had got it; and you, Winnie, you traitor, oh, you traitor! There isn't a female for the word, is there? it should be female altogether. You that he put his last trust in, poor old governor! you've served him out the best of any of us," said Tom, with a burst of violent laughter, "and there's an end of him and all his schemes!" he cried.

Winifred rose up tremulous. There was perhaps in her heart too an echo of Tom's rage and sense of wrong. This woman, the reverse of all that her father's ambition (vulgar ambition, yet so strong) had hoped for, to be the mistress of the house! And Bedloe, which Winnie loved, to pass away to a family which had rubbed off and forgotten even the little gloss of artificial polish which Mr. Chester had procured for his sons. She would have given it to them had the power been in her hands, she had always intended it, never from the first moment meant anything else. And yet when all was thus arranged according to her wish, above her hopes, Winifred felt, to the bottom of her heart, that to give up her home to Mrs. George was a thing not to be accomplished without a thrill of indignation, a sense of wrong. And the very relief which filled her soul brought back to her those individual miseries which this

blessed decision (for it was a blessed decision though cruel) could not take away. She made Tom no reply. She scarcely returned the pressure of Mr. Babington's kind hand. She said not a word to the agitated, triumphant, yet astonished pair, who could not yet understand what good fortune had happened to them. She went straight out of the library to Miss Farrell's room. She still wore her hat and outdoor dress. She took her old friend's hand, and drew her out of the chair in which she had been seated, watching for every opening of the door. "Come," she said, "come away."

"What has happened, Winnie? What has happened?"

"Everything that is best. George has got Bedloe. It is all right, all right, better than any one could have hoped. And I shall not sleep another night under this roof. Dear Miss Farrell, if you love me, come away, come away!"

CHAPTER XX

EDWARD LANGTON had never meant to forsake his love. He intended no more to give her up because she did not agree with him, because he thought her mistaken, or even because she had rejected his guidance and wounded his pride, than he meant to give up his life. But he had been very deeply wounded by her acceptance of his withdrawal at that critical moment. She had not chosen to put him, her natural defender, between her brothers and herself. She had refused, so his thoughts went on to say, his intervention. She had preferred to keep her interests separate from his, to give him no share in what might be the most

important act of her life. He would not believe it possible when he left her. As he crossed the hall and hurried down the avenue, he thought every moment that he heard some one, a messenger hastening after him to bring him back. But there was no such messenger. He expected next morning a letter of explanation, of apology, at least of invitation imploring him not to forsake her—but there was none. While Winifred's heart sank lower and lower at the absence of any communication from him, he was waiting with a mingled sense of dismay, astonishment, and indignation for something from her. It seemed incredible to him that she should not write to soothe away his offence, to explain herself. His first sensation indeed had been that the offence given to him was deadly and not to be explained, and that she who would not have him to help her in her trouble, could not want him in her life; but

before the next morning came he had reasoned himself into a certainty that he should have as full an explanation as it was possible to make, that she would excuse herself by means of a hundred arguments which his own reason suggested to him, and call him to her with every persuasion of love. But nothing of the kind took place—Winifred, sick and miserable, awaited on her side the letter, the inquiry which never came, and felt herself forsaken at the moment when every generous heart, she thought, must have felt how much she needed support and sympathy. She did not want his interference; she had been able to manage her family business — to do without him; he had been *de trop* between her brothers and herself. Then let it be so! he said at last to himself, and plunged into his work, riding hither and thither, visiting even patients who needed him no longer, to prove to himself that

he was too much and too seriously offended to care. To be sure, he was not the man to stand cap in hand and plead for her favour.

He went over all the district in those three days, dashing along the roads, hurrying from one hamlet to another. It was not the life he had been so foolish as to imagine to himself, the life —he felt himself blush hotly at the recollection— of the master of Bedloe, restoring the prestige of the old name, changing the aspect of the district, ameliorating everything as only (he thought) a man who was born the friend and master of the place could do. It had been an ideal life which he had imagined for himself, not one of selfishness. He had meant to brighten the very face of the country, to mend everything that needed mending, to do good to the poor people, who were his own people. He remembered now that there were those who thought it humiliating and base for a man to be enriched by his wife,

and the subtle contempt of women embodied in that popular prejudice rose up in hot and painful shame to his heart and his face. A man is never so sure that women are inferior, as when a woman has neglected or played him false. Edward Langton's heart was very sore, but he began to say to himself that it served him right for his meanness in depending on a woman, and that a man ought to be indebted to his own exertions and not look for advancement in so humiliating a way. These thoughts grew more and more bitter as the days went on. He flung himself into his work: an epidemic would have pleased him better than the mild little ailments or lingering chronic diseases which were the only visitations known among those healthy country folk; but such as they were he made the most of them, frightening the sick people by the unnecessary energy of his attendance, and saying to himself that this,

and not a fiction of the imagination or anything so degrading as a wife's fortune, was his true life. That he flew about the country without many a lingering unwilling look towards Bedloe, it would be false to say. His way wherever he went led him past the park gates, which he found always closed, silent, giving no sign. On the one occasion when Winifred perceived him descending the hill, by one of those hazards which continually arise to confuse human affairs, he, for the moment half-happy in the entrancement of a case which presented dangerous complications, did not see or recognise the little pony carriage lingering under the russet trees, and thus missed the only chance of a meeting and explanation; but he did meet, when that chance was over, next day, in the afternoon, Mr. Babington driving his heavy old phaeton from the gates of Bedloe. Langton's heart gave a leap even

at this means of hearing something of Winnie; but perhaps his pride would still have prevented any clearing up, had not the old lawyer taken it into his own hands. He stopped his horse and waited till Edward, who was walking home from the house of a patient in the village, came up.

"I want to speak to you," Mr. Babington said. "Will you jump up and come with me along the road, or will you offer me your hospitality and a bit of dinner? There is full moon to-night and I don't mind being late. Oh, if it's not convenient, never mind."

Edward's pride had made him hesitate—his good breeding came to his aid, showing it to be inevitable that he should obey the hungry longing of his heart.

"Certainly it is convenient, and I am too glad—drive on to my house, and I shall be with you in a moment."

Though he had felt it to be his only salvation

to hold fast by his profession and present tenor of existence, Langton's heart beat loud as he hurried on. Now, he said to himself, he should know what it meant, now he should have some light thrown upon the position at least which Winifred had assumed.

Mr. Babington, however, ate his dinner, which was simple and not over-abundant, having been prepared for the doctor alone, with steady composure, and it was only when the meal was over that he opened out. Langton had apologised, as was inevitable, for the simple fare.

"Don't say a word," said the lawyer, with a wave of his hand. "It was all excellent, and I'm glad to see you've such a good cook. You don't know what a comfort it is to come out of a confused house like *that*, with lengthy fine dinners that nobody understands, to a comfortable chop which a man can enjoy and which it is a pleasure to see."

"Bedloe was not a confused house in former days," said Langton, with a feeling that Winifred's credit was somehow assailed.

"Ah, nothing is as it was in former days," said Mr. Babington, shaking his head; "everything is topsy-turvy now. I suppose you know all about the last turn the affair has taken. I wonder you were not there, though, to support poor Miss Winifred, poor thing, who has had a great deal to go through."

"You will be surprised," said Langton, forcing a somewhat pale smile, "if I tell you that I don't know anything about it. Miss Chester preferred that the question between her brothers and herself should be settled among themselves. And perhaps she was right."

"My dear Langton," said Mr. Babington, laying his hand on the young man's arm, "I hope there's no coolness on this account between that poor girl and you?"

"I see no reason why she should be called a poor girl," Langton said quickly.

"Ah, well, you have not seen her then during the last two or three days. Poor thing! between making the best of these fellows, and struggling to keep up a show of following her father's directions — between acting false and meaning true"—

"Mr. Babington," said Langton, with a dryness in his throat, "unhappily, as you say, there has been — no coolness, thank Heaven — but a little — a momentary silence between Miss Chester and me. Perhaps I have been to blame. I thought she — Tell me what has happened, and how everything is settled, for pity's sake!"

"Yes," said the old lawyer, "I haven't the slightest doubt, my young friend, that you have been to blame. That is why the poor child looked so white and pathetic when she said to

me that she had no one to consult. When you come to have girls of your own," Mr. Babington said somewhat severely, "you'll know how it feels to see a little young creature you are fond of look like that."

Heaven and earth! as if all the old fogeys in the world, if they had a thousand daughters, could feel half what a young lover feels! The blood rose to young Langton's temples, but he did not trust himself to reply.

"Well," Mr. Babington continued, "it's all comfortably settled at the last. I had my eye on this solution all along. I may say it was my doing all along, for I carefully refrained from pointing out to him what of course, in an ordinary way, it would have been my duty to point out—that in case of Miss Winifred's refusal there was no after settlement. You don't understand our law terms, perhaps? Well, it was just this, that if she refused to accept, there

was no provision for what was to follow. I knew all along she would never accept to cut out her brothers—so here we come to a dead stop. He had not prepared for that contingency. I don't believe he ever thought of it. She had obeyed him all her life, and he thought she would obey him after he was dead. She refused the condition, and here we are in face of a totally different state of affairs. The other wills were destroyed, and this was as good as destroyed by her refusal. What is to be done then but to return to the primitive condition of the matter? He dies intestate, the property is divided, and everybody, with the exception of that scamp Tom, is content."

"I don't understand," Langton said: it was true so far, that the words were like an incoherent murmur in his ears—but even while he spoke, the meaning came to his mind like a flash of light. He had put aside all such

(as he said to himself) degrading imaginations, and had made up his mind that his work was his life, and that a country doctor he was, and should remain; but, all the same, the sensation of knowing that Bedloe had become unattainable in fact and certainty, not only by the temporary alienation of a misunderstanding, went through his heart like a sudden knife.

"I can make you understand in a moment," said Mr. Babington. "Miss Winifred made the will void by refusing to fulfil its condition, and no provision had been made for that emergency; therefore, in fact, it is as if poor Chester had never made a will at all: in which case the landed property goes to the eldest son. The personalty is divided. They will all be very well off," the lawyer added. "There is nothing to complain of, though Tom is wild that he is not the heir, and Miss Winifred, poor girl —she was very anxious to do justice, but when

it came to giving over her house to that pink-and-white creature, much too solid for her age, George's wife— Well, it was her own doing; but she could not bear it, you know. Her going off like that left them all very much confused and bewildered, but I think on the whole it was the wisest thing she could do."

"How going off?" cried Langton, starting to his feet.

"My dear fellow, didn't you know? Come now, come now," said the old lawyer, patting him on the arm, "this is carrying things too far. You should not have left her when she wanted all the support that was possible. And she should not have gone away without letting you know—but poor thing, poor thing! I don't think she knew whether she was on her head or her heels. She couldn't bear it. She just turned and fled and took no time to think."

"Turned and fled? Do you mean to say—

do you mean to tell me"— The young man, though he was no weakling, changed colour like a girl: his sunburnt, manly countenance showed a sudden pallor under the brown, something rose in his throat. He took a turn about the room in his sudden excitement, then came back, mastering himself as best he could. "I beg your pardon; this news is so unexpected, and everything is so strange. Of course," he added, forcing himself into composure, "I shall hear."

"Yes, of course you'll hear; but if I were you, I should not wait to hear, I should insist on knowing, my young friend. Don't let pride spoil your whole existence, as I've seen some things do with boys and girls. She is well enough off, to be sure. I wish my girls had the half or quarter of what she will have; but still it's a come-down from Bedloe. And to give it up to Mrs. George, that was harder than she thought. She thought only of her brothers, you

know, till she saw the wife. What the wife did to disgust her, I can't tell, but I've always noticed that when there are two women in a case like this, they always feel themselves pitted against each other, and the men count for nothing with them. As soon as the thing was done, Miss Winnie forgot her brother: she saw only Mrs. George, and to give up to her was a bitter pill. She is a good girl, and meant everything that was good, but Mrs. George is a bitter pill: when it came to that, she felt that she could not put up with it. And you were not there, excuse me for reminding you. And she took it into her head that everything was against her, as girls do—and fled. That is the worst of girls, they are so hasty. You will know when you have daughters of your own."

Thus the good man went on maundering, quite unconscious that his companion could have risen and slain him every time that he mentioned those

daughters of his own. What had his daughters to do with Winnie? Mr. Babington talked a great deal more on that and every branch of the subject, until it seemed to him that it was time "to be driving on," as he said. And then Edward had leisure for the first time to contemplate the situation in which he found himself. Self-reproach, anger, disappointment, coursed through his veins. He was wroth with the woman he loved, wroth with himself: one moment attributing to her a desire to cast him off, a want of confidence in him which it was unendurable to think of; the next, bitterly blaming his own selfish pride, which had driven him from her at the moment of her need. The high tide of conflicting sentiments was so hot within him that he went out to walk off his excitement, returning, to the consternation of his household, an hour or more after midnight, the most unhallowed of all promenadings in the opinion

of the country folk. When he got back again to his dim little surgery and study, returning, as it seemed, to a dull life deprived of her and of all things, and to the overmastering consciousness that she was gone from him, perhaps by his own fault, the young doctor had a moment of despair: then he rose up and struck his hand upon the table, and laughed aloud at himself. "Bah!" he said to himself; "nobody disappears at this time of day. What a fool one is! as if these were the middle ages! Wherever she has gone, she must have left an address!" He laughed loud and long, though his laugh was not mirthful, at this bringing down of his despair to the easy possibilities of modern life. That makes all the difference between tragedy, which is mediæval, and comedy, which is of our days: though the comedy of common living involves a great many tragedies in every age, and even in our own.

CHAPTER XXI

AN address is not everything: there must be the will and the power to write, there must be the letter produced, and the address obtained. The very first step was hard. To go up to Bedloe and ascertain from the brother, who was "that cad" to Langton, where Winifred had gone, and thus betray his ignorance and the separation between them—the idea of this was such a mortification and annoyance to him as it is difficult to describe. He could not bear to expose himself to their remarks, to perhaps their laughter, perhaps, worse still, their pity. A few days elapsed before he could screw up his courage to

this point, and when at last he did so, his brief and cold note was answered by George in person, whose dejected aspect bore none of the signs of triumph which Langton had expected.

"I was coming to ask you," George said. "My sister went off in such a hurry she left no address. She left her maid to pack up her things. I did not even know she was going. It was a great disappointment to my wife and me. We should have been very glad to have had her to stay with us until—well, until her own affairs were settled. She would have been of great use to Alice," George continued, with an unconscious gravity of egotism which was almost too simple to be called by that harsh name. "She could have put my wife up to a great many things: for we haven't just been used, you know, to this sort of life, and it is very difficult to get into all the ways. And then the children were so good with

Winnie, they took to her in a moment. Speaking of that, I wish you would just come up and look at Georgie. My wife thinks he is quite well, but I don't quite like the little fellow's look," the anxious father said.

Langton was not mollified by this unexpected invitation. The idea of becoming medical attendant to George Chester's children and at the beck and call of the new household at Bedloe filled him indeed with an unreasonable exasperation. He explained as coldly as he could that he did not "go in for" children's ailments, and recommended Mr. Marlitt, of Brentwood, who was specially qualified to advise anxious parents. He was indeed so moved by the sight of the new master of Bedloe, that the purpose for which George had come was momentarily driven out of his head. Why it should be a grievance to him that George Chester was master of Bedloe he

could not of course have explained to any one. He had not been exasperated by George's father. Disappointment, and the sharper self-shame with which he could not help remembering his own imaginations on the matter, joined with the sense of angry scorn with which he beheld the place which he had meant to fill so well, filled so badly by another. George thanked him warmly for recommending Dr. Marlitt, "though I am very sorry, and so will my wife be, that you don't pay attention to that branch. Isn't it a pity? for surely if anything is important, it's the children," he said in all good faith.

It was only after he was gone that Edward reflected that he had obtained no information. It soothed him a little to think that she had not let her brother know where she was going. It had been, then, a sudden impulse of disgust, a hasty step taken in a moment when she felt herself abandoned. Edward did not forgive

her, but yet he was soothed a little, even though excited and distressed beyond measure by his failure to know where she was. A day or two passed in the lethargy of this disappointment and perplexity as to what to do next. Then he thought of Mr. Babington. He wrote immediately to the old lawyer, begging him to find out at once where Winifred was. "I don't ask if you can, for I know you must be able to do it. People don't disappear in these days."

But Mr. Babington, with a somewhat peevish question whether he knew how many people did disappear, in the Thames or otherwise, and were never heard of, in these famous days of ours, informed him that he knew nothing about Winifred's whereabouts. She had gone abroad, and with Miss Farrell, that was all he knew. By this time Edward Langton had become very anxious and unhappy, ready almost to advertise in the *Times* or take any other wild

step. He resolved to lose no further time, not to delay by writing, but to go off at once and find her as soon as he had the smallest clue. This clue was found at last through the bankers (for Langton was quite right in his certainty that people with a banking account who draw money never do really disappear in these days), who did not refuse to tell where the last remittances had been sent. He was so anxious by this time that he went up to London himself to make these inquiries, and came back again with the fullest determination to start at once in search of Winifred. He sent to Mr. Marlitt, of Brentwood, who was a young doctor, but recently established and much in want of patients, to ask whether he could take charge of the few sick folk at Bedloe, and made all his preparations to go. It was November by this time, and all the fields were heaped with fallen leaves. He had settled everything

easily on the Saturday, and on Sunday night was going up to town in time to catch the Continental mail next day.

Then—according to the usual perversity of human affairs—the epidemic came all at once, which he had invoked some time before. It broke out on the very Saturday when all his arrangements were made — two cases in one house, one in the house next door. He perceived in a moment that this was no time to leave his duty. Next day there were three more cases in the village, and in the evening, just at the moment when he should have been starting, the brougham from Bedloe drew up at his door, with an air of agitation about the very horses, which had flecks of foam on their shoulders, and every indication of having been hard driven. George Chester entered precipitately, as pale as death.

"Oh, Langton," he cried, "look here! don't

stand on ceremony. I never did anything against you. You attend the children in the village; why don't you attend mine? Little Georgie's got it!" the poor man cried out, with quivering lips.

It is not for a moment to be supposed that Edward could resist such an appeal. He went with the distracted father, and fought night and day for two or three weeks for little Georgie's life, as well as for the lives of several other little Georgies as dear in their way. Here he had what he wanted, but not when he wanted it. When he woke up in the morning from the interrupted sleep, which was all his anxieties allowed him, he would remember in anguish that even the clue given by the bankers would serve no longer. But during the day, as he went from one bedside to another, he had too much to remember, and so the dark winter days wore away.

Winifred had taken refuge in the universal expedient of going "abroad." It is difficult to tell all that this means to simple minds. It means a sort of cancelling of time and space, a flying on the wings of a dove, an abstraction of one's self and one's affairs from the burden of circumstances, from the questions of the importunate, from all that holds us to a local habitation. Winifred was sick at heart of her habitual place, and all the surroundings to which she had been accustomed. It was not possible for her, she thought, to explain the position, to answer all the demands, to make it apparent to the meanest capacity how and why it was that her own heirship was at an end. She fled from this, and from the unnatural (she said) prejudice against her brother and his wife which seized her as soon as it became apparent that Bedloe was in their hands—and she fled, but not so much from Edward, as from what she thought

his desertion of her. What she thought—for after a while she too, like Edward himself, began to feel uncertain as to whether he had deserted her—to ask herself whether she had been blameless, to say to herself that it could not be, that it was impossible they could part like this. What was it that had parted them? It had been done in a moment, it had been her brother's foolish accusation—ah, no, not that, but her own tacit refusal of his counsel and aid. When Winifred began to come to herself, to disentangle her thoughts, to see everything in perspective, it became gradually and by slow degrees apparent to her that if Edward was in the wrong, he was yet not altogether or alone in the wrong. Her mind worked more slowly than did Langton's, partly because it had been far more strained and worn, and because the complications were all on her side. She had to disengage her mind from all that had troubled and

disturbed her life for weeks and months before, and to recover from the agitation of so many shocks and changes before she could think calmly, or at least without the burning at her heart of wounded feeling, hurt pride, and neglected love, of all that concerned her lover. It was some time even before she spoke to Miss Farrell of the subject that soon occupied all her thoughts. Miss Farrell had felt Edward's silence on her pupil's account with almost more bitterness than Winifred herself had felt it. She had put away his name from her lips, and had concluded him unworthy. She avoided talking of him even when Winifred began tentatively to approach the subject. "My darling, don't let us speak of him," she had said. "I have not command of myself: I might say things which I should be sorry for afterwards."

"But why should he have changed so?"

Winifred said; "what reason was there? He was always kind and true."

"I don't know about true, Winnie."

Then Winifred faltered a little, remembering how he had advised her to humour her father. She made a little pause of reflection, and then abandoned the subject for the moment; but only to return to it a hundred and a hundred times. She was not one of those that prolong a misunderstanding through a lifetime. She pondered and pondered, and it was her instinct to think herself in the wrong. She had been hasty, she had been self-absorbed. And had he not a right to be offended when she so distinctly, of her own will, by no one's suggestion, put him aside from her counsels, and let him know that she must deal with her brothers alone? It made her shiver to think what a thing it was she had thus done. She would have done it again, it was a necessity of the

position in which she found herself. But yet when you reflect, to put your betrothed husband away from you in a great crisis of fate, to reject his aid, to bid him—for it was as good as bidding him—leave her to arrange matters in her own way, what an outrage was that! She could not think how she could have done it, and yet she would have done it over again. To get Miss Farrell to see this was difficult, but she succeeded at last; and then they both trembled and grew pale together to think of what had been done. Poor Edward! and all those days when Winifred had sat miserable in her room, feeling that her last hope and prop had failed her, and that she was left alone in the world, what had he been thinking on his side? That she had thrown him off, that she would have none of him? In their consultations these ladies made great use of the man's wounded pride. They allowed to each other that it was

the wrong of all others which he would be least likely to bear. It was not only a wrong, it was an insult. How could they ever have thought otherwise? It was he who was forsaken, and that without a word, without a reason given.

They had settled themselves, after some wanderings, in one of those villages of the Riviera, which fashion and the pursuit of health have taken out of the hands of their peasant inhabitants. It was not a great place, full of life and commotion; but a little picturesque cluster of houses, small and great, with an old campanile rising out of the midst of them, and a soft background of mild olive-trees behind. They had thought they would stay there till the winter was over, till England had begun to grow green again, and the east winds were gone; but already, though it was not yet Christmas, they were beginning to reconsider the matter, to feel home calling them over the misty seas. Christ-

mas! but what a Christmas! with roses blooming, and all the landscape green and soft, the sea warm enough to bathe in, the sunshine too hot at noon. Winifred had begun to weary of the eternal greenness, of the skies which were always clear, of the air which caressed and never smote her cheek, before they had long been established in the little paradise which Miss Farrell, even with all her desire to see her child happy, could not pretend not to be pleased with.

"I cannot believe it is Christmas," Winifred said discontentedly. "No frost, no cold, even flowers!" as if this were a kind of insult. "Everything," she cried, "is out of season. I don't see how we can spend Christmas here."

"It is not like Christmas weather," said Miss Farrell; "but still, my dear, neither was it in the Holy Land, I should suppose, not like what we call Christmas," she added, faltering a little; "but it is very nice, Winnie, don't you think, dear?"

"No, I don't think it is nice: it is enervating, it is unmeaning, it has no character in it. It might be May," cried Winnie; and then she added with a sudden outburst of passion, "I don't think I can bear it any longer. I cannot bear it any longer. Oh, Miss Farrell, Edward! what can he be thinking of me, if he has not given up thinking of me altogether?"

"No, dear, not that," Miss Farrell said, soothing her.

"What, then? he must be beginning to hate me. I cannot let Christmas pass and this go on. Think of him alone amongst the frost and the snow, nothing but his sick people, no one to cheer him, called out perhaps in the middle of the night, riding miles and miles to comfort some poor creature, and no one, no one to comfort him!"

"My dear child!" Miss Farrell cried, taking Winifred into her kind arms.

At this moment there was a tinkle at the

queer little bell outside—or rather it had tinkled at the moment when Winifred spoke of the frost and snow. When Miss Farrell rose and hastened to her, to raise her downcast head and dry her tears, the old lady gave a start and cry, displacing suddenly that head which she had drawn to her own breast. Winifred, too, looked up in the sudden shock ; and there, opposite to her in the doorway, a cold freshness as of the larger atmosphere outside coming in with him, stood Edward Langton, pale and eager, asking, "May I come in?" with a voice that was unsteady, between deadly anxiety and certain happiness.

They said a great deal to each other, enough to fill volumes ; but so far as the present history is concerned, there need be no more to say.