# THE

# SECOND SON

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'THE WIZARD'S SON,' 'HESTER,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLS.

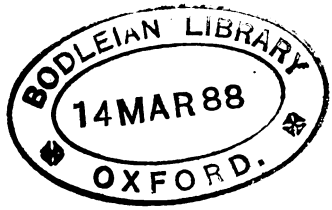
VOL. I

London

MACMILLAN AND CO.

AND NEW YORK

1888




*Printed by* R. & R. CLARK, *Edinburgh*

# CONTENTS

# THE SECOND SON

## I

### THE FAMILY AT MELCOMBE

MR. MITFORD of Melcombe had three sons. His estates lay in one of the richest of the midland counties, and they were not entailed. His house was not very imposing nor beautiful in itself, being of comparatively recent erection, and built at a period when comfort within was more considered than beauty without. It was low, no more than two stories in height, but spreading over a wide area, with a long garden front which permitted a very handsome suite of rooms; delightful to live in, though without architectural pretensions of any kind. Though the house was so recent, the Mitfords had been at Melcombe for as many centuries as were necessary to establish their claims as

county gentry of the best class, and had met with those misfortunes which are almost as indispensable as success and prosperity to the thorough establishment of an old race. They had suffered more or less in the Jacobite rebellions, their house had been burnt down more than once, they had given their family valuables to the king when he was at Oxford. These circumstances made the fact that their house was new and ugly, their plate a little scanty, their jewels defective, rather a point of pride than of humiliation for the family. It was also rather a feather in their cap that the entail embraced only a very small portion of their possessions; for had it not been broken in haste during the eighteenth century, in order to leave the heir free to follow Prince Charlie without ruining the family in case the Hanoverians should hold, as happened, the winning side? This step, however, is a very important one, when the family, and not the individual possessor, is taken into view. It is generally supposed that the law of natural justice requires the abrogation of all such restrictions as those involved in laws of primogeniture

and entail. But there are, as usual with most human questions, two ways of looking at this matter. If you have made a great deal of money, it is only right that you should have the power of dividing it among your descendants, or (which is still another view) giving it to whom you choose. But when an inheritance has been handed down to you by your fathers and grandfathers in succession, the natural justice runs all the other way. Then it becomes a breach of right to contradict the purpose with which it was constituted, the limitations under which you received it: since it is not your property at all save in trust. But this is neither the moment nor the place for a treatise upon the English laws of succession. Mr. Mitford was a man who had a great idea of his rights as an individual, and he was the third in succession who had held the estates of Melcombe entirely in his own hands.

His three sons were Roger, Edmund, and Stephen. The eldest son, notwithstanding the power of disinheritance which was in his father's hands, had been brought up as eldest

sons usually are, without any alarm as to his future, or idea that under any possibility he could be displaced from his natural position. He had been in the Guards in his youth, and had passed that blossoming portion of his existence without any discredit, if also without any special use. He had withdrawn, however, from a life somewhat too expensive for his allowance and circumstances some years before the beginning of this history, and, with occasional absences for pleasure or adventure, lived at home, managing as much of the business of the estate as his father permitted to pass out of his own hands, looking after the stables, hunting a little, and finding enough to occupy him in that busy idleness of country life which is so seductive and looks so much like important work when the doer of it has nothing else to do. Roger was not, however, ignorant of what men have to do in regions where existence is less easy. He had been, as people say, a great deal about the world. He had taken that round which to young men of the present day stands in the place of the grand tour which their forefathers took with more or less ad-

vantage in the way of culture and art. He had been all over America, he was still part owner of a Californian ranche, he had touched at Japan, and he knew familiarly many a place which, a generation ago, only sailors by profession or merchants' clerks knew anything about. How much good all these varied experiences had done him it would be hard to say, but they had at least contributed with many other influences to form the man.

Edmund, the second son, was of a very different mould. He was one of those who are untravelled, and have not knocked about or roughed it, as it is the fashion to do; that is to say, he knew Europe and the great countries which have marched with his own through the comparatively modern levels of history, and he knew books and rather more art than was good for him. He had a mild little fortune of his own, derived from his mother; the just enough which is supposed to be very bad for a young man by inducing him to believe that it is unnecessary to do anything for himself, but which the present writer takes the liberty of believing is sometimes very good for a young man, keeping

him out of the ranks of the struggling without that sense of guilt and helplessness which must always characterise the ineffectiveness of the poor. Edmund cared little for game, great or small; he was not interested in savage life, whether that of the hunter, or the cattle-owner, or the aboriginal, though more in the last than in the first. He was a man somewhat without motive in the world, reading a great deal, wandering more or less, writing a little, musing much. His musings did not come to anything to speak of; indeed, there was supposed to be little use in him of any kind. He could not even lay claim to that high reputation in the way of *bric-à-brac* which, for a dilettante such as he allowed himself to be, is a kind of salvation. Whether it was indolence, or whether it was that he had no conviction of the importance of Japanese fans and china plates in decoration, he had not made much even of the rooms which had been given up to him at home. They were hung only with pictures and water-colour sketches, some of which were done by his own hand, without a fan among them, or any other barbaric 'bit

of colour.' He did not come up to his possibilities even in that respect. His presence or absence did not tell very much upon the house. It is true that most of the inhabitants at Melcombe were glad to have him there; but those very qualities which made everybody pleased to see him diminished the importance of his going away. He gave so little trouble that no one missed him, though when he was at home the fact that he gave little trouble was his highest praise.

Stephen was the one who turned the house upside down when he appeared. He was a soldier, with his regiment, spending only his intervals of leave (and not always those) at Melcombe. But no one could be under any doubt on the subject when Stephen was at home. He had everything altered to suit his pleasure; even Mr. Mitford, who never departed from his rules, was unconsciously thrust out of them on Stephen's return, and thought nothing of it. This not because he was the favourite. He could not be said to be the favourite. He was too noisy, too imperious, for that part. He had not the sweetness, the persuasiveness, which procures

one of a family his own way. He got the upper hand because he insisted upon it. None of the others felt themselves able to oppose Stephen. As for Edmund, he shrunk at once from any controversy, feeling that he must go to the wall; and Roger would give in with a growl, saying in his moustache that the fellow was not here for long, or else—— Mr. Mitford yielded with a still worse grace, but he did yield also,—chiefly because he felt it undignified to engage in any strife unless he was certain to be victorious, and that could never be certain when it was Stephen who was the antagonist. Stephen did not mind in the least what weapons he used. He would speak of his father's age in a way which made Mr. Mitford furious. 'I don't want to disturb you, sir, at your time of life. One knows, of course, that habit is more than second nature with old people.'—'Who the deuce do you mean by your old people?' Mr. Mitford would shout in a passion, conscious of being only sixty-seven, and well out of sight yet of the three score and ten years. The servants invariably flew to execute Mr. Stephen's orders. Anything for a quiet life,

they said. And thus it was that without going out of his course to conciliate anybody, or troubling himself about the least recompense, Stephen got most things his own way. He was, perhaps, the handsomest of his family, as features and merely physical attributes go. He was taller than his brothers, he was better at all outdoor pursuits; or perhaps it was because he always said he was the best that everybody thought so. Then he had the reputation of being open-handed and liberal, because people who are so noisy and impulsive generally are as careless of money as they are of other people's comfort, or at least it is usual to think so. Stephen is so thoughtless, everybody said; you don't expect Stephen to remember little precautions, or to curry favour, but at bottom he's the most good-natured fellow! He doesn't pretend to be clever, but he sticks to his friends like a good one, the gentlemen said. He's a little rough, but then he's so very good-natured, said the ladies. So Stephen went on steadily thinking of nothing but how to please himself. There is no branch of human industry in which perseverance is more sure of its reward.

There were daughters in the Mitford family, but they had never been taken much into account. The mother had died young, and no feminine head of the house had ever succeeded her. There was an excellent housekeeper, Mrs. Simmons, who devoted herself to the boys, but thought young ladies were best in the schoolroom, and kept the governesses at a haughty distance. The young ladies were timid girls, who were frightened of their brothers, and thought Mrs. Simmons quite right. Somehow or other, nobody quite knew how, two of them married out of that schoolroom, and escaped into what we must hope was a better life. One little girl was still left at home. Her name was Katherine, but she had not the vigour which that name implies. To have called her Kate would have been impossible, or even Katie. The universal sentiment of those who knew her averted this false nomenclature by calling her Nina, supposed to be a contraction of the last syllable of her name, as it is of so many names. She was nearly eighteen at the period to which I am referring; a pretty enough little girl, looking much younger than her age, and with a

constantly apologetic tone about her, as if she had no business to be in the way, or show herself in superior male society,—which, to tell the truth, she did very little. The last governess had departed some time before: governesses had not been welcome in the Mitford family, nor had they been happy; and in what way Nina had been educated, or her sisters before her, nobody knew. It was supposed that they could read and write, and it was known (by the nuisance it was) that they could play badly upon a well-thumped schoolroom piano, out of which more noise than music was ever got. Now that the governess was gone, Nina was more often visible than she had been before. The humblest of little apologetic girls cannot live in a schoolroom all alone. If there had been no other reason against it, there was this reason, that it was now nobody's business to carry up tea to that secluded place. The schoolroom maid had departed along with the governess, and when this dilemma was reported to Mrs. Simmons her deliverance was very decisive. 'It is high time Miss Nina came down to dinner,' she said, although on a former occa-

sion she had protested that the schoolroom was the proper place for young ladies. This proves that even the housekeeper was not always consistent; but then, in the present case, tea in the schoolroom instead of dinner downstairs had the air of being a privilege for Nina, a thing that evidently could not be. When it was thus settled that she should make her appearance at dinner, Nina learned to show herself much more downstairs during the day. She was all alone, poor little thing; there was nobody to talk with upstairs, or with whom to exchange those innocent little secrets which belong to girlhood. She was very heartsick with longing for her sisters, and for Miss Beaumont, who had been kind, and even for Mattie, the little schoolroom maid. Had she been left alone, the deserted girl would in all likelihood have formed a very unsuitable but devoted friendship with Mattie; or she might have fallen in love with the gardener, or done something of a desperate kind. Mrs. Simmons saved her by issuing that recommendation, which was as good as an order. Nina did not like it at first, but afterwards she got to like it. She was a

pretty little creature. She was very anxious to please. And when any one walked into the drawing-room, which had hitherto been empty, save on great occasions, and became aware of a little startled movement, and the raising of a pair of half-frightened eyes, and the flutter of a frock which seemed ready to flatter out of sight on the faintest indication that it was in the way, the spectacle soon came to be quite an agreeable thing.

The sitting-rooms of the house were *en suite.* There was first a library, with windows all round, in one corner, then a large drawing-room, then a small one, and at the other corner the dining-room. The whole line of rooms was lighted at night. The drawing-rooms served only the purpose of a passage from the library at one end to the banquet at the other. But the flutter of Nina's frock changed this arrangement, and made the silent passage room into a little centre of domestic life, more pleasant than the heavy library, which was lined with books and hung with heavy curtains, as became the abode of knowledge and masculine mental occupation. It may be doubted, perhaps, whether Mr.

Mitford ever discussed a question more profound than how to gain a little upon his new leases, or keep back a little from the new buildings and repairs which his farmers demanded. But these are questions serious enough in their way, and the library was grave enough in appearance to be tenanted by a bishop. The young men and their father, not always on the best of terms with each other, formed a sufficiently gloomy procession when they came from under the shade of the dark velvet portière, marching along to dinner, four tall men, and not a smiling face. When first Nina's white frock had been seen to rise timidly from one of the sofas it made a sensation in the group. 'What are you doing here at this hour?' Mr. Mitford said to his daughter somewhat gruffly. 'Please, papa, Miss Beaumont has gone,' said Nina, trembling a little. 'To be sure,' he said, mollified by her wistful look, and offered his daughter his arm. How Nina had trembled as she took that formidable arm! She was ready to sink into the earth one minute, but the next could not help saying to herself, 'Oh, that Mrs. Simmons could see me!'

For though it was the housekeeper who had been the cause of this bold step, she had not intended it to be to Nina's advantage; nor had it ever occurred to her that her master, who was so little careful of the girls, should, on seeing this little one, with her downcast eyes, trembling before him, have remembered that little Nina was a lady, and offered her his majestic arm.

By and by, dating from this time, a change came about in the domestic arrangements at Melcombe. Edmund was the first who forsook the gloomy assembly in the library, and went to Nina in the drawing-room when the gong sounded for dinner; and at last it came to this, that Mr. Mitford issued alone out of the library door, and found his three sons, in their black coats, all gathered round Nina, as if she somehow, who was nobody, only the youngest and a girl, had become a sort of head in the house. She did not, however, rise to the occasion. Nor did Roger, to whom his father left it to give the little lady his arm, give over to her the head of the table, which had been his place since she was a baby. She sat at her brother's right hand,

as if she had been a little guest. It would have appeared absurd to all of them to put this little thing, though they all liked her well enough, in the place of the mistress of the house.

Such were the Mitfords and their house and family at the time when this episode of their story begins.

## II

### THEIR NEIGHBOURS

NEIGHBOURS, as everybody knows, are vastly more important in the country than they can be in town. The Mitfords were not people who kept much company; indeed, the female element being so entirely suppressed as it was, they can scarcely be said to have kept any company at all. They had parties of men in the house in September, and sometimes at other periods, when an election or some great public event occurred in the country; or in the race week at Beaulieu, when everybody is expected, more or less, to entertain. It might perhaps have been on these occasions that the elder girls met their respective husbands; but the matches were all made in neighbouring houses, never at home. And speaking of society, there was none at Melcombe, for who would call a shooting-party,

or a collection of men gathered together for any one distinct male object, society? But the neighbourhood was, as everybody said, distinctly sociable and friendly. The nearest house, of course, was the Rectory, and the nearest neighbours were clerical. How it is that the English gentry should for so many centuries have suffered the existence at their very door of households fraught with peril to their younger members is a question which has not passed without previous discussion, that we should introduce it head and shoulders here without warning. It is one of the highest proofs of the sincerity of religious principle and faith in the national church which a body of excellent but perhaps not remarkably spiritual-minded persons could give. The Rectory is almost always at the Squire's park gates; it is nearer than any other house. In, say, six cases out of ten, it is full of sons and daughters about the same ages as the Squire's sons and daughters; young people evidently quite as good in every way, but probably not at all rich, or likely to increase by connection or otherwise the greatness of his house. The sons, young fellows getting afloat in

the professions, or scuffling through the long vacation as best they can between the Hall, which is the chief house in the parish, and the clerical house, which is the second,—what a danger for the Squire's daughters, probably just at the impressionable age, and not yet competent to judge of the advantages of a good match! And the girls, still more dangerous, innocent man-traps laid in the very sight of an indignant father! Sometimes the familiarity in which the two sets of young people have grown up, calling each other by their Christian names, and assuming almost brotherly and sisterly relationships, is a safeguard; but not always, for these sorts of fraternal relations often expand into something nearer and dearer.

The Mitfords were exceptionally fortunate, however, in their clerical family. The Rector of Melcombe had but two children: the daughter (providentially) older than any of the Mitford boys; the son younger even than Nina, which was more than could have been hoped for. The Rector was of a Jersey family, and his name was spelt Le Mesurier, as no doubt it ought to have been pronounced;

but as a matter of fact he was called Le-measurer, as if it were one word, and he never objected to the mispronunciation. Miss Lemesurier was the housekeeper, nay, the head of the house, at the Rectory. Her mother was dead long ago. Miss Lemesurier was approaching forty, and she was by far the best curate her father had ever had. Not only did all the external affairs of the parish pass through her hands, but most of the spiritual too. She was a large woman, larger than her father, and overshadowing him both mentally and bodily. She had a great deal of fair hair, somewhat sandy, but which in its day had been celebrated as gold, and this was her chief external distinction. She wore it in an old-fashioned way, in large massive braids, so that it could never be ignored, and was a conspicuous part of her somewhat imposing personality. Her name, it was believed, was Patience, but she had never been known as anything but Pax, though the origin of that cognomen was lost in the mists of antiquity. The Rectory, withdrawn among its trees, had a dignified and impressive appearance, with the spire of Mel-

combe old church rising beyond it into peaceful blue skies flecked with English cloud, and scarcely stained by the village smoke. But through an opening in these trees, Pax Lemesurier, from where she sat at her favourite window, commanded the gate of the great house, and saw everybody who went and came. Nature had at first afforded this facility, but it was kept up by art. She had the opening carefully preserved and trimmed, so that no intrusive bough should ever shut that prospect out.

This was the nearest female neighbour our Squire's family had. Naturally, as she was several years older than the Mitfords, two of them in succession had fallen in love with Pax. It had been a short affair with Roger, who had learned better after his first period of service with his regiment. But Edmund had held by it a long time, and would have brought it to the crisis of marriage if Pax would have listened to him ; but she was not that kind of woman. Marrying, she declared at once, was not in her way. She had a house of her own, as much as any married woman had, and a great deal more

independence, and to change this free and full life for that of a younger son's wife, watching her husband's countenance to keep him in good-humour, and conciliating his father that he might increase their allowance, was a sort of thing to which nothing would make her submit,—'nothing, at least, with which I am at present acquainted,' Pax said. 'Of course such a thing might happen as that I should fall in love.' She said this with such gravity that everybody laughed, putting aside, as it were, a margin for future possibilities. At the moment Edmund was very angry and much offended by this speech, which showed how entirely that specific was out of the question in his own case: but in the end he learned to laugh, too.

Another notable member of the neighbouring society may best be introduced to the reader as she appeared in Pax's drawing-room, one spring morning, having ridden over to see her friend from her own house, which was quite near as country calculations go, being about five miles off. This young lady was a person of great importance in the circle round Melcombe. She was an heiress,

not only of money, but of a delightful and highly prosperous estate; and though her name was not of much account, and her connection with the district recent, no one could have a finer position than Elizabeth Travers, to whom all the greatest families in the neighbourhood possessing sons showed the utmost attention. She was not in her teens, like the usual heroines of romance, but in her twenties, which is very different, and had seen a good deal of the world. It would be impossible to pretend that she was unaware of the position she held, and the great advantages, as people say, which she possessed. As these advantages were evidently not hers, but those of her wealth, she was not proud of them, but occasionally, indeed, a little bitter, like a woman who felt herself wronged, although she got nothing but compliments and worship. Her position was so far peculiar that she had inherited all this from an uncle, recently dead, who out of some abstract impression of justice, believing that Elizabeth's father had laid the foundations of the fortune which he did not live to enjoy, had left everything to his niece, with but a slender provision

for the insipid, delicate invalid wife whom he left behind. Mrs. Travers had been kept in ignorance of this arrangement, which had taken even her own house from her. It was the one thing upon which Elizabeth insisted. The poor lady was told that Elizabeth was the final heir, and that it was not in her power to leave anything away from her husband's niece, who had always lived with her, and of whom in reality she was both fond and proud. Mrs. Travers, all unsuspicious of the truth, had shed a few tears over even this disability. 'If there had been only ten thousand, my dear,' she said, 'which I could have called my own! Of course I should have left the most of it to you. He need not, I'm sure, have ever supposed that I would leave it away from you; but to think I could do what I liked with it, and leave a few legacies when I passed away, would have been a pleasure. I don't know why your uncle should have had so little faith in me, my dear.'

'It was not that he had little faith in you, dear auntie. Besides, you have more than ten thousand pounds, I am sure. And whatever legacies you wish to leave, you may be

certain that they will be paid,' said Elizabeth.

But Mrs. Travers shook her head, declaring that what she wished was not any such assurance, but only that, to show his trust in her, he had left her something which she could have considered as her very own. This was quite as great a grievance to the poor lady as if she had known the real state of the case, which Elizabeth, with so much trouble, and even at the cost of a fib or two (but it was the lawyers who told them, and that did not matter), so carefully concealed from her. Thus they lived together; Mrs. Travers ordering everything as if it were her own, and believing it so to be, with Elizabeth, her dependent, in the house. She treated her niece as if she had been her daughter, it must be allowed, but now and then would exhibit little caprices of proprietorship, and debar her from the use of a horse or a carriage. 'It may be yours to do what you like with after I die, but it's mine as long as I live,' she would say pettishly: notwithstanding that the house and everything in it, the carriages and horses, were Elizabeth's, and not hers at all.

This assertion of rights had been of little importance while the two ladies led a secluded life of mourning, after the death of the head of the house; but that period was about ending, and Elizabeth's embarrassments and difficulties were likely to increase. It was upon this subject, with perhaps some others underneath, that she had now come to unburden her heart.

Miss Lemesurier sat in her usual chair near the window, which commanded the Melcombe park gates. She was in a light gown, as was also her wont, though it was not becoming. Her flood of light hair, in two great heavy braids, framed her face, and was twisted in a great knot behind. Her complexion, which had grown a little dull, was not capable of overcoming the mingled effects of the light hair and dress, and her eyes, though they were large and animated, were gray, too, of a yellowish tone, concentrating rather than giving forth light. She lent her full attention to Elizabeth, and yet she kept her eyes on the park gates of Melcombe, and not a beggar or tramp could pass out or in without being seen by Pax.

'It is vexing, that's all,' said Elizabeth, drying her brown eyes, which in their wet condition sent sparks of light all round her, and illuminated the scene. 'It isn't as if I wished poor auntie to lose the least of the pleasure she takes in her things.'

'Only they are not her things; they're your things.'

'Oh, what does that matter? What do I care whose things they are? But she cares, poor dear!"

'I'm not fond of self-deception,' said Pax, folding her large hands in her lap. 'If you didn't care, my dear, you would never come and tell me.'

'Oh, Pax!'

'I'm not fond of deception of any kind,' continued Miss Lemesurier. 'The subject of it is always angry when it is found out, and has a right to be angry. You know I was always for letting Mrs. Travers, poor thing, know; there would have been a few more tears, and then all would have been right.'

'I don't think so. As a matter of fact, my uncle's will was very unjust. Fancy his wife, who had been his faithful companion all these

years! Everything had been hers, just as much hers as his, and in a moment they all pass away from her without any reason, and come to me Nothing could be more unjust.'

'That's a large statement,' said Pax. 'I don't know if it's unjust or not, but there can't be a doubt that it's hard. Widows have almost always to bear it. Perhaps they don't mind. When it's their own son who turns them out of house and home everybody seems to think it's all right. But of course you would never have turned her out. You would have made yourself her slave,—as, indeed, you are doing now.'

'Not a slave at all. It's all quite right,' said Elizabeth. 'Sometimes she is a little aggravating, and then I come and grumble to you,—but only to you, Pax: and then it all comes right again.'

'What's wrong can never be right,' said Pax, with a certain placid dogmatism. She paused a little, and then she said, 'There is a wonderful sight!—the three Mitford boys all walking together out of the gates.'

Elizabeth got up quickly to peep over her

friend's shoulder. A little additional colour had come to her face. 'The three Mitford boys!' she said, with a little strained laugh. 'One would think you were talking of three curled darlings in velvet frocks, or knicker-bockers at the most.'

'I've seen them in both,' said Pax calmly. 'But it's very seldom of late that I've seen them together. Lizzy, when you make up your mind, and poor Mrs. Travers is no longer in the way——'

'How could she ever be in the way?'

'Oh, my dear! How much simpler this world would be,' said Pax, 'if people would be sincere and speak the truth! I think the whole business wrong, you know. Still, having done it, you may at least be frank about the consequences, and not pretend to me that it makes no difference. Of course she is in the way. You know very well you can never marry while she is there, thinking herself the mistress of all. I should not wonder if you were to keep it up to the end, and humbly accept an allowance from her out of your own money.'

'It would do — us no harm if I did,' said

Elizabeth, colouring high, and speaking in a very low voice.

'Very likely it would do you no harm. To be poor in reality would not do you much harm. You're a good, honest, healthy young woman, and quite capable of looking after your family, and bringing up your children——'

'Pax!' Elizabeth stopped her, laughing and blushing. 'You go a great deal too fast!' she cried.

'That's true. Of course it would take a few years. But that's not the question, my dear. You couldn't be married like an ordinary girl. There would be all the fuss in the world about settlements, and everything must be turned over among the lawyers and talked about, and your position made known. You couldn't deceive her any longer; it wouldn't be possible. Everybody would know.'

'Everybody knows now, except my poor auntie. I don't see what difference it need make.'

'And you think you could get a man to aid and abet you in all that! You think your husband would carry on the farce, and make

believe to be Mrs. Travers's pensioner, and have your money doled out through her hands!'

'Pax,' cried Miss Travers, 'I tell you, you go a great deal too fast. There's no such person; time enough to consider what he would do when he exists.'

'My poor child,' said Pax, with a mixture of pity and contempt, 'he exists, or at least I hope so, for your sake. I hope you are not going to marry thirty years hence some boy who is not born yet,—that would be a dismal look-out indeed. He exists, and not far off, or I'm mistaken. Indeed, I should not wonder if he were to pass at any moment under those trees.'

'All this is quite beyond the question,' said Elizabeth, with a look of pain. It was not the fluttering, pretty blush of happy anticipation, but a hot colour of embarrassment, of perplexity, almost of irritation, that made a line under her eyes. Something like a flame of trouble not unmixed with shame passed over her face. 'We have talked of this a great deal too much,' she said, 'or at least I have let you talk. To speculate may

be no harm. I suppose I thought it amusing at one time, but it is not amusing now. Pax, please, if you care for me at all, don't say any more.'

'I care for you a great deal, my dear, and for him also,—I have a right to,' Pax said. Then there was silence between them. For as a matter of fact the three young men were passing under the trees; and it remained uncertain whether they were coming to the Rectory, or whether any one of them was coming to the Rectory, or where this unlikely group were bound. To see them all three together was so unusual that the women who took so great an interest in them watched and waited for the two or three decisive minutes, almost holding their breath. The footsteps became audible after a minute, and even a distant sound of voices; and then these indications became distant, and it was evident that the Rectory was not the end to which they were bound. Both the ladies drew a long breath when this was ascertained beyond doubt, but it is uncertain whether it was in relief or disappointment. The colour still flamed, red and hot, under Elizabeth's eyes.

The passing sounds seemed to have disturbed and excited her. She had forgotten the original subject of her complaints and trouble, and her mind went far away out of the Rectory drawing-room to other speculations of her own.

Meanwhile, the three Mitfords passed the Rectory gate, and recognised Elizabeth's horse, which the groom was walking up and down outside the gate. 'Oh ho!' cried Stephen. 'There's Lizzy Travers's mare. She's having a consultation with old Pax, Roger, about the best way of hooking you.'

'I wish you'd try to be less vulgar, Steve.'

'Oh, vulgar! As soon as a fellow speaks the truth about a woman, you call him vulgar. Old Pax ought to know how to set about it, if all tales are true.'

'There are some things which are worse than vulgar,' said Edmund, 'and that is one of them. Keep your messroom talk for that fine locality. You will soon be there.'

'I hope so,' cried Stephen,—'free from the lackadaisical, which is worse than vulgar any day. Look here, you fellows, I wish you would make up your minds who is going in

for Liz,—a fine girl and a fine fortune, and capital preserves, though they're overstocked. If it's not good enough for you, it's quite good enough for me, and I shouldn't mind settling down. Not at home, though. The Governor is too much for any fellow. I can't think how you stand it, you two.'

To this speech there was no reply, and presently all three paused to greet a couple of men, quite unlike themselves, who were crossing the common, coming from the little railway station to which the Mitfords were bound. One of these was a very trim and fresh country gentleman of fifty or so, with a gray moustache and that indescribably clean, well-brushed air, the perfection of physical purity and soundness which we in England are apt to consider characteristic of an Englishman,—a man who was not above a cigar, but never smelt of smoke; who was no ascetic, yet showed no symptom of any indulgence; who looked his years, yet bore them like a flower, and was as active as any of the younger men beside him. There was no mistaking the handsome, slim young fellow by his side for anything but his son.

But though he was tall and straight and delightful in the first bloom of his youth, Raymond Tredgold was not such a perfect type as his father. The man was as self-possessed and easy in speech and mind as in appearance; the youth was a little shy, a little eager, half a step in advance, but not half so sure where he was going or what he meant to do.

'Hallo, what's up?' Raymond cried, which indeed was but a version less refined of the sentiments of the ladies at the Rectory window as to the errand of the brothers, all walking together, as if they had something (for once) in common to do.

'You're going to see Stephen off?' said Mr. Tredgold, solving this problem summarily. 'I am sorry you are going, Steve. My girls think it will soon be weather for tennis, and I don't know what else, and every man that goes is a loss, they say.'

'If it's only in the light of any man that goes—I hope Amy and Nancy think more of me than that. Tell them I'll see them in town, where perhaps they won't take any notice of me.'

'Or you of them. We know what you think of country folks in town,' said Mr. Tredgold, with a laugh that was not without meaning. Then he added, 'We are going to see if the Rector can do anything for Ray in the matter of this exam.'

Ray gave a little shrug to his shoulders when he thus became the subject of the conversation. He was two and twenty, and it was recognised as fully necessary that he should lose no time.

'I am afraid the Rector has rather forgotten his classics,' said Edmund.

'What can I do? To send him to a crammer is too expensive; besides, I don't approve of the system. I wish I knew of any one else. But the Rector, even if he has forgotten something, must still know a great deal more than Ray.'

'In an old-fashioned way.'

'Goodness, what can that matter? Isn't it all old-fashioned?' cried Mr. Tredgold, who had been in the army in his youth, and had not had the advantage of a classical education. 'I always was told the classics themselves were the oldest things in creation. It

stands to reason they can't be treated in any of your newfangled ways.'

'Ray,' said Stephen, 'I'll tell you what to do, a deal better than going in for exams. A hundred yards off, round the corner, you'll see a certain mare walked about, waiting for her mistress, and the mistress is in the Rectory drawing-room with old Pax. Go in strong for that, and you never need trouble your head any more about exams.'

He laughed an insolent laugh, sweeping over his brothers, both of whom were very grave, a malicious glance of defiance. Young Raymond flashed an angry look at his adviser; but the colour rose in his young cheek, and he made a half step forward, like a dog pulling at the leash in spite of himself.

## III

### BROTHERS

'I WONDER,' said Edmund, as they returned towards the house, 'whether I may speak to you quite frankly, Roger?'

'That means make yourself disagreeable about something. Well, fire away. I don't mind anything, now that fellow 's gone.'

'I wish you wouldn't speak of him so.'

'Come, that's a little too much, Ned. I mean Steve no harm, but you don't think it adds to the comfort of the household, do you, when he's here?'

To this the younger brother made no reply, especially as at the moment he had obeyed involuntarily an impulse given by Roger, in which more was meant than met the eye. They had been walking along the road which, with a sweep round the village common, led to Melcombe from the railway.

Roger had not said that he intended to take a less direct way, but he silently turned along a cross-road traversing the common in the opposite direction, and his brother had followed without a word. Indeed, there could not be said to be either leading or following in the matter, for they moved as by one impulse, keeping side by side. Imperceptible as the influence was, however, it was so marked that when the turn was taken Edmund looked up quickly with a questioning glance. After a moment he spoke—

'Need we enter into that? I have wanted for some time to speak to you, Roger. Don't you think you should come to some decision now, and think of doing what my father wishes so much, what all your friends desire?'

'Speak plainly. I am bad at riddles.'

'It is no riddle; you know what I mean,' said Edmund, with a faint rising colour. 'You should marry; you know that's the question.'

Roger was silent for a moment, and they went on quickly, their footsteps ringing clear upon the road, as if that had been the prevailing sound to which speech was but a

broken accompaniment. He said at last, 'It's a question for myself, surely, rather than for any one else. Marry—whom, I wonder? If I'm directed in such a matter, the direction should be complete.'

Edmund half paused, and threw out his arm with a quick gesture towards the point which they were leaving behind. 'To speak of direction is folly, Roger. But don't you know? If you don't, you are the only ignorant person.'

Again the steps went on and the voices stayed,—on, quickly, in measured cadence, sure and steady towards an aim, whatever that aim might be. It was very different, at least, from the object of the other interrupted strain,—the conversation which was begun and broken off so often, and by which only a portion of the intended meaning could be conveyed.

When Roger broke silence again, it was in the veiled voice with which a man speaks who turns his head away, not to encounter the scrutiny of his companion's eye. 'I thought it was the first tenet of the romantic school,' he said, 'that marriage cannot be

without love. Should I marry one woman while——should I insult one woman by asking her while——that's out of the question at least.' With angry force he kicked away a stone which was in his path as if that had been the thing which was out of the question, and, hurting his foot upon it, gave vent to a short, sharp exclamation of pain, all of which seemed to come into the discussion and form part of it, as they went on.

'Marriage is a very complex matter,' said the younger brother; 'it's not so simple as one thought. Love is not the only necessity, as one used to suppose.'

'You speak like an oracle, Ned,' said Roger, seizing the opportunity to laugh off an argument which was becoming serious. 'And that's much from you, the faithful Edmund. No, I'm not going to laugh about Pax, dear old Pax,—there never was a better or a dearer,—but you see the justice of it now.'

'I see,' said Edmund, adopting his brother's plan, that natural expedient of embarrassed feeling, and turning his head aside, 'that there are many things which make it impossible, and best that it is im-

possible. She saw that well enough from the first, and always told me so. It's rather a dreary thing to be convinced, but I am convinced, if that will do you any good.'

'How should it do me any good?' said Roger, in a quick, startled tone.

'Only because you know how much in earnest I was—and yet I see it all well enough. There are other things wanted. There's suitability,—that commonplace qualification; there's all one's life to be taken into account.'

'You speak like Pax herself, Ned.'

'I daresay,—it's all her at second-hand; but the thing is, I now see it myself, which I didn't and wouldn't in the old days. I don't undervalue love. God forbid. It's the foundation of all things—but——'

'It must consider suitability first of all,' said Roger, with a forced laugh, 'and reckon up all the qualifications, so much money, so much family, so much beauty even,—oh, I know that comes in; and then, everything fully considered, it may let itself go! Yes, I understand all that. But,' the young man continued, drawing a long breath, 'that's not

how it sets to work, alas! There's no consideration at all to begin with,—no dwelling on this, or dwelling on that, none of your reasons for doing a thing. Love,' he went on, warming to his subject, 'is not doing anything. It rises in you when you are thinking nothing of it; it catches you unawares; all at once there comes into you something that was not there a moment before. It's not your doing, nor *her* doing. It is not because she's lovely, even; it's because of—nothing that I know. It comes, and there it is; and the question is—the question is, what are you to do with it, what is to follow it, how is it to end?' He clenched the hand that hung by his side and dashed it into the vacant air with a kind of fury. 'Talk about questions!' he cried, with a strange laugh. 'There's a question which I don't know how to solve, for one.'

'Is it as bad as that?' asked his brother in a subdued and troubled tone.

'As bad as—what?' cried Roger, turning upon him. 'There is no bad in it. I don't believe you know what I am talking about. I am talking of love, love in the abstract,

love with a capital letter,—what you despise, and think should give place to suitability, Ned. Suitability! I think I see myself poking about looking for what is suitable! Yes, when I want a pair of shoes—No, when what I want is——'

'The companion of your life, Roger, the mistress of the house, the lady of Melcombe, the representative of the family in our generation—besides other things more important still.'

'I'm glad you spare me the children!' cried Roger, with a hard laugh.

Then the conversation stopped, and the quick, steady strain of the footsteps, hurrying in their excitement like a march in music, resumed; always going on,—going on like the composed strain of life through all that can happen, quickened now and then by the hurry or commotion of some event, but never brought to a standstill. The young men's minds were not open to such a comparison, nor, indeed, to any comparison at all. For a long time they moved on in silence, keeping step, with complete harmony in their movement; but in their thoughts they were an

immeasurable distance apart. The month was March; the roads were dry and dusty, the woods all covered with an indescribable softened tint, and here and there shrubs with a higher tone of budding green, which denotes the new life swelling to the tip of every bough, half bursting in the brown buds. The footsteps of the brothers rang upon the road in perfect measure, and for several minutes neither spoke. At length, as the road rounded off towards the west, Roger turned suddenly upon his companion.

'Are you going anywhere in particular,' he said, 'that you come this long round? I thought you had something to do at home.'

'Only to keep you company,' said Edmund. 'I had not thought of any other motive.'

'Are you sure it was merely for company? It is your turn to be questioned now. Didn't you think that perhaps, if you stuck to my side, you might—influence me, for my good, as you fellows are always bent on doing; keep me from going where I have a mind to go; make me ashamed possibly of where I was going?' Roger spoke hastily and angrily,

but at the same time with embarrassment and a hot flush upon his face. And now for the first time the rhythm of their footsteps ceased, and they stood and looked at each other with much meaning between them, more than was put into words.

Edmund replied in a somewhat startled tone: 'No, I don't think I intended all that. I came with you without any particular intention, out of mere habit, idleness. If you think I meant to spy upon you——'

'No, no,' cried the other, 'nothing of the sort. If you meant anything, Ned, I know it was for my good; but don't you know, you fellows who are so fond of influence, that the man who is to be influenced never likes it when he finds it out?'

'I had no such thought,' said Edmund, seriously. 'I didn't even know—but since you think so, Roger—— It's true I have no particular object in coming this way; on the contrary, the opposite direction—might suit me best.'

'I think so, Ned, if you will not be offended.'

'Why should I be offended?' said Ed-

mund; but he had the dubious, startled look of a man suddenly pulled up and arrested in his course, whatever that might be. 'It is true I have something to do,' he said, waving his hand to his brother as he abruptly turned back. He was not offended, but he was abashed and startled by this sudden dismissal. No, there was no cause of offence. A brother may say to a brother what it would not be civil to say to a stranger; he may give that natural ally to understand that he wants to be alone, that he has things to occupy which do not brook companionship. The frankness of the nursery may still linger about their intercourse and no harm done. But Edmund felt, as was equally natural, as if he had been meddling, and his efforts had been rejected as intrusive. He walked very quickly in the opposite direction, driven by annoyance and something like shame, while Roger went on with equal speed upon his way, a little disturbed and uneasy, but full of a fervour of feeling which drove all those lesser sentiments before it like a strong wind. It hurt him to hurt Ned, and at the same time the heat of his momentary anger

against Ned, and feeling that his presence was extremely uncalled for, impelled him to do so; but in a few minutes he had forgotten all about his brother and everything else save the errand upon which he was bound.

Edmund had no such burning motive in his heart. When the little flash of irritation was over, evaporating in the speed of movement and the prick of the fresh breeze which blew in his face,—which, indeed, was an east wind, and nothing less, though, far inland as Melcombe was and sheltered by many woods, it was robbed of much of its severity,—his hasty steps gradually modified into that slower and reflective pace which comes natural to a thoughtful person in the depths of the country, where no pressure or hurry is. He went along quietly, thinking of many things. There had been little activity in Edmund's life; he had been somewhat apt to follow the impulse given him, as he had done in the present case, accompanying Roger, with no intention of interfering with Roger, but instinctively, because the turn had been taken which led that way. But it was upon this peculiarity of his own that he

reflected, as he turned away. He thought of his brother, for whom he not only felt much tenderness, but in whom he took a pride, which was not, perhaps, justified by any superiority in Roger, but was the younger boy's traditional admiration for his elder brother, a sentiment which often lingers after the elder brother has been far surpassed by the younger one and left behind. In some respects this had been done in Edmund's case. He had a better head than Roger, and of this he could not but be aware. He had done better in education than Roger; indeed, he had accomplished much which Roger had not even tried to do. He was in reality more independent, more individual, than his brother, who was of the order of the country squire, without any higher aspirations. But yet Edmund had always been proud of him, and so continued. He had been proud, at Oxford, of the gay young guardsman who brought a whiff of London (not always too wholesome) among the 'men,' and dispersed the mist of thin talk about schools and degrees. He was proud of him now in his robustness, his knowledge of several things

his profound learning in horses, his great rides and feats of all kinds. Roger could far out-ride him, out-walk him, even out-talk him in his own way. Edmund admired his energy, his quick impulses, his certainty of being right, whether about the course taken by the fox or the course taken by the Government. As a true man of his time, knowing how very much is to be said on both sides, Edmund secretly laughed at this certainty, but he admired it, all the same.

Something, however, had come over Roger, in these late days, which had a strange effect upon this open-air and robust young man,—something which had cast him down from the supreme height of those certainties, and at the same time opened out new possibilities in him. To think of Roger, of all people in the world, discussing love,—love, as he said, with a capital letter, giving a nervous laugh; a thing surrounded by all the tremors and hesitations and uncertainties of feeling, complicated by horrible doubts as to what must be done about the issue which he could not control; a power sweet but terrible, which had carried him out of him-

self, as he described it, and out of all his habitual ways. This new phase of Roger made him more and more interesting to his brother, justified the instinctive pride in him which Edmund had always felt, and awoke a hundred questions in the quiescent breast of the young man, who, his own romance having died out to the very ashes, felt himself put aside from life, and for the moment in the position of a spectator. Where was a greater instance of the perversity of circumstances, or, rather, of human hearts and wishes? It had seemed to many people, not only to the family most concerned, that Roger Mitford and Elizabeth Travers were specially indicated by Providence as a pair 'fitly formed to meet by nature.' Their estates lay side by side; their characters were similar, or so the country thought. What Elizabeth wanted in point of family was fully made up by Roger; and though there was no want at Melcombe of a wife's money, still it is well known that more money never comes amiss even to the wealthiest. Thus everything indicated a match, which had the 'suitability' which Edmund had ap-

pealed to, in its favour in an overwhelming way.

Alas, suitability is a delusion and snare. It severs more heaven-destined partners than it unites; it lights fires of resistance in the youthful soul. Roger had never been supposed to be romantic, but even upon his seemingly unfantastic mind this rebellion against the suitable had told. At least, so he asserted now with vehement emphasis, as has been seen. There had, however, been a moment when it was not supposed that he had felt this any drawback; when he and the heiress had ridden together, danced together, walked and talked together, and all had been supposed to be in good train. Edmund's mind went back to this period as he walked along. From Roger's it had disappeared altogether; had it also disappeared from that of Elizabeth? The neighbourhood had unhesitatingly concluded that she had not been slow to make up her mind, and that when Roger's proposal was made it would be accepted without delay or doubt. Edmund had himself been of that opinion. When he had seen her horse and groom outside the Rectory

gates, a keen sympathetic pang had gone through his mind. He was fond of entering into other people's feelings, and he had thought instinctively of the proud, yet tender, woman watching from the window the man whom she perhaps loved, whom, at least, she had begun to think of as a man who meant to seek her love,—watching him pass by on the other side, without a look or thought. The woman could make no sign; the woman was bound to stand like an Indian at the stake, whatever happened, and never show what she felt. Edmund's mind hung between these two with a poignant sense of pain, of which, possibly, he did not render a full and frank account to himself. Was it for Roger gone astray, or for Elizabeth slighted and disappointed, or was there still some subtler sentiment underneath?

## IV

### THE WEST LODGE

ROGER MITFORD quickened his steps as his brother left him. He had been like a dog in a leash, compelled to curb his impatient impulse; now he darted forward, the fervour in his heart carrying all before it. It was no walk upon which he was bound. There is no mistaking the expression on the face of a man who is going somewhere, who knows exactly where he is going and is eager to get there. He walked on as if for a wager along the winding country road.

Presently this impulse came to an end, or at all events he paused, relapsed into a saunter, but a saunter in which the same nervous impatience was disguised. In many things, but most especially in that kind of pursuit which absorbed Roger, the hurry of the eager pursuer fails as he reaches the point at which he

has aimed. As he draws near he grows cautious, he grows timid. A terror of what he may find when he gets to the end seizes him. 'If Lucy should be dead!' cries the poet. But that is an extreme case. It may be that Lucy will be cruel, that she will be indifferent; it may be—oh misery worse than either alternative—that she is not there. Finally Roger swung open the gate known as the west gate of Melcombe, and stole in with almost noiseless steps, holding his breath. No sign of hurry then in his mild aspect. He had only come round to ask Ford the keeper something about the dogs, —a most innocent question which was really of no consequence. 'I'll wait a bit, and perhaps he'll turn up,' Roger said, slightly breathless. 'If he doesn't, it's really of no consequence — only something about the puppies. I'll wait a bit, and see if he comes in. How is your garden looking this fine day?'

'Oh, sir,' said Mrs. Ford, 'when the sun come out this morning it was just a-blaze: all the crocuses a-shining like gold. Them crocuses is the nicest things as ever was.

You couldn't have done a kinder action to Lily and me.'

'I'm very glad you like them. They're simple things enough,—the very simplest you could get anywhere; why, gardeners, you know, make no account at all of them.'

'Gardeners is very queer,' said Mrs. Ford. 'I don't think they care for nothing as hasn't a name that's three miles long, as Lily says. She does take her fun out of the Scotch gardener about that, Mr. Roger. You should just hear her at him. My Lily has a deal of fun in her, when she don't stand in awe of a person.'

'Of whom does she stand in awe?' asked Roger, with a smile which lit up his face into tenderness; then it suddenly clouded over. 'The Scotch gardener is not society for your daughter, Mrs. Ford.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger! bless you, he thinks himself much too grand for the like of us.'

'Then he's a puppy and a fool, and doesn't know what he's talking of!' cried Roger hotly. He paused, and, restraining himself, continued with a smile, 'I hope I'm not the person of whom Lily stands in awe.'

'Oh, sir! you're a deal too good and kind,' cried the keeper's wife, taking up her apron to remove an invisible particle of dust, and avoiding the young master's eye. Then there was a momentary pause.

'Ford doesn't seem to be coming,' remarked Roger at last.

'No, sir, I don't expect him till tea-time at soonest. He said as he was going to make a long round out by Bilbury Hollow, and then down by——'

'Well,' said Roger cheerfully, interrupting her, 'I'll take a look at the puppies before I go, and I should like to see your crocuses, Mrs. Ford, now I'm here.'

'They're not half as fine as in the morning, sir,' said the keeper's wife. 'The sun 's gone in, and they're just like children at school; they've gone in, too. If you were a-passing this way, sir, some time in the morning ——'

'There's no time like the present,' answered Roger; 'but you needn't disturb yourself, if you're busy. I think I ought to know the way.'

'Oh yes, sir, no doubt you knows the way,' said the woman, hesitating. But whatever

her feelings might be on the subject, it was clear that she could not oppose the entrance of the master's son, the young Squire, through whose favour her husband had got the place, and on whose favour they all depended. But the keeper's wife, with an uneasy soul, saw him pass through her house to the greenness of the garden which was visible behind. No one knew or shared her anxieties. She stood looking after him helplessly for a moment, and then, shaking her head, returned to her work, with the sort of unsatisfactory consolation there is in utter helplessness—for what could she do?

Roger stepped along through the passage which traversed the little house with a step which in itself was full of revelations. It rung upon the floor with a sort of triumph, yet timidity. He was on the eve of attaining a pleasure which had still more or less to be schemed for, which he could not seek openly. He had before him the prospect of such an occupation for the afternoon's idleness as it made his heart beat to think of; and yet whether he should have this pleasure at all, whether these hours should be enchantment

or a blank of disillusion and misery, was not in his own power, but in that of another,—of one whose very charm was the caprice which wounded yet delighted, which sometimes made him miserable and sometimes intoxicated him with pleasure. It is not all men who are liable to this kind of subjugation, but Roger had all the qualities which gave it supreme power. He was little used to women, still less to the kind of woman to whom the pursuit and subjugation of man are natural, and who puts a master's passion, his wiles and cunning, his patience and his vehemence alike, and disregard of all other things, into her sport. He was simple-minded, seeking no recondite motives, believing in what appeared before his eyes. And he was in need of an object, his mind vacant and unoccupied except by those matters of physical activity which cannot be always pursued, and which leave a perilous blank when they are withdrawn. Perhaps if he could have hunted all the year through, if the shooting could have lasted, if the village football and cricket had been continuous and exciting enough, he might never have thought of the more seduc-

tive play which occupies the imagination and the heart.

But there are perforce periods in country life in which there is, as *ces messieurs* lament, nothing to do. M. Ohnet's latest hero, at such a pause in existence, elegantly devotes himself to the seduction of the nearest lady as the right and natural alternative. A vicious young Englishman, in such circumstances, might perhaps have found in the keeper's pretty daughter a natural victim. But Roger was neither a *beau garçon* of the French type, nor a Squire Thornhill of the last century. And when he fell under this unaccustomed spell, it was himself who became, or was likely to become, the victim. There was no idea, however, of any victim in the sensations with which he went through the keeper's cottage into the garden behind. It was Armida's garden, the Bower of Bliss, the fool's paradise, to Roger. Away from it he was not without serious thought of what it might come to, and a just perception of all the difficulties and impossibilities in his way. But at this moment he thought of nothing of the kind. All the restraints of judgment, of good sense and

practical possibility, were withdrawn. He was hurrying to an intoxication more delightful than any which vulgarer methods could afford. The delicate fumes had mounted to his head already, though he had not yet tasted the dangerous draught.

The keeper's cottage, known as the West Lodge, was very much like many other lodges at the park gates of country-houses. It was built of red brick, with gables intended to be picturesque, but without any pretence at antiquity, being indeed a quite recent erection and in conformity with the taste of the moment. It was, however, already half covered with creepers, and on the warm south wall the roses and honeysuckles which made it sweet in summer were bursting into leaf. The garden behind was separated from the park only by a railing, and in the season of flowers it was a sight to see. The keeper's wife was one of those women with an instinct for flowers, under whose hand everything thrives, and her simple gardening by the light of nature and homely experience succeeded better than art. Mrs. Ford had married somewhat late in life, and had been a florist

in her untutored way before she was a mother. She took her baby, when it came, unexpectedly past the time for such vanities, very much as she would have taken some new and rare plant. It was no rough boy, to fall into the father's way, and grow up in velveteens, a miniature keeper, but a girl, a delicate little creature, a sort of animated flower, transporting the elderly mother into a heaven of tender worship such as she had never dreamed of. The great white lilies were standing in angelic groups about the garden, with their stately heads bent in the reverence of that Ave which the flower of the Annunciation has brought out of the old pictures, out of tender tradition, to make it doubly sweet. The keeper's wife could see them from where she lay, with the little woman-child who was her flower and late blossom in her arms; and what could she name it but Lily, in the still transport of her soul? The flowers and the child were as one in her eyes, the most exquisite things in the earth, good enough for a queen, yet hers, which was a wonder she never could get over. Lily the child grew up in such delicacy and daintiness as the end-

less care and worship of a mother often brings. Mrs. Ford's own perceptions grew finer through the medium of the child. Perhaps her flowers, too, gave her a delicacy not to be expected among her kind.

Lily had been dressed like a little lady when she caught Mrs. Mitford's eye, and was carried to the Hall to be admired and caressed and to amuse the invalid lady on her death-bed. The Squire's wife was not a judicious adviser for a woman lost in such an adoration. She took a violent fancy to the child, and left her a little legacy to be spent in her education. 'She must not grow up to be a mere house-maid. She must have a good education; and then who knows what may happen?' Mrs. Mitford said, with a smile that made Lily's mother dissolve in weeping. Lily was far more pretty, far more dainty, at that period than poor little Nina, who was in the nursery, a weakly baby, left to the nurse's care. From that moment the girl's fate was settled. Mrs. Ford had a battle to fight with her husband, who comprehended none of these delicacies, and did not understand why his little girl should not stir about the house, and open the

lodge gates, and help her mother. But even Ford was penetrated by and by with the pride of having a child who was like nobody else's, and whom strangers took for a little lady from the Hall. He was mollified by the fact that the radiant little creature was very fond of him, and would sit in his lap, and coax him to tell her stories, and applaud her daddy's crooning of rustic songs, notwithstanding her white frocks and her lessons from the Melcombe governess. There is nothing more contagious than child-worship in any circumstances; and Lily was, to belong to a keeper and his homely wife, a miraculous child. Her beauty was not of the dairymaid kind. She was even a little deficient in colour, pale as suited her name. And as she grew older, the father came to look upon her with a little awe. 'Are you sure as she wasn't changed at nurse?' he would say as the dainty creature stood between them, he in his gaiters at one side of the hearth, and his elderly wife in her black cap on the other, with her hard hands all rough with work, and wrinkles abounding in the homely face which bore the brunt of all weather.

'I know as she's never left my lap till she could run by herself,' said the mother, well pleased. But she might have been a little princess,—they were both agreed on that.

Naturally, the bringing up of Lily was a point upon which the whole neighbourhood had its opinion, which did not agree with that of Mrs. Ford. 'What is to come of it?' the village people said; and indeed the West Lodge could give no answer to that question. 'Is she going for a governess, or do they mean her for the new girls' school?' her more favourable critics asked, when Lily came home with her education completed. Miss Lemesurier even sent for the mother, to ask this question. 'I don't approve of that style of education even for such a purpose,' said Pax; 'but I will speak to my father, Mrs. Ford, if you want her to try for the girls' school.'

'No, thank you kindly, miss. Her father and me, we don't want nothing of that sort,' Mrs. Ford replied.

'What do you want, then? You haven't given your girl an expensive education, and

brought her up so different from her class, without some meaning, I suppose?'

'Well, miss,' said the keeper's wife, drawing patterns on the carpet with the point of her umbrella, 'we've brought up Lily as we thought was best for her. She's different in her nature, without any doing of ours.'

'I wonder how you can talk such nonsense,' cried Pax,—'a sensible woman like you!'

'If it's nonsense, the dear lady at the Hall, she spoke the same. She saw as the child wasn't like one in a hundred. Give her a good eddication, she said, and then——'

'Yes, and then—what then? That's just the question.'

'Well, miss, then there's no telling what may happen,' Mrs. Ford said.

'Oh, you foolish woman!' cried Pax, holding up her hands; 'oh, you——' But words failed to express the force of her feelings. 'Mrs. Mitford, poor thing, is dead, and we'll say no harm of her,' she went on, 'but don't you see what that means? There is only one thing it can mean. It was like her senti-

mental, silly ways to put it in your head. It means that you expect some fine gentleman to come and fall in love with her and carry the girl away.'

'I'm not thinking anything of the sort,' cried the mother, springing up and growing red; for English mothers, both high and low, whatever may be their prudential outlook, unlike all parents of other races, vehemently deny that such a thing as marrying a daughter ever enters into their heads. But Mrs. Ford was too simple and too self-conscious to add anything to this first denial. Aware of the guilty hopes in her heart, she broke forth with, 'Oh, Miss Pax, I never thought as you'd say such things to me!' and burst into a flood of tears.

'I don't know that there would be anything wrong in it,' said Pax impatiently. 'If I saw any way to a good marriage for Lily or any one, I'd certainly help it on. But suppose she caught some one far above her, which is what you're thinking of, you know,—what would happen? If the very best came that you could hope for, which is very, very unlikely, he'd take her away from you, and

separate her from you, and perhaps never let her come near you more.'

The mother dried her eyes indignantly. 'It's clear to me you don't know my Lily; and how should you?' Mrs. Ford cried, with mingled resentment and pity. 'They might tear her with wild horses, but they would never get her to consent to that.'

'Perhaps so; but you wouldn't like her to be torn with wild horses, would you?' Pax said.

These words gave Mrs. Ford a tremor for the moment; they gave her 'a turn,' she said to herself. But as there was no immediate possibility of verifying them, and it is much pleasanter to think of events taking a favourable course than a bad one, she was able to dismiss them out of her mind for the time. Still it was not a pleasant thing to have said. Lily would never abandon her mother, never turn her back upon her, not if she were drawn with wild horses. But how about the wild horses? The mother's heart stood still for a moment. Better she should be abandoned, cast off, dropped for ever, than that Lily should be exposed to that rending. It gave

Mrs. Ford a 'dreadful turn.' But then she hastily thrust it out of her mind.

It was enough to make any mother's heart dance to see the radiant creature Lily at home. Her hair was light brown and silky, and shone in the sun like gold. Her mother thought she had seen nothing like it save the knot of spun glass which she had brought home from the exhibition once held at Beaulieu, and kept under a little glass shade on the mantelpiece. Her face was like a flower, though more like a rose now than a lily; her complexion more tender, delicate, and perfect in its first bloom than anything but a girl's complexion can be. Her eyes were as blue as the sky. To be sure, the features were not perfect, if Mrs. Ford had been disposed to take them to pieces. The girl's slim figure was also like a flower, tall and light, and swaying a little, as a lily does with its graceful, drooping head. To think of such a creature doing housework, or looking after the dog's meat, was a thing that made the parents shiver: whatever happened to them, that was impossible; they had not brought her home from the genteel seminary and all

her nice companions for that. It was, indeed, after the first rapture of her return, an embarrassing question what Lily was to do. The parents did not know what to make of it; they did not know what to say to her on the subject, or whether to suggest that it was necessary to do something. Lily did not at first appear to see any necessity. She went out with her pencils and colours and made little sketches, and she played 'pieces' upon the jingling piano, which had come out of the schoolroom at Melcombe, and sounded like an old tin kettle, and for some time seemed to suppose that this was all that was required of her; but this blissful state of ignorance was dispelled by communications made to the girl in the village at a little tea party, where she was eagerly questioned as to whether she were going into service, or what she was going to do. Lily awakened rudely under the fire of these demands, but she was not without spirit, and she had accepted the position. The housekeeper at Melcombe had some sewing to be done which was finer than the village was equal to; and Lily installed herself in the vacant little room

that was called the parlour, which had never been used till her return.

And here the parents, growing less and less wise as they came more and more under the influence of this dazzling child of theirs, made Lily a bower. It looked into the garden, and Ford, with the aid of some of the workmen on the estate, made the window into a glass door opening into that flowery enclosure. There Lily took up her abode, with her pretty accomplishments and her pretty dresses, to see what would happen. These words which her early patroness had said had not indeed been reported to her. But she felt as Mrs. Mitford had done, as her mother did, as Pax had instantly divined, that there was no telling what might come. The preparation was over; the results might be anticipated any day.

What was it the girl expected when she sat down to her little pretence of work in her little room, all fenced and guarded from intrusion, looking out upon her flowers? She did not know; neither did the mother know who had prepared it all for her, as if with a settled plan and purpose. There was no

telling what might happen; there was no telling what fine fortune or beautiful hero might suddenly come out of the unknown. Lily sat down in her bower all hidden among the leaves, and put out her webs unconsciously, as perhaps the spiders do when they begin. It is not a lovely comparison, and she meant to devour no one; but the girl, in all her prettiness, was like nothing in the realms of nature so much as the swift and skilful creature which spreads out these fairy webs, the *toile à la bonne vierge*, to shiver upon every bush in the autumn sun.

It was not long before an event occurred which made the heart of this little enchantress leap into her mouth in fright and triumph. One can imagine that to a little spider, new to her work, the sudden bounce of a great fat fly into those gossamers which she has extended by instinct in the sun, without any clear idea what is to come of them, must be an alarming as well as an exciting sight. Will those airy meshes be strong enough to bear that weight? Will they tear asunder under it? And what is to be done with this altogether unlooked-for victim, so much bigger

than his captor? Something like this thrill of strange sensation darted through Lily Ford, when all at once it became apparent to her that the vague event which there was no divining, the wonder for which she had been looking, had come. She had not selected that particular prey any more than the spider does. And it would be impossible to imagine anything further from the thoughts of Roger Mitford, when he strolled into Ford's cottage as he passed, with some question about the young birds and the prospects of the shooting, than that he should then and there be brought face to face with his fate. It was with no purpose, even, that he was led into Lily's parlour for greater honour, the fire in the kitchen being overpowering on the hot August evening. He went in unsuspecting, and asked his questions all unaware of Armida in her corner, who, for her part, intended the young Squire no harm. But when he made some remark which Ford did not understand at once, and the girl's quick, clear voice rose in the dusk, explaining it, and Roger, amused and interested, stepped to the open window opening into the garden, and in the

mystic twilight, just touched by the glimmer of the small new moon, saw the unthought-of, unlooked-for apparition, and asked, surprised, if this were Lily, the deed was done. He was not himself aware of it, but she was aware of it, feeling the tug, let us suppose, in all the delicate, invisible threads of her nets, as this big captive was caught in them. Roger lingered talking to her for ten minutes, pleased to find his mother's baby favourite developed into so charming a creature, and went away thinking no more of it. But after that he returned again and again. And this was why he had discoursed to his brother, he a man who knew nothing about poetry or the fictions of the romancers, upon the mystery of love; and why the keeper's wife endeavoured with affright to keep him out of the garden, where the cobwebs entangled everything, though it was now no longer autumn, but spring. But Lily sat within and peeped out, hearing his voice, and expected him, drawing the young man with her mysterious thread. For the enchantress had forgotten her alarm in the pleasure of conquest, and for her victim she was without ruth or pity.

## V

### AFTER DINNER

'I HEARD,' said Mr. Mitford, when the servants had left the room, 'that Elizabeth Travers was over here to-day. Who saw her when she came?—or was it true——'

A look was exchanged very quickly, almost imperceptibly, by the others round the table, and Nina, who had not yet had time to go away, answered in her little voice, which had still something in it of the shrillness of childhood, 'She was not here, papa.'

'But I heard that she was here,' said Mr. Mitford, in his peremptory tones. He was one of the men who are always ready to suppose that they are being deceived, and that every contradiction must be a lie,—possibly intentional, perhaps only uttered on the spur of the moment, but at all events untrue.

Roger, who knew what was coming, stirred

in his chair with a consciousness that could not quite be concealed; but it was Edmund who replied—

'She was at the Rectory, sir. We saw her mare in front of the gates, as we were going to the railway with Steve.'

'Which of you went in to make her welcome?' the Squire asked.

'I don't think any of us thought of it. Steve had only just time to catch his train.'

'I was not thinking of Steve. What has Steve to do with it? But you two, I suppose, had no train to catch. It was most fraternal, truly beautiful, to walk down with your brother, but it did not, I imagine, occupy all your souls.'

'I don't pretend it occupied much of my soul,' said Roger. He had turned half round on his chair, perhaps out of mere caprice, perhaps that the light might not fall so distinctly on his face.

'And when you saw her there—a fine creature, handsome enough to turn any young fellow's head, and as nice as she's handsome—you forgot all about Stephen, and did your best to make yourself agreeable? Much as I

value family affection,' said the Squire, in the voice of satire which his children dreaded, 'I could forgive that.'

Nina was not clever enough to see what it was about, but she perceived that the situation was strained, and she made a little diversion for the brothers by leaving the table. Mr. Mitford never entered the drawing-room after dinner, so that Nina's departure was accompanied by a little ceremonial which sometimes had the effect of changing a disagreeable subject. She went up to her father, and put her soft little lips to the weather-beaten cheek which he turned carelessly towards her. 'Good-night, papa,' she said.

'Good-night, good-night,' he replied, almost with impatience. This time the diversion was without effect. That Roger should get up to open the door for her seemed to Mr. Mitford a quite unnecessary ceremony; and it must be owned that Roger himself but seldom remembered this homage to womanhood in the person of so familiar and unimportant an object as his little sister. He had to come back from the door, by which he was so much tempted to escape, and take his

chair again, which he did most unwillingly, foreseeing trouble to come.

'Well!' said the Squire. 'How far did you go with her? Or rather, how long did she stay?'

'I told you, sir,' said Edmund, 'that we went with Steve to the railway.'

'Again! what has Steve to do with it?' the father cried.

'So that we saw nothing but the groom with the mare. Her visit was at the Rectory, not here.'

'At the Rectory, and not here!' repeated the Squire, with a contemptuous (and very unsuccessful) mimicry of his son's tone. 'Did I ever say it was here? How could she come here, to a house where there's no woman, to throw herself at your heads? That's what you expect a girl to do, you young fellows nowadays. She went as far as she could in coming to the Rectory. By Jove, when I was your age I should soon have let her see I knew what she meant.'

'You forget, sir,' said Roger, evidently restraining himself with an effort, 'that there is not the slightest reason to suppose—indeed,

that we have not the least right to imagine—Miss Travers's visit to her friend at the Rectory to have anything to do with us.'

'I don't forget, sir,' cried the angry father, 'that you're a puppy and a coxcomb, and that Lizzy Travers is twenty thousand times too good for you.'

This perfectly irrelevant sentiment was delivered with so much heat that Edmund gave his brother an anxious, deprecatory look, to which Roger replied with an indignant frown before he spoke. 'I am convinced of that,' he said.

'Convinced that you mean to let her be carried off before your very eyes! There's that long-shanked simpleton Ray Tredgold: though he's a boy and a fool, he has more sense than you. I saw him at her bridle, assiduous enough, I can tell you, and Tredgold himself settling her stirrup for her. Why weren't you there? What the deuce do you mean by always being out of the way when there's a really good chance for you? And she must have seen you pass under her very nose, taking no notice. A pretty way to treat a lady, and the handsomest woman

in the country, and all the Biglow estate at her apron-strings!'

'I'm very sorry, sir, if you thought us negligent,' said Edmund. 'For my part, I think it would have been very bad taste to interrupt her at that moment. She had just arrived, she was with her particular friend——'

'What,' said Mr. Mitford, with a laugh, 'are you still so soft in that quarter, Ned? To think any woman in the world would prefer Pax Lemesurier to an admirer of the other sex! We all know your sentiments in that quarter, my boy: but women are not such fools as to care for each other's company except when there's nothing better to be got.'

To this neither of the young men made any reply. It is possible that they were themselves of the same opinion, regarding it with blind faith as a sort of mathematical axiom, recognised by everybody and beyond the necessity of proof. But to a man who is angry, and who is relieving his mind on a legitimate subject, there is nothing so exasperating as silence. It is worse than contra-

diction, for it implies disrespect. It implies that he is not worth arguing with, that there is nothing for it but to bear with him, and let the tempest die away.

'You seem to have nothing to say for yourself,' he said, turning to Roger, 'and I don't wonder. But at least you know my opinion. You are acting like a fool, in the first place, and how far it is strictly honourable——'

'Honourable!' exclaimed Roger, turning round suddenly from where he had placed himself with his face in shadow.

'I'm not afraid of you,' said his father, with a laugh. 'Honourable,—that's what I said. According to my old-fashioned code, it's distinctly not honourable to persecute a girl with your attentions at one time, and at another to fling her carelessly off.'

'I have done neither one thing nor the other,' cried Roger, roused to an outburst of indignation, 'nor has any one a right to say so. I have the greatest respect for Miss Travers, and always have had. And if any one but you, sir, ventured to speak so of a lady whom—of a—of a girl who——'

'Do you want me to finish your sentence for you?—of a lady whom you once admired very much, and who is the best match in the country; of a girl who would make a capital mistress to Melcombe, and complete the estate in the most satisfactory way, so that the family would be the better of it for generations. I tell you what, Roger,' said Mr. Mitford, relaxing—'for a quarrel between you and me can lead to nothing agreeable—the thing for you to do is to get the Black Knight out to-morrow, and ride over to see her. She will be quite willing to believe that you prefer getting her all by herself, for the aunt, of course, doesn't count; you can easily elude the aunt. Do this, like a good fellow, and I'll be content.'

Edmund's eyes conveyed a dozen messages while this was being said, but how could his brother receive them, having turned again his shoulder to the light? No answer came for some time out of the shadow. Perhaps the young man was struggling with himself; perhaps it was only reluctance to reply, to meet the softened tone with another contradiction. At last he said abruptly, 'I am

sorry—I can't go to-morrow. I am—otherwise engaged.'

'Engaged! I should like to know what that means,' said the father sharply.

'I've got something else to do,' said Roger. 'I've—various things to do. I've—a number of letters to write. I can't possibly spare to-morrow. It would throw everything into arrears.'

'Well,' said the father, persistently amiable, 'if not to-morrow, let us say next day, or Thursday—at all events, a day this week.'

'I shall be busy all this week,' Roger said, in a sullen tone recognisable by both father and brother. They knew his under lip had set firm, and the somewhat too long upper one had closed down upon it like a vice. Edmund, looking at him fixedly, in the hope that he might glance up and take counsel from his warning eyes, afforded a means to the Squire of giving vent to his renewed wrath.

'What is all that telegraphing about?' he said. 'Ned, you had better mind your own business. You want to advise your brother to be prudent, not to try my patience too far.

Let him alone; he had better be honest and let me know exactly what he means, since we're on the question. If he means to defeat me in my first wish, let him say so, and then we can fight fair.'

'Roger means nothing of the kind, sir,' said Edmund, 'though he may be driven to say so, if you press him so hard. Good heavens, what is the use of talking of what a man means! You know very well that in most cases we mean nothing but just what happens to hit our fancy for the moment. To defeat you, no! I'll be bound for him that is not what he means.'

'Hold your tongue, Ned,' said Mr. Mitford. 'That's all very well for boys and women. I expect I'm talking to a man when I talk to my eldest son. How old is he? Three and thirty, if he's a day. Do you mean to tell me that's an age at which a fellow can go on philandering as if he were still a boy?'

'I'd rather, if it is the same to you,' said Roger, again suddenly shifting his position, and revealing a face very white and obstinate, with a fiery glow under the lowered eyelids, 'that we discussed this matter, father, you

and I, instead of having it talked over like this. Ned means very well, and would be kind if he could, but he doesn't always understand.' After receiving this redding stroke, which is inevitably the recompense of the third party, Edmund drew back a little, involuntarily, from the table, pushing his chair out of the circle of the lamplight. The two faces which were within that round of light stood out like those of actors upon the intimate stage of private life, which is so much more exciting than any play.

'Very well,' said the Squire, 'that's what I say. Let us have it all honest and aboveboard. You know well enough what I want. I want the Biglow estate added on to Melcombe, which is all for your own advantage, not mine. It would not do me any good if it were done to-morrow. And I want a woman that will be a credit to us, that can take the head of the table, as your mother did, and make a fit mistress of a family like ours. The first pretty girl that turns up is not what I want, Roger. You're old enough to know what's what, and not to be run away with by any childish fancy. All these things I find in

Lizzy Travers. She's a fine, handsome creature, she's a woman of sense, and she has got plenty of money, and just the land that is wanted to round off our own. You looked as if you thought so, too, a little while ago. Why, in the name of all that's idiotic, do you call off now, and disappoint her (as I've no doubt you're doing), and defy me?'

Mr. Mitford warmed as he went on; the enumeration of all Elizabeth's advantages fired his blood, and the thought that for some whim, some caprice unworthy of a man, some change of liking, all these advantages might be thrown away, was intolerable to him. He could not but feel that his son must be actuated by something more than mere perversity,—by an undutiful impulse to go against himself and thwart his designs, which were so clearly for the benefit of the family. That sons did so out of mere rebellion, and injured themselves to spite their father, without any other motive, Mr. Mitford thought he knew well. It was one of their leading impulses, he was convinced.

The contrast between this superficial wrath and flow of opposition on one side and the

passion in Roger's face was wonderful. He was quite pale; his eyelids half drawn over his eyes, his nostrils drawn in, his lips set tight. No petulance of contradiction such as his father believed in, but a force of emotion which was full of tragic elements, was in his face. He cleared his throat two or three times before he could get possession of his voice. 'In the first place,' he said, 'Miss Travers's name must be put out of the discussion once for all. We were never more than good friends, she and I. Stop a little' (for Mr. Mitford had given vent to a snort of contempt and the scornful exclamation 'Friends!'). 'You have no right, and I have no right, to speculate upon what she thinks. A woman's mind is her own, I hope, as well as a man's. That's only a small part of the question, sir, I allow; the question is between you and me. If I proposed to a lady and she rejected me, I suppose you would not say *that* was my fault.'

'But I should, sir,' retorted his father; 'certainly I should, in this case. I should say it was your shameful shilly-shally, your would and your wouldn't, your reluctance to

come to the point, that had disgusted the girl, and with good reason; only somehow I've faith in her, and I don't think it has.'

Roger glared at his father with what he thought was indignation on Elizabeth's account. 'I refuse to bring in her name. She has nothing to do with the question,' he cried. 'The question is between you and me, sir, and nobody else has anything to do with it. I never had any such intention as you give me credit for; but even if I once had, as you think, I haven't now. I don't want to bind myself. I've—no desire to marry,' Roger said. He made a slight pause before he said these words, and plunged a sudden glance into the shade where Edmund sat, as if challenging him to interfere; and a sudden flush of colour rose on his own face. He added hastily, 'I hope you don't think I'm capable of changing my mind to annoy you. I cannot deny such an accusation, because it's incredible. You can't think so badly of me, even if in the heat of the moment you say it. But if my mind ever inclined towards *that*, which it didn't, at least it does not now.'

'And you think that's a reason,' cried Mr. Mitford. 'By Jove! You ought to think a little, Roger, what's your *raison d'être.* You've no profession, you never do anything, you're the eldest son. Just because it is unnecessary for you to work for your living, being the eldest son, it's your business to attend to this. You may call me brutal, if you like; perhaps it's brutal, but it's true. This is your share of the duty. If you don't do it——' Mr. Mitford got up from his chair almost violently, pushing it away from the table. Then he paused, and looked at his son from the vantage ground of his height and attitude. 'Whether it's from mere caprice, whether it's for other reasons,'—and here, to Roger's troubled ear, his voice sounded full of meaning,—'whatever is the cause, you had better look to it, my boy. Though you're the eldest son,' said the Squire, turning away, 'please to remember that in our family there's no eldest son, so to speak, further than a parent may please.'

He went away as he spoke, bursting through the door which opened into the drawing-room. Though he had avoided

that way of reaching his own special retirement since little Nina had taken up her abode in it, his excitement was so great that he forgot his usual habit to-night, and a scream from Nina, faintly heard in the noisy shutting of the door, testified to her wonder rather than pleasure at the sight of this unexpected figure pushing through her usually silent rooms. His two sons sat immovable in their astonishment, watching this stormy exit. It was seldom that Mr. Mitford permitted himself to lose his temper, and they stared at each other with looks which were far from comfortable. The Squire was generally very decorous; if he had never sought the confidence and friendship of his boys, at least he had seldom repulsed them, and never threatened. But on this occasion excitement (or was it policy?) had carried him quite out of himself. They heard Nina's frightened little outcry, then a quick and rather angry dialogue, and then the shutting of the distant library door, which indicated that he had entered his own room for the evening. Roger had become very calm, very silent, in the midst of this sensation. 'What do

you suppose *that* means?' he said at last, when the echoes of the alarmed house had died away. 'I did not think my father would have adopted such vulgar methods,' he said.

'He meant nothing,' said Edmund, in his usual *rôle* of peacemaker. 'And you might have temporised a little. You could not have been forced into matrimony at a moment's notice. Why not yield a little, and keep the peace?'

'There has been too much sacrificed to keeping the peace.' Roger got up and began to walk about the room, his figure moving up and down like a shadow outside the circle of the light. 'I can't keep it up,' he cried. 'I cannot go on like this. The best thing for me, if I could but do it, would be to go away.'

'And why not? Why not go to town for a month or two? There's nothing tragical about that, no grand decision involved. Go up for the season, and cut this knot, whatever it is.'

'You speak at your ease,' said the elder brother, looking out of the shadow at Ed-

mund's thoughtful face, in which there was no struggle, only a shade of sympathy and anxiety. Roger was torn by sensations very different,—by passion contending with all the restraints of life, and thought, and better judgment. 'It is an easy matter for you,' he repeated, with a certain bitterness; 'to settle other people's affairs is always the simplest thing in the world.'

'I don't even know what your affairs are,' said the other. 'I suggest no settling; take a moment's pause, as you may so well do. No one can have a word to say, if you start off for town now. It is the moment when everybody is going. And whatever there may be to decide, get it at arm's length, get it in perspective,' Edmund said.

Roger stared at him almost fiercely for an instant, then came back and flung himself down again in his chair. 'Don't insult a man with your artist's jargon,' he said; then changing his tone in a moment, 'That's just what I do, Ned,—that's just what I do too much. I can't get any natural action out of myself for that. My father thinks I mean to cross him. I don't. I see the sense of all

he or you can say, though you drove me mad with your talk about what was suitable. I know it well enough. He's right, and you are right, and nobody knows so well as I do all the trouble that's in it, or how good it would be to take the other way. But,' said Roger, staring into the white heat of the lamp, with eyes that were full of glowing fire —'but——'

Edmund stretched across the table, and laid his hand on his brother's arm. There are moments when the most sympathetic can do nothing, can say nothing, that may not turn to exasperation instead of solace. The touch was all he could venture on. Already both had forgotten the father's threat, if threat it were.

## VI

### NINA

THE drawing-room at Melcombe had a succession of window recesses, or rather projections built out from the level of the room, like little porticoes enclosed with walls, where all the brightness of the sunshine concentrated, and where a silent little reader or thinker might rest unseen, whoever went or came. It was in one of these that Edmund found his sister the next morning. She had appropriated the little nook, which was oblong, with an opening opposite the great window like a doorway into the drawing-room. On the cushioned seat which ran all round Nina had accumulated her treasures. She had a work-basket full of bright-coloured wools and silks, always in disorder, and pieces of work at which she sometimes laboured for half an hour at a time. She had a few books scat-

tered upon the seat: a novel always in course of reading; a book of poetry, about which she was not very particular so long as it was verse; and a volume of that vague morality and philosophy beaten down into a sugared pulp, which has at all times been thought the right thing for young ladies. It need scarcely be said that the little girl never opened it, but it represented the higher literature to her unsophisticated soul. She had what she called her 'drawing things' upon the table beside her, so that in case an inspiration moved she might fly to her pencil, like a heroine in an old-fashioned novel, without loss of time. She never did so, but what did that matter? An old guitar, which Nina had found in a lumber-room, hung by a faded ribbon from the wall, so that she might equally soothe her mind with that, if any sudden pressure of affairs suggested music as the natural relief to an overburdened soul. To be sure, Nina did not know how to play, but that made no difference. Had the necessity existed, no doubt the knowledge would have come.

On the whole, the little thing pleased her-

self much with these simple preparations for every emergency, and as no emergency occurred read her novel in peace, or when there was any bazaar in prospect, for which her married sisters claimed her aid, would seize her crewels and work for a whole twenty minutes. She led a very useless life, much unlike the present habits of high-minded girls. She had nothing to do, and did nothing. She learned nothing. She did not improve her mind. She had no part in the operations of the household. In short, she existed only like one of the flowers in the garden. She loved the guitar, which she called a lute, and the drawing things, and the poetry book, and the crewels, which she called embroidery. These were all accessories to the little part she had to play, but her novels were old-fashioned, and so was her ideal, and she did not know that any more was intended in the constitution of a little girl belonging to a county family. Geraldine and Amy had married, that was true, and entered upon another kind of existence, which Nina supposed, some time or other, she too would have to do. But she did not speculate on that change: it was not

within the range of any near possibilities, and the little mind did not require the stimulus of any such subject for dreams. Lily Ford, in her room which opened on the garden, dreamed all day long,—dreamed with passion, inventing for her future endless pleasures, splendours, and delights; but Nina, in her window-seat, was quite quiescent, pleased with the days as they came. To be sure, Lily was a little older, and her position was not the assured and simple one held by the little lady at the Hall.

'Oh, you are here, Nina,' said Edmund, coming in. He placed himself in the basket-chair, which, though it was well cushioned, always creaked, and disturbed Nina's quiet. 'I thought you might be out, as it is such a fine morning. You don't go out half enough.'

'I have no one to go with, Edmund. It is rather dull always going out alone.'

'So it is. If you would only be a little bolder, Nina, and get upon a horse, you could ride with Roger or me. One of us would always be glad to go.'

This was one of the little habitual things

which Nina knew were said without much meaning. Oh yes, no doubt Edmund meant them when he said them. But his sister was too shy to keep him to his word. She was not so timid as was supposed, and had got, if not upon a horse, yet upon a pony, many times with impunity, and ridden soberly about the park. But the idea that Nina was not bold enough to ride had always been kept up. Though she was so simple, she quite understood this little fiction, and that it was not at all in her *rôle* to call upon her brothers to go out with her ; for little persons like Nina, with all their innocence, often know things which they are not supposed to know.

'Thank you very much, Edmund,' she said. 'I am quite happy here. I am at a very interesting bit in my book. I am not quite sure, but I almost think that Ethelbert is going to turn out Lord Wilfrid's son, which would quite explain the sympathy that Emily felt for him the first time she saw him. It is the most interesting book——'

'Perhaps you would rather I went away, and let you unravel the mystery,' Edmund said.

'Oh no; oh, dear, no!' exclaimed Nina, putting down the volume upon its face. 'I would a thousand times rather talk to you. And there's something I want to ask you, Edmund. What was papa so angry about last night?'

'Last night? Oh, it was nothing, my dear. One of us displeased him. Either Roger or I said something that brought on a discussion; nothing you need trouble your little head about.'

'But I do trouble my head. How can I help it? I know it was Roger, and not you. I heard loud voices, sounding quite angry, and then I went and sat close to the door.'

'Do you think that was quite right, Nina? It is not the thing for a lady to do.'

'Oh, I was not *listening!*' cried Nina. 'I did not look through the keyhole, or anything like that. I only sat near the door. And then I heard papa scolding,—oh, scolding! worse than he ever did, even at Geraldine. I couldn't help hearing. Then he bounced in when I was sitting there, never expecting it. What made him come through the drawing-room last night? I started up

as if I had been shot, and then he—said something disagreeable to me.'

'I am afraid you deserved it this time,' said Edmund, shaking his head. 'You should not sit near the door; you might hear something that you were not intended to hear.'

'Oh, that is exactly why——' Then she stopped short in confusion. 'I mean,' she said, looking as if about to cry, while Edmund continued to shake his head, 'that I never know anything—about anything! And why shouldn't I find out, if I can? It is so dull at night, sitting all by one's self here.'

'I ought to have thought of that,' said Edmund; 'of course it is dull. I'll make a point of coming in and sitting with you in future, Nina, if you will promise not to sit near the door.'

'Oh, thank you very much, Edmund,' said Nina. She was aware that this promise was about as much to be depended upon as that of riding with her, if she could not ride; but repression had taught this little creature wisdom, and she accepted the offer as a benevolent form. 'It was about Roger getting married,' she said, nodding her head in her turn.

'What do you know about that? You must not say a word of anything of the kind. Roger is not going to be married.'

'I know,' said Nina. 'I think I know more than you do, or papa either, but I am sure I would never tell.'

'You—know about Roger? Nonsense, my dear little girl, you must not even think on such a subject. There is nothing for you to know.'

'Oh, but there is,' said Nina, once more nodding her head. 'I knew first from what Simmons said. And then I rode round by the West Lodge, and there I saw.'

'I thought that you said a minute ago you would never tell.'

'Not to any one else,' replied the girl, 'but you and I are just the same as himself, Edmund. I would not tell papa for the world. Did you ever see Lily Ford? I think she is beautiful. There are not very many beautiful people like women in books. Perhaps she is not quite up to that, but she is the beautifulest I ever saw.'

'Oh, nonsense,' said Edmund, endeavouring to laugh the revelations off. 'Prettier

than Geraldine? You couldn't mean that: and "beautifulest" is not a word.'

'It is what I mean,' said Nina. 'Geraldine? Oh, Geraldine!—she was just Geraldine, nicer than anybody. It did not matter in the least whether she was beautiful or not. But Lily Ford is like somebody in a book. I once read a poem about a beautiful maiden in a garden, don't you know? She is like that. She walks out among the flowers, and she never goes anywhere else except to church, and Mrs. Simmons says she doesn't know what her parents are thinking of; and then they always say something about Roger, but they don't let me hear what they say.'

'You hear a great deal too much, I think,' cried Edmund. 'Nina, you ought to know it is not fit for a young lady to listen to what the servants say.'

'Who am I to speak to, then?' asked Nina, the tears rising to her eyes. 'Am I never to hear anything about anybody?'

'My dear child,' said Edmund, 'I see how wrong we have all been. It is a shame that you should be driven to that, you poor little girl among all us men. But there is always

the Rectory, Nina, when you're dull,' he hastily said.

'Oh, I'm not at all dull. I like home the best: but I can't help thinking about what is going on. I like to ride past the West Lodge, the garden is always so pretty. And when it is warm you can look in at the window and see Lily sitting at work. I believe she's making some things for me,' the girl added, with a certain sense of pride and proprietorship in Lily. 'Roger is there almost every day.'

'Nina! for Heaven's sake, don't go on with these revelations. All this information is quite out of your way. If Roger knew, he would be very angry; he would think you were watching him.'

'So I was,' admitted Nina quietly, 'more or less; for I wanted to know. When you hear all sorts of things said of your brother, and especially when you see that they don't want you to hear what they say——'

'You must be removed out of the hands of those servants,' said Edmund. 'Don't you know the difference between educated and uneducated people, Nina? You have no

right to listen to them. You don't hear people of our own class——'

'Oh, Edmund! why, everybody does it; not about Roger before us, but about others. The Tredgolds, and even Pax. Pax was saying the other day that Amy Tredgold went out a great deal too much when she was in London, and that our Stephen——'

'Don't say any more, please. I daresay we all talk about our neighbours more than is necessary. But the servants,—you must not listen to the servants. As for Roger, he would be very angry. You must know, if you heard anything at the door,—oh, Nina!—that this was not what my father was speaking to Roger about.'

'No,' said Nina, after a pause, fixing her eyes upon her brother as if there might be a great deal more to say; but though her eyes were eloquent she spoke no further word. For the next half hour or more Edmund kept his place, and made conversation for his little sister. He did his duty manfully, using every endeavour to make her forget the subject on which she had herself been the speaker. He told her about the books he had been read-

ing, giving her at considerable length the plot of a new novel, with a description of the leading characters and their actions. He told her about some discoveries in which the fairy tales of science, the beautiful part of research, came in as they do not always come in, even in its most beneficent spheres. He told her about the last great traveller who had made a track across the black continent. To all of which Nina responded with a little swift interrogative Yes? with a No! of wonder, with the milder Indeeds, and Oh, Edmunds, of attention. She gave him her ear devoutly for one thing as much as the other, and laughed, and clasped her hands, and looked astonished and dismayed, just when it was right for her to show these sentiments. But when at last he got up and left her, Edmund was by no means sure that Nina had not seen through him all the time, that she had not been quite aware of his purpose, and laughing in her little sleeve at his attempts to beguile her. He thought to himself, as he went away, considerably exhausted with his exertions and with the uncertainty of having at all succeeded in them, that he would never

undervalue little Nina's intelligence again. What she had told him was not new to him. He had known very well where Roger was going when he turned along the west road from the station. He had understood what his brother meant when he betrayed the uneasiness of his troublous passion in talk which pretended to be abstract. But Nina's little matter-of-fact story, her glimpses into the conclusions of the servants, added a pang of reality to the visionary picture which Edmund had made to himself. As it was in Edmund's fancy, it might have gone on for months or years before coming to any crisis; but in a moment, by the illumination of all these sharp little commonplace lights, he saw how immediate and how urgent the danger was.

There had been in Edmund's mind a lingering incredulity, the conviction of a man in his sound senses that love, in the gravest sense of the word, for the keeper's daughter was after all an impossibility; that it was a freak of fancy rather than a serious passion which had occupied his brother. How in Ford's cottage, within the ken of the father and mother, amid all the homely circum-

stances of their life, Roger should have been so fatally enthralled it seemed impossible to conceive; and by Lily Ford, the little half-educated, conventional enchantress, with all the sentimentalities of her boarding-school about her, her artificial superiority, her little romantic graces! If she had been an unconscious, dutiful, rustic maiden, helpful and sweet, Edmund thought he could have understood it better. But for a man who had known and liked, if not loved, Elizabeth Travers, who had owed something of his development to Pax—that he should throw his life away for Lily Ford! The wonder of it took away Edmund's breath; yet he had no resource but to believe it now. And what was worst of all was that he could think of no way of helping Roger. His father's threats, his inquiry in respect to that other matter so plainly impossible, the mere suggestion of which was an insult and injury to the lady—so much too good, Edmund said to himself indignantly, for any one of them at their best—would of course throw Roger more and more into his fatal entanglement, and make all deliverance hopeless. And

there seemed nothing that any one could do. Remonstrance was futile ; the time for it was past ; and what advantage could there be in pointing out the frightful drawbacks, the miseries, involved in such a connection to the unfortunate who saw them all, and yet could not resist the infatuation which was stronger than reason ? It was not thus, perhaps, that Edmund would have regarded a love which was superior to all obstacles, had it not approached himself so nearly. He realised in the present case with a heavy force of fact, more telling than imagination, what it would be to have Lily Ford the mistress of his father's house.

In the perplexity of his mind he found himself following instinctively a path which he had perhaps trod oftener than any other during the whole course of his life, the path that led to the Rectory. He knew that Pax at her window would see him coming, and would divine that he was in trouble, and that his errand to her was the selfish one of unburdening his soul. How often had he unburdened his soul to Pax, in every kind of embarrassment and distress !—even when the

disturbing element was herself, when he had so loved her in her full maturity, so hotly wanted to marry her, so insisted that the obstacles were of no importance in comparison. He still loved Pax devotedly in a way, but the thought of his boyish projects in respect to her sometimes brought the hot colour to his face, sometimes overwhelmed him with a desire to laugh. It had become ludicrous, impossible, as no doubt it had been always, had he had eyes to see. The recollection of it came strongly back to him as he ran up the familiar stairs, and went in unannounced, with a little tap at the door. Perhaps she thought of it, too, as she turned half round to greet him, holding out her hand with a 'Well, Edmund!' looking at him in the tall, narrow mirror which stood between the two side windows, and which was always the medium through which she contemplated her intimate visitors. Pax was of opinion that she understood people better when she first saw their faces and unconscious expression in this old-fashioned greenish glass.

'Well!' he said, throwing himself down upon a chair opposite to her. 'I'm out of

heart and out of humour, and as usual I've come to you to be consoled.'

'That's quite natural,' said Pax. 'What is it about?'

'I can't tell you—everything,' cried the young man. And then he took up a piece of work which lay on the table, and began to examine it gravely, as if he knew all about it. And so, indeed, he did; for Pax kept a piece of work by her, for state occasions, for the afternoon when people called, which made slow progress, and had no connection with the big work-basket, always overflowing, which stood on the other side of her chair. 'You were at this leaf, or thereabouts, last time I was on the verge of suicide,' he said, with a laugh.

'And I shall be at another leaf next time,' Pax answered calmly. 'There is just enough of the pattern to keep me going till I deliver you over into the hands of your wife.'

'My wife! I shall never have one, Pax.'

'Not till you are married,' said Miss Lemesurier. 'But I don't suppose that is what troubles you now.'

He made no answer for some time, and

then he burst forth suddenly, 'I don't think it's good for Nina to be all alone as she is. That little thing is far sharper than any of us think.'

'I am glad,' said Pax, 'that you have found that out.'

'She ought not to be left to the servants, to pick up the gossip of the house.'

'I am very glad,' said Pax, 'that you have found that out. I hope your father sees it, too.'

'Oh, my father,' Edmund said impatiently, conscious all at once that not Roger, but the Squire, was the cause of all his anxieties, for surely he ought to have known better, if anybody should.

'And I don't see how it is to be remedied unless one of you were to marry.'

'To marry!' Edmund exclaimed again, and there suddenly gleamed upon him another vision of Lily Ford in the chief place at home, training, restraining, his little sister. A flush of angry colour came over his face. 'You are very keen upon marriages,' he cried, with an instinctive endeavour to give a prick in return. 'You used not to be so, if I remember right.'

Pax looked into the mirror, and saw herself seated there, mature and motherly, while the young man, flung into his chair in languor and discontent, sat gloomy before her. She uttered an involuntary thanksgiving within herself. If I had been such a fool! she thought, and thanked Heaven: then spoke sedately. 'For right marriages always—for wrong never,' she said, with emphasis. 'Come, I know that's what you are upset about.'

'I have no right to be upset,' he said. 'I suppose I've nothing to do with it. Am I my brother's keeper? Probably he is better able to judge than I am, and I'm a meddling fool to think I could interfere.'

Pax raised her eyes and looked at him seriously, but she did not help him out, and he sat pulling her work about, snipping at stray threads as if that had been the most important occupation in the world; then he suddenly tossed it from him, nearly overturning the light table.

'I should have thought,' he cried angrily, 'that you would have known all about it. Here is one of the storms that are periodical

in our house,—my father raging, and Roger going to the devil.'

'No, no,' said Pax, 'not so bad as that.'

'What do you call not so bad? He might be bad and do less harm. Imagine Lily Ford at Melcombe, the lady of the house!'

'Has it gone so far?' said Pax, in a tone of alarm. 'You ought not to speak so to me, Edmund, about less harm—but still I know what you mean. I can't think it's so bad as that.'

'Can you think of my brother, then, as a scoundrel?' cried the young man, changing his view in a moment, as the caprice of his troubled mind suggested. Then he came to his senses in the relief of having thus disburdened himself. 'I fear,' he said, 'it has gone as far as that. I don't see what else can come. Roger is not a fellow to—he is not a man that could—— You know what I mean, Pax. He is too good, and too tender-hearted, and too honourable. He could neither deceive a woman nor desert her, even if he wanted to.'

'Does he want to?' Pax paused a moment, not expecting any answer to her question;

then she said slowly, 'There is still one way out of it: there is the girl herself.'

'The girl herself!' Edmund cried, with unmeasured astonishment and almost contempt.

'She is in a very artificial position; but she is a natural, silly little thing, with a will of her own; when that is the case there is never any telling,' Pax in her wisdom said.

## VII

### MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

On the same morning a consultation of a very different kind was going on at the West Lodge. The scene was the little parlour which to poor Roger had been a place of fatal enchantment. It bore, perhaps, a different aspect in the morning, but it is doubtful if any circumstances,—even the chill daylight with all its revelations, even Mrs. Ford in the midst of her morning's work, with all the common accessories of household labour about her, —could now have affected the mind of the lover. Perhaps if at the first he had seen the mother on her knees 'doing' the grate, while Lily in her pretty dress, not fit even to be touched by those grimy fingers, stood by and looked on, the contrast might have affected his imagination; but who could tell? He might have found it only an accentuation of

the wonder how out of so homely a soil such a flower could have grown. To the chief actors themselves there was nothing in the least remarkable in the situation. Mrs. Ford on her knees before the hearth, with a brush in her hands and the glow of exertion on her face, had paused, looking up from her work to speak, while Lily stood by in the brown velveteen which had been her winter dress, and which, to do her justice, she had made herself, with pretty white frills round the hands which were free from any trace of labour, a few early primroses pinned upon her breast, and her silky hair shining in the sun. The glass door was open, the sunshine streaming in, the garden ablaze with those crocuses of which the keeper's wife had boasted, the little room all glorified by the light, which, however, at the same time remorselessly showed all those poverties of over-decoration and vulgarity of ornament of which its inmates were unconscious. Mrs. Ford was making an appeal which was almost impassionate, and which suited very well with her attitude, if not with her occupation, while Lily listened somewhat impatient, very de-

cided in her adverse opinion, pulling the threads unconsciously out of a scrap of linen which she held in her hands.

'My pet,' said Mrs. Ford, 'it's time to think serious, if ever you thought serious in your life. I'm dead frightened, and that's the truth. I've always looked, I don't deny it, for a 'usband for you as could give you a different 'ome from this. We've done our best, your father and me, to make it a nice 'ome. We've done a deal for you, Lily, though maybe you don't see it. It's not a place now for the likes of you, brought up a lady, and naturally looking for things as was never wanted by him or me. But still we've done a deal more than most folks approved of our doing; we've done the most we could.'

'Yes, yes,' said Lily impatiently, 'what is the use of going over all this again, mother? I never said you hadn't been awfully good.'

'Well, I don't mean to say *that*,' resumed Mrs. Ford, drying her eyes with her apron. She was apt to be tearful when she insisted on Lily's excellences, or humbly put forth her own attempts to do justice to them. 'But we've done what we could, and I've always

hoped for a 'usband as could do more, and that I won't deny.'

'Well, mother!' said Lily again.

'But, dear,' cried the keeper's wife, 'you mustn't look too high! Oh, Lily, you mustn't look too high! When Mr. Roger first came here I was a bit flattered; that I don't deny. I felt as if it was a great compliment. Him to come in quite friendly like, and take a chair, and talk to you and me. It was not as if it had been talking to your father about them things as men can go on about for hours. Senseless things, *I* think, but then that's their way. And that he should be taken up with you was natural, and asking questions, for you were his mother's pet, there's not a doubt of that. I was flattered like, I won't deny it. But since Christmas I've took fright, Lily. I've got more and more frightened every day. I've tried my best to say as you were busy, as you were out,—any excuse I could think of.'

'Thank you, mother.'

'You would thank me if you thought a bit. Lily, you don't know the world; if you were as old as me, you would know that nothing good ever comes of a gentleman visit-

ing in a poor 'ouse. He may mean no harm, and she may mean no harm, but it comes to harm in spite of 'em both.'

'Mother!' exclaimed Lily, with great indignation, 'how dare you speak like that to me! Harm! Do you think I'm one of the poor creatures that forget themselves, that get into danger and trouble,—me! If you think that of me, I wonder you don't turn me out of your house.'

'Oh, Lily!' cried the anxious mother. She gazed at the girl for a moment with hands uplifted, then turned round hastily and addressed herself to the grate with great fervour of exertion, making her brush ring into all the corners. After a minute or two of this active work Mrs. Ford turned round again. 'You put me to silence and you put me to shame,' she said, rising from her knees. 'You've got learning enough and sense enough to get the better of a dozen like me: but you didn't ought to, Lily, however things are, for I'm your mother, and that's more than learning, or foreign languages, or playing the pianny,—ay, or even taking views.'

'Mother, of course it is,' said the girl. 'I

never would have been nasty to you if you hadn't been nasty to me—supposing for a moment that I was like one of the victims in a story-book, and that harm of that description could ever happen to me!'

Mrs. Ford accepted Lily's kiss with a tearful smile. 'Hold off the brush,' she said, 'or it'll make a mark on you. Oh, Lily, my pet, you're never nasty to me, — only I'm silly about you and I take everything to heart. And as for Mr. Roger—no, I ain't easy in my mind about Mr. Roger. I can't say I am, for it wouldn't be true.'

'Why, what could Roger do?' said the girl, with a triumphant smile. 'Nothing but what I like, you may be sure.'

'That may be, or that mayn't be,' replied Mrs. Ford, shaking her head; 'but what I'm thinking of is his father, Lily. His father, he can do just what he pleases. He can turn us out of this house, which is the nicest I ever was in for its size, and where I'd like to end my days. He could turn your father out of his place. He can hunt us all out of the parish, away from everybody we know. Oh, you think nobody could do that? But you're

mistaken, Lily. The Squire can do whatever he wants to do. It's awful power for one man, but he can. I have heard say he can leave all his money away from his sons, if they don't please him, and that's what frightens me. Oh, Lily, Mr. Roger, he's too grand; he's not the 'usband I'd choose for you.'

'Too grand,—nobody's too grand,' said the girl; and then she laughed. 'For that matter, your favourite Mr. Witherspoon thinks a deal more of the difference between himself and the keeper than Mr. Roger does. A fine scientific gardener,—oh, that's a great deal more grand than the young Squire.'

'Lily, Lily! there you are, always laughing at the steady young man that could give you a nice home, and furnish it nicely, and keep a servant, and everything. That's what would please me. Better than us, but not so much better that he would throw your father and mother in your face, with a good trade that he could carry anywhere. Oh, that is the kind of man for me. All the masters in the world couldn't frighten that one, they couldn't do him no harm. He's sure of a place somewhere else, if he has to leave here. Squire

may fret as he likes, he can't do no harm to him. Oh, Lily, if it was me——'

'And how are ye the day, Miss Lily? and did ye like the sparrygrass?' cried the girl, with an imitation of the gardener's Scotch, 'Oh, mother, how you can like that man! He may be nice enough, and respectable enough, and all that, but he's not a gentleman,' Lily said, with great dignity, drawing herself up.

'And that's what I like him for,' replied her mother.

Lily gave Mrs. Ford a look of mingled indignation and superiority. 'I shall never have anything to say to a man who is not a gentleman,' she said.

'Oh, goodness gracious me!' the mother cried.

Neither to Mrs. Ford's exclamation nor to her attitude of despair did Lily pay any attention. She seated herself at the table, opened a little fancy box in which were her thimble and scissors, and drew towards her the needlework she was doing for Nina at Melcombe. It was a work which went on slowly, subject to many interruptions, but still it was the

occupation to which she sat down morning after morning, when the grate was done and the fire lit. The fire was now blazing up brightly, and everything was cheerful within and out: the crocuses all expanding under the sunshine, the same brightness flooding in at the open door, the brisk little fire modifying what sharpness there still might linger in the March air. The only shadow in this brilliant little spot was Mrs. Ford, standing on the other side of the table, with her black brush in one hand and her broom in the other, disconsolately leaning upon that latter implement, and looking at her daughter with troubled eyes. Lily had taken her seat opposite the window. She had laid out a pretty mass of white muslin and lace upon the table; her graceful person, her shining head, the flowers on her bosom, all harmonious and delightful, made the picture perfect. If her features wanted regularity, who could pause upon that point, in the general radiance of beauty and health and satisfaction that shone about her? In short, who could take that beauty to pieces, or question which part of it was more or less near perfection, who had ever fallen under the

spell of her presence? Six months ago Lily had been conscious of that spell. She had been very willing to exercise it if it existed, and fully and fervently believed that the something which would certainly come would be something to her advancement and glory. But still it had all been vague. She had not known what kind of fly would stumble into her shining web. When Mr. Witherspoon, the gardener, appeared her heart had fluttered; she had for a little while supposed that he might be, if not the hero, at least the master, of her fate. But Lily's ideas had much enlarged since those days. She had learned what triumph was. Visions very different from that of the gardener's two-storied, blue-slated house had passed before her eyes. That man of science who condescended to love her, and wished to improve her mind, was very different from the young Squire, who found all her little ignorances half divine. Roger, with his straight, well-dressed figure, standing up as she had seen him first, asking, was this Lily? stroking his moustache as he looked at her, had been, in comparison with the solid gardener, romance and beauty em-

bodied to the ambitious girl, who, suddenly enlightened by this revelation, held to the certainty that no man who was not a gentleman could ever satisfy her. And since then —well, since then—— As she mused a conscious smile lighted up her face; since then perhaps other and still more splendid revelations had come.

'What are you laughing to yourself at?' said Mrs. Ford, who sometimes felt a prick of exasperation even with her darling. 'You're thinking of Mr. Roger, and that he'll make a lady of you; but suppose his father leaves everything away from him? Oh, Lily, you don't know what it is, trying to be a lady, and nothing to do it with. It's worse, a deal worse, than living poor and thinking nothing different, like we do.'

'Mr. Roger!' cried Lily, with a toss of her head. 'One would think there wasn't a gentleman in the world but Mr. Roger, to hear you speak.'

'There's none as comes here, at least,' Mrs. Ford said.

The conscious smile grew upon Lily's face. It seemed on the eve of bursting into a laugh

of happy derision. But she made no reply in words; indeed, she bent down her face to hide the smile which she could not conceal, and did not intend to explain.

'Leastways, not as I know,' her mother continued, with a vague suspicion passing like a cloud over her mind. She gave a moment to a hurried, frightened reflection on this subject, and then said to herself that it was impossible. Why, Lily was never out of her sight, never away from her, never wished to be away, or take her freedom, like other girls. Lily was quite satisfied to be always within her mother's shadow. Mrs. Ford felt a glow of happy pride as she remembered this, and it drove all her doubts and painful anticipations out of her mind. 'My pet,' she said, 'there's a many things to be thought of afore you marry, and in particular if you marry out of your own kind. I don't call Mr. Witherspoon that, or even young Mr. Barnes, or Harry Gill, though he's as well off as can be.'

'A gardener, a farmer, and a horse-dealer!' exclaimed Lily, letting out her suppressed laugh, but with an *éclat* of de-

rision in it. 'What fine gentlemen, to be sure!'

'Oh, Lily!' cried the troubled mother. 'There's not one of them but would be a grand match for Ford the keeper's daughter. Now listen a bit to me. As far as that you can go, and none of them would say you nay when you had your father and your mother up of an evening, or to sit with you when you were lonely, or have a bit of dinner at Christmas, or that. They mightn't be fond to see us too often, but they'd never say a word so far as that goes.'

'I should hope not,' said Lily, growing red. '*My* father and mother! If they were not proud to see you, I should know the reason why.'

'Oh, my sweet! I always knew as you'd be like that. But, Lily,' continued Mrs. Ford, with bated breath, 'what if it was the Hall? I've been through the rooms once with Mrs. Simmons, when she was in a good humour because of the game. Oh, Lily! I felt as if I should take off my shoes. I'd no more have sat down on one of those golden chairs, or touched the sofas, except, may be,

with a soft clean duster, than I'd have flown. I couldn't have done it. Velvet beneath your feet, and velvet on the very footstools, and you couldn't turn round but you'd see yourself on every side. I declare, I was nigh saying to Mrs. Simmons, "Who's that vulgar, common person as you're showing round, and what's the likes of her got to do there?" and it was just me.'

'Well, mother,' said Lily coldly. She held her head very high, and there was a crimson flush on her face. The view was, no doubt, new to her, and wounded her pride, perhaps also her heart, deeply. She spoke with a little difficulty, her throat dry with sudden passion.

'Oh, my darling child, supposing as you was to lead Mr. Roger on, and let him come and come, till he hadn't no control of himself no more; and that's what it's coming to. And supposing as it come to that as you was married. And supposing the Squire didn't make no objection, but gave in to him because you was so pretty,—as has happened before now. Lily, what would you do with your father and your mother then?' asked

the good woman solemnly. 'Would you have us up to one o' your grand dinners, and set us down at your grand table, with Mr. Larkins, as has always been such a friend to your father, to wait? It makes me hot and cold all over just to think of it. Your father always says Mr. Larkins, he's such a good friend; and suppose he was standing up behind my chair to help me to the potatoes, or pour Ford out a glass of beer. Lord, I'd sink through the floor with shame, and so would your father.'

Poor Lily had been foolish in many of her little ways, but she was miserable enough while she listened to this speech to make up for much. She saw the scene in her quick imagination, and she too shivered: the terrible Squire at the end of the table, and delicate little Miss Nina, and all the ladies and gentlemen; and in the midst of them her father and mother, and Larkins grinning over their shoulders! Lily's own heart sank at the thought of how she would herself come through if exposed to that ordeal; but father and mother! She sat bolt upright in the keen pang of her wounded pride, for it

was all true; it was true, and more. She felt as her mother said, as if she too, in shame and mortification, would sink through the floor.

'If it should ever come to that,' she said, with a gasp, 'I should like to see—any one that would dare to look down upon father and you.'

'Oh, my pet, I knew you would feel like that; but how could you stop it, Lily? You couldn't stop it, my dear. You would have to get all new servants, for one thing, and they would turn out just as bad as the old ones. There's no way as you could work it, my pretty,—no way!'

'If it was like that, I should give up all company altogether, and you should come and see me in my own room, where nobody could interfere,' declared Lily. But then the strain of her tone relaxed, the hot colour faded, and she laughed with a tremulous mirth in which there was an evident sense of escape. 'It might have come to that once, mother,' she said, 'but not now. No, not now, —I know better now. If it was Windsor Castle he had to offer, instead of Melcombe

Hall, I wouldn't have him. Don't you worry yourself about that.'

Mrs. Ford gave a gasp of amazement. She had meant to make the drawback very clear, but she had not intended to be thus taken at her word. That Lily would weep and protest that no such indignities should ever be possible in *her* house, be it ever so splendid, was what she meant, but no more.

'Lily,' she said, 'Lord bless you, I didn't mean you were to give up what was for your happiness on account of me.'

'Do you think I'd let people look down upon and slight my mother?' asked Lily. 'Besides,' she added quickly, 'he's dull; he is not the least entertaining; he is no fun, mother. There are some that are far better fun, and just as good gentlemen, and never would behave like that.'

Mrs. Ford was deeply disappointed, in spite of her evil prognostications. 'Well, Lily,' she said, 'I'm glad you're so reasonable. I can't help feeling for Mr. Roger, poor dear, but if it's to be Witherspoon, after all——'

'Witherspoon!' ejaculated Lily, with an accent of scorn; but who it was, or where she had seen any gentleman who was not Roger, not all her mother's importunities could make her say.

## VIII

### PRIMOGENITURE

THE atmosphere of a house in which there is a family quarrel is always affected, however limited may be the extent of the quarrel. In the present case there were but two of the family involved: but they were the principal persons in the house. Not a word was said about it at the breakfast-table, from which, indeed, the Squire had disappeared before Roger was visible, to the relief of everybody concerned, nor at lunch, where they met with more civility than usual, saying 'Good-morning' to each other with averted eyes. But at both these meals the situation was very obvious, the air stifling the other members of the party, embarrassed to a degree which was absurd. Why could not they talk in their usual tone, or keep at least an appearance of ease? Why was it that a

subject could not be kept up, but was dropped instantaneously as soon as, with two feeble remarks, it had been brought into spasmodic being? How was it that all the ordinary events which furnish table-talk seemed for this moment to have ceased to be?

Edmund did his best, labouring against the passive resistance of the two silent figures who sat at the head and foot of the table, and made no contribution to the conversation. Every subject, however, that he could think of appeared to have some connection with forbidden matters. As Nina's support was of a very ineffectual kind, and she was too much in awe of her father to hazard many observations of her own, the result was very unsuccessful. It was so feeble, indeed, that the servants gave each other looks of intelligence, and Larkins stationed himself in a pose of defence behind his master's chair. If there were to be any split in the house, which was a thing the servants' hall had foreboded for some time past, Mr. Larkins felt very sure on which side policy and safety lay. The air was thus affected throughout the house. It diffused a

kind of general irritation for which nobody could account. Even little Nina spoke very sharply to her maid, and Edmund kicked away the unoffending dog who got between his feet as he left the dining-room. They were angry, they did not know why. And Mrs. Simmons had all the maids in the kitchen in tears before she had done with them that day. The belligerents themselves were the only persons unaffected by this general tendency. They were cool to an exasperating degree, polite, making remarks full of solemnity and high composure. These remarks were addressed to Edmund, who figured as the general public. 'What do you think of the weather, Edmund? It was sharp frost last night, Larkins tells me, but I hope you'll be able to get a good run to-morrow.' 'Did you notice if the wind was veering to the west, Ned? I rather think we are going to have a deluge.' These were the sorts of observations they made. Had the mind of Edmund been free to remark what was going on, he would no doubt have been struck by the comic aspect of the situation; but unfortunately in such circum-

stances, though there is always a great deal that is very funny, the persons about are too deeply concerned to get the good of the ludicrous side.

Edmund was much startled to find himself called into the library after that uncomfortable meal. His father made a sign to him to close the door, and pointed to a chair near his writing-table. 'I don't often make such demands on your time,' he said. 'I suppose you can give me ten minutes, Ned?'

'As long as you like, sir,' he said promptly, but with some surprise.

'Oh, as long as I like! It's not exactly for pleasure. Edmund, perhaps I was a little peremptory with your brother last night.'

'I think so, sir,' said Edmund, 'if you will let me say so. You've always been so good to us. That makes us feel it the more when you are a little——'

'Ill-tempered, unjust. I know that's what you meant to say.'

'I meant only what you yourself said, father,—peremptory. Roger is not in a happy state of mind, to begin with.'

'He has no great reason to be in a happy state of mind. I know he's after some villainy. I've heard it from several people.'

'No villainy,' said Edmund quickly. 'Whoever says so doesn't know Roger.'

'That's the most lenient interpretation,' his father remarked; 'otherwise folly, madness, something too wild to name.' The Squire paused, and looked his second son almost imploringly in the face. 'Can't you do anything, Ned? You two are very good friends, and you've a great deal of sense. There are times when I've thought you rather a milksop, not much like the rest of us, but I never denied you had a great deal of sense.'

'Thank you, sir. I'm afraid I am rather —a milksop, as you say. My kind of sense doesn't seem to make much impression.'

'It would, upon your brother, if you would speak plainly to him. A young fellow can do that better than an old one. They think we're preaching, they think we don't understand. That's a good joke,' said Mr. Mitford, with a short laugh, turning his eyes as it were inwardly upon his own experience. 'But the

fact is you all of you think so. Persuade him that he's a fool, and get him to understand,' continued the father, looking into Edmund's eyes with a steady stare, 'that what I said was no vain threat. I mean it, every word.'

'You mean it, sir?' said Edmund, with a look of surprised inquiry. So little impression had the threats of last night made upon him that he did not even remember what they were.

Mr. Mitford's face flushed into an angry redness. 'I mean it, and I hope *you* don't intend to be insolent too. I mean, sir, that there's no eldest son in our family. I can make whomever I please the eldest son; and by Jove, if Roger makes an infernal fool of himself, as he seems to intend to do——'

'I suppose it's quite legitimate as an argument,' Edmund said reflectively.

'Legitimate! What do you mean by legitimate? It is no argument; it's a plain statement of what I mean to do.'

'If there was any hope that it would be effectual,' Edmund went on; 'but my opinion is it would have exactly the contrary effect; and to threaten what one doesn't mean to carry out——'

'Do you want to drive me out of my senses?' cried the Squire. 'I never threaten what I don't mean to perform. Take care you don't spoil your own prospects too. As certainly as I sit here, if Roger takes his own way in this, I shall take mine, and wipe him out of the succession as I wipe off this fly, without hesitation or—compunction,' he continued, drawing a long breath.

'No,' said Edmund, with a deprecatory smile. His heart quaked, but he would not even appear to believe. 'No, no,—you are angry, you take perhaps too grave a view; but wipe him out—Roger? No, father; no, no.'

'None of your no, no's to me, sir,' cried the Squire. He had a way of imitating his antagonist's tone mockingly when he was angry, but he had not the talent of a mimic. 'I say what I mean, and not a word more than I mean. If you cannot do any more for your brother, make him understand that I am in earnest, and you may do some good.'

'I should only do a great deal of harm. I should put him beside himself.'

'Then there will be two of us,' said the

Squire,' with a grim smile. 'If that's all you're good for, I'm sorry I asked you, and you may as well go. But take care, my boy,' he added, rising as Edmund rose. 'Take care that you don't spoil your own prospects too.'

Edmund left his father's room with something of the feeling of a man who has been listening to some statement of important possibilities delivered in an imperfectly understood language. He made a great many efforts to elucidate these unfamiliar words, and make out what they meant. They were as strange to him as if they had been in Hungarian or Russian. 'Wipe Roger out of the succession;' 'No eldest sons in our family;' 'Take care you don't spoil your own prospects too,'—the most recondite of Slav dialects could not have been more difficult to understand. The constitution of the family was a matter entirely beyond argument to this young Englishman. In the abstract, he was ready enough to argue out any question. The law, as interpreted in different countries under different theories, bore no especial sacredness for him, that it might not be fully

criticised, questioned, or condemned. He was quite willing to discuss the hereditary principle in general, both its drawbacks and its advantages. But to think of Roger disinherited, of himself, perhaps, preferred, gave him an intolerable sensation which it was impossible to endure. Roger wiped out of the succession!—his brother, whom nothing could keep from being the head of the house, no change in respect to the estates, no arbitrary settlement; his elder brother *Roger!* There was an incredibility about it which brought an angry laugh to Edmund's lips, yet struck him like a sharp blow, like a sudden warning stroke, awakening him to dangers unthought of, to the unreality of everything about him. It was as if, walking along a solid, well-known road, he had suddenly come to an unexpected yawning precipice, as if he had all at once seen some volcanic crater open at his feet. Nothing less than such metaphors could explain the sudden shock, the tremendous danger. Roger wiped out of the succession, his own prospects—his *prospects*, good heavens!—of disinheriting his brother, of being preferred in Roger's place!

This made the blood rush to his brain, singing and ringing in his ears. He to disinherit Roger! Just in that way the warmest champion of equal inheritances would probably pause. Abstract justice is one thing; it may be that children have a right to an equal division of their father's possessions; it may be that they have no right at all to another man's property, even though he may be their father; but for one to displace the other, to take advantage of the father's weakness and grasp his inheritance,—this, to a generous spirit, looks like the worst kind of robbery. Edmund felt himself degraded, injured, by the very thought. He recalled his father's words. They could not mean this or that; there must be a different signification to them. If there were only a dictionary of human perversities by which he could find it out! He took a long walk upon it, which is so good a way of clearing the head, but light did not come to him. His father was an honourable man. He was a good father; he had never done anything unkind or cruel. What did he mean now by this insane suggestion, by speaking in a new language which the

unassisted intelligence could not understand?

The sun had set by the time Edmund returned home. The little paraphernalia of the tea-table, which it had pleased Nina to set up in the hall, was there in its corner, deserted, and nobody was visible but Roger, who stood with his back to the entrance as Edmund came in, apparently examining the whips upon the rack, displacing and rearranging them. He turned half round when his brother entered, but for a minute or two took no notice, carrying on his half-occupation, one of the expedients of idleness to get through a little time. Edmund, for his part, took no notice either, for his heart was still sick with bewilderment, and he was reluctant to say anything, afraid to begin a conversation, though he had so much to say. He went up to the wood fire, which blazed in the great open chimney, and stood leaning upon the carved stone mantelpiece, which bore the Mitford arms, and was one of the curiosities of the place. The hall was the only part of the house which had any pretensions to antiquity. It was full of dark corners, with two

deep-recessed windows throwing two broad lines of light from one side to the other. One of these was partially filled with painted glass, coats-of-arms blazoned in the brilliancy of that radiance; the other was white and pale, full of a silvery spring-coming sky.

'How is the wind?' said Roger, at last. 'I hope that old croaker is not going to be justified in his forebodings. The sky looks uncomfortably clear.'

'There is frost in the air,' said Edmund. Then he turned round, with his back to the fire, in the favourite attitude of an Englishman. 'But I thought,' he said, 'it couldn't matter much to you. Are you not going away?'

'Going away! Not that I know of,' Roger replied curtly.

'I thought you said—it's just the time for town; a number of people there, but none of the whirl of the season. Why don't you go? The hunting is not worth staying for at the fag end of the year.'

'Why don't you go yourself, if you like it so much?' Roger asked.

'I will, if you'll come with me, like a

shot. To-night, if you please, by the last train.'

'Why should I go with you? I am not a man for town,' said Roger, with a gloomy face, as he approached the fire. 'And just at this time of the year, when the country gets sweeter day by day! Hang the hunting! Is that all I care for, do you suppose?'

'A man should not shut himself up from the company of his kind,' remarked Edmund sententiously.

'His kind! And who are they, I wonder? Fellows at the club, who don't care a brass farthing if they ever see you again—or—or——'

'That's the question,' said the younger brother. 'Our friends like us well enough here, but they would not break their hearts if we absented ourselves for three months, or even for six. Come, Roger, let's go.'

'You are perfectly welcome to go, whenever you please. You don't want your elder brother to take care of you, I hope?'

'My elder,' Edmund murmured under his breath. The word gave him new energy.

'Roger, I wish you'd listen to me,' he said. 'Look here! Here is this sort of a quarrel got up in the house. It's nothing,—a fit of temper, a fit of obstinacy; for you are a bit obstinate, you know. It's nothing, but it puts everybody out of sorts; even Nina, poor little thing, who has nothing to do with it. The best way by far to cut it short would be to run off for a little. Don't you see, that clears you from all embarrassment. After all, perhaps you ought to have gone in and said a word to Elizabeth, now that she is just beginning to show again. No harm done, old fellow, but she might have taken it kind.'

'What's Elizabeth to me,' cried Roger, 'or I to her? She is just as indifferent—— If you had gone, it might have been more to the purpose; or Steve,' he said, with a harsh little laugh,—'the all-conquering Steve. Ned, if we are not to quarrel, leave that alone, for on that subject I will not hear a word.'

'On what subject, then, will you hear?' said Edmund, 'for one way or another there is a good deal to say.'

Roger began to pace up and down the hall from one end to another. He had his hands thrust into his pockets, his shoulders up to his ears. The least sympathetic spectator might have observed the conflict which was going on within him. At last he burst forth, 'Don't say anything at all, Ned. For goodness sake, hold your tongue, and let me think for myself.' He had another long march up and down, then resumed: 'If I could think for myself! I can't think at all, I believe. I just bob up and down as the current catches me. I think I shall go to town, after all. You're right, Ned; you are a cool, clear-headed fellow, with plenty of sense. I daresay I couldn't do better than take your advice.'

Edmund could not but smile within himself at this double ascription of sense to him as his special quality. He did not feel as though sense had much to do with it. 'Do,' he urged. 'I don't think you'll ever regret it, Roger. I'll tell Wright to put your things together, for a month, say. Shall I say for a month?'

'I wonder, now,' said Roger, fixing his

gaze upon his brother, 'why you should be so anxious about it. It might be pleasant or it might be convenient, but why the deuce *you* should make such a point of it I don't see.'

'I—don't make any point,' replied Edmund. 'It seems to me that it would be a nice thing to do. I should be glad of your company. We might do a few things together. We have not been out together like this since we were boys, Roger.'

'On the spree,' said the elder brother, with a laugh; 'that's the word. I wonder how Mr. Gravity will look when he's on the — what do you call it?' He paused a moment, and then he said, 'That's not your reason, Ned.'

'Not altogether, Roger. A family quarrel is a hideous thing; it upsets me more than I can tell you. The Squire and you are too like each other; you will not give in, one or the other; and a little absence would set it all right.'

'Oh, a little absence would set it all right! But still, that's not what you mean, Ned,' Roger said. He walked across the hall,

across the gleams of prismatic heraldic tints from the nearest window, to where the other revealed far away, to the distant horizon, a whole pale hemisphere of sky. There he stood, his dark figure outlined against that almost shrill clearness, while Edmund stood anxious behind. What the conflict was which was going on within, Edmund painfully guessed, but could not know as he watched him, in that wonderful isolation of humanity that prevents the closest sympathiser, the most zealous helper, from understanding all. Dared he interfere more distinctly? Must he keep silence? Was he losing a precious opportunity? Edmund could not tell. He stood helpless, clearing his throat to speak, but in the terrible doubt saying not a word.

'A little absence would set it all right,' Roger repeated, muttering between his teeth. 'Would it so? Is one's will of no more consequence than that? A little absence —a little—— Ned,' he said, turning round, 'you needn't speak to Wright. Perhaps I'll go, perhaps I shan't; no man can tell at six o'clock what he'll do at ten. We'll see how the chance goes,' he added, with a laugh, 'if

there's time after dinner—or if there's not.' He paused as he passed, and laid his hand on his brother's shoulder. 'This I will say, whatever happens,—you mean well, Ned.'

'That's poor praise,' said Edmund, 'my sense and my good intentions. If you'd do do it, Roger, for my sake—we've always been good friends, old fellow. Never mind the good meaning; do it for love.'

'For love!' the other said. He went away, with a hasty wave of his hand. Was it possible that his brother, 'that dearest heart and next his own,' in the very melting of his fraternal anxiety, had touched the wrong chord at the last?

# IX

## MOUNT TRAVERS

MOUNT TRAVERS, which was the name of the place which Elizabeth's uncle had built when he became a rich man, was of a very different description from the older houses of the district. It stood out barely on the top of a hill, surmounting everything within range of half a dozen miles, with a few half-grown plantations round it. It was constructed in the style of what was supposed to be in those dark days an English manor-house; that is, in red brick, to which dignity, it had been fondly hoped, was given by the introduction of large bays and great windows in hewn stone. No redder or whiter house ever existed outside of a nursery book. At the foot of the height on which it stood the natural foliage of the leafy country rose in waves of varying green, but near the house

itself, to give it shelter or shade, were nothing but shrubs and neatly planted trees, which were not tall enough to hide a single corner of the brilliant walls. Mr. Travers had thought all this very fine, and a proof of the superiority of the nineteenth century; for there was no other plate-glass in all the parish, and the conveniences in every way were innumerable. His horses and even his cows were better lodged by far than the servants at Melcombe, who were all huddled together in old attics at the top of the house; whereas Mr. Travers's butler had a large and airy room, lighted with plate-glass like his master's. It had been the great pleasure of the last year of old Travers's life to make a striking thing of that new and resplendent dwelling. You stepped into the hall upon tiles of the most elaborate and costly description, and found yourself surrounded with inlaid panels and carvings in oak, which did not pretend to look old, as most things of the kind do, but boldly showed in every leaf and twig an art manufacture fresh from the workshop. The staircases were all ornamented in the same way; the rooms were gorgeous from the

hands of the upholsterer; everything was the newest, brightest, and most highly improved of its kind.

Mrs. Travers sat in the great window of the drawing-room, a huge, broad, and lofty bay, where the plate-glass extended from the roof to the floor, and all was as light and naked as the noonday, indeed much more so; for Nature at her most unadorned never takes that air of nakedness which a great, open, unabashed window, making everything more distinct with its vast film of clear glass, throws upon the landscape. Mrs. Travers in her black gown, a speck in that broad stream of light, appeared like a small black image in the intense but doleful whiteness of the prospect beyond. It was a rainy day, the clouds all careering about the skies, throwing occasionally a spiteful dash of rain straight at the window, and the country looking dull yet shrewish, like one who would fain scold, but dared not under the circumstances. The successive waves of the trees, in their various outlines and depths, the faint tinge of green upon some, the half-opened leaves of others; the undulating country, here a common, there

a park, here a piece of rich upland, there a ridge of trees, with villages scattered, and the roof or turrets of a rural mansion appearing out of a thick cluster of wood,—everything was visible from that big window. It seemed like an inquisitive watcher: and in the midst of its staring whiteness sat Mrs. Travers, all black save for the widow's cap and cuffs and collar, which were everything that is suggested by the dictates of unmitigated woe.

She was a little, spare woman, with a small, worn face, very gentle to outward semblance, yet with certain lines in it that denoted a querulous soul. She had her work in her hand, a large piece of white knitting, upon which she generally kept her eyes fixed, talking softly on with her face thus rendered opaque, save when she would suddenly and quietly drop her hands in her lap and lift the said eyes, which were of a somewhat muddy blue. This happened at periodical intervals, and was apt to rouse in the interlocutor, if at all sensitive, a certain nervous expectation which was not comfortable. Elizabeth had been used to her aunt's 'ways' all her life, and she did not so much mind.

'I hear you were at Melcombe yesterday, Elizabeth.'

'Yes, aunt. I went to see Pax.'

'You have grown very fond of Pax, as you call her. It was not much of an object for such a long ride.'

'Perhaps the ride itself was the chief object,' said Elizabeth with a smile. 'I have always been fond of Pax, but I did want a ride, a good long ride, after being shut up so long.'

'You call it long? Your poor uncle would have been surprised if he had known that, after making you his heiress and everything, you should think six months' mourning too long.'

'Dear aunt!' said Elizabeth, with a little sigh of impatience; then she added, 'My uncle would understand; he would know that one might long for a little fresh air, and yet mourn him as truly—as truly as——'

She paused. She was a very honest young woman, above all treachery. She began to feel with self-reproach that there was little mourning in her thoughts. Some natural tears she had dropped; nay, she had dropped many. But it cannot be denied that

she had begun to wipe them soon. It is the course of nature; because an old man dies, it is impossible that a young woman should shut herself for ever out of the world.

Mrs. Travers put down her knitting, and looked at her niece with those little pale blue eyes. Elizabeth thought they looked through her, but this was not the case. Mrs. Travers had not yielded to any violence of grief, and Elizabeth's mourning was quite respectfully 'deep,' which was almost all that she felt to be required.

'Many people would have thought it necessary, for an uncle who had done so much for them, not to be seen at all for the first year,' remarked Mrs. Travers.

'If that were all. I am not in the least anxious to be seen.'

'Then, what were you doing at Melcombe? You know as well as I do that now you are known to be your uncle's heiress, all the young men from far and near will be after you, like flies round a pot of honey.'

'Indeed, aunt——'

'Oh, don't tell me you don't know. That is one of the reasons that ought to have made

your poor dear uncle leave things more in my hands; for if it had been understood that you were to have the money only at my pleasure, it would have been a refuge for you from fortune-hunters. What he has done, though he meant it well, is really a very bad thing for you,' Mrs. Travers said, ending off a row abruptly, with a little tug to bring it straight. 'I know what fortune-hunters are.'

To this Elizabeth made no reply, and after a while her aunt continued. 'You saw some of the Mitfords, of course; and of course the old man, whom I never liked, has marked you down for one of his sons. Oh, don't tell me; I know it well enough. The eldest, perhaps, because Mount Travers would be such a nice addition to the property; or the second, because he has not very much of his own, and it would be nice to have him so near home; or the youngest. Now, if it had to be one of them,' said Mrs. Travers, suddenly lifting her dull but very observant eyes, 'the youngest would be my choice.'

'I wish you would understand,' replied Elizabeth with some vexation, 'that there is no question of anything of the kind. I saw

the Mitfords pass, all three together, on their way to the station. That was the nearest communication I had with them. I saw young Raymond Tredgold and his father also, if you feel interested about them.'

'Oh yes, fortune-hunting too. Of course I am interested about them all; but I will tell you this, Lizzy, if you make any ridiculous marriage like that, taking up with a boy ever so many years younger than yourself, I can't take anything from you in the end, but you shan't bring a baby-husband to live in my house.'

Elizabeth had gone to the window, and stood close to that great expanse of light, leaning her head against one of the divisions. Had she been, as Mrs. Travers supposed, dependent, no doubt all this would have wounded her deeply. But as there was not the slightest vestige of right in the matter, and the poor lady was as powerless, though she did not know it, as the chair on which she was seated, the poor little ineffectual injury was easier to bear. Elizabeth stood looking out, a little vexed but more sorry, with nothing but compassion slightly tinctured with shame

in her face. She was a little mortified that her aunt, her nearest relative, who had known her for so long, should speak to her so.

'I don't think you will be tried,' she said, with a faint sigh of impatience. And then she added, 'Mr. Gavelkind is coming to luncheon to-day. I hope you won't mind. I heard from him this morning that there was something he wanted to speak to—about.'

She stopped short at the pronoun in spite of herself. She could not say 'to you,' and would not say 'to me.' Her path was very thorny. The lawyer had to be received somehow, and must have the way prepared for him. Poor Elizabeth, in her impulse of generosity, had found a thousand reasons to answer all arguments, when she was told that her uncle's widow ought to be informed exactly what was the state of affairs. But she had not foreseen such a very ordinary little practical dilemma as this.

'Mr. Gavelkind!' cried Mrs. Travers. 'I must say I think it is very strange that he should write to you about coming, and not to me, Elizabeth. I don't like to say so, but I can't hide it from myself. You take a great

deal too much upon you, my dear. Though my husband did leave you his heiress, I don't suppose he ever intended to make you mistress of my house.'

'Dear aunt!' cried Elizabeth in despair—'You know you never did take any interest in business. He wrote to me thinking—that he ought not to trouble you about such matters; thinking it would worry you, and that you would not like it, and that I—— In short,' added Elizabeth, with a sudden inspiration, 'it is something about my own little bit of money, after all, and nothing of yours.'

'Why did not you say so at once?' asked her aunt. 'I should not wish ever to interfere with your own money. I have always regretted that I was not allowed to manage mine from the beginning. I am sure there would have been more of it now; and as that is all I have to dispose of, to give any little keepsakes to my own relatives—— Well, we needn't talk of that any more. If you want any advice I shall be pleased to give you my opinion, Lizzy, but you young people think you know everything better than we do.'

'No, indeed, aunt; but I shall not exercise any judgment of my own; I shall do just what Mr. Gavelkind advises. What do I know about stocks and investments?'

'You ought to know about them, if you don't. You ought to look at the city article every morning, and improve your mind. My father was a stockbroker, and that is what *he* said. "Read the city article, and then you'll know as much as any of us do,"—that is what he always said. Of course it does not matter just now with your own thousand or two. But when you have all the Travers money to manage——'

'I hope,' said Elizabeth, faltering, turning her head still more away, oppressed by the weight of the untruth which she had meant to be only a tacit one, 'that it may be very long before——'

'Well, my dear,' said Mrs. Travers, in a subdued and softened tone, 'I believe you do. I am sure that you don't want to get rid of me for the sake of the money. I may be a little nasty about the will sometimes. It isn't that I ever would have alienated his money, —you should have had it all the same, Lizzy,

every penny,—only it would have seemed more trustful-like. But any way, my dear, I am certain you never would grudge me a day's enjoyment of it,—of that I am quite sure.'

Elizabeth stole like a culprit behind her aunt's chair and gave her a kiss, at the risk of receiving a stab in return from the knitting-pins. She felt guilty but glad this time, her own heart melting too. 'We don't need to say these things between you and me, do we?' she whispered, feeling very tenderly towards the guardian of her youth.

'But, my dear,' remarked Mrs. Travers, going on with her knitting after a little emphatic nod of assent, 'by that time you will have a husband, who will rule the money and you too.'

'I am not so sure of that. At all events, there is no appearance of him as yet upon the horizon,' replied Elizabeth, returning to her seat, this little episode being over. The worst of it was that such little episodes occurred almost every day.

'And you nearly five and twenty!' said Mrs. Travers. 'To a woman who was mar-

ried at nineteen, as I was, that seems quite old for a girl.'

'I don't consider myself a girl,' returned Elizabeth, with a smile. 'I am like Pax. I have outgrown those vanities.'

'Nonsense, my dear. Pax is five and forty if she is a day, and a clergyman's daughter without a penny. Oh yes, I know all the Melcombe young men were in love with her—once: except the youngest. The youngest is the one I would choose. He is a fine-looking sort of fellow; he is not one of the calculating sort. Roger is as proud as Lucifer, and would snuff and sniff at good honest money, and think a great deal more of his mouldy old lands, and Edmund is a sentimental dawdle; but the third one, Lizzy, he would be the man for me. He has always something to say to a woman. He'd run off with you whether you would or not; he'd give you no peace; he wouldn't take no for an answer. That is the sort of young fellow I like to see.'

'Why, you are like Lydia Languish, aunt! I did not know you were so romantic.'

'I never was for myself,' said the little

woman, who had sparkled up out of her widow's weeds for a moment with a flash of spirit and fire which tempted the listener to laugh; 'married at nineteen to a stockbroker in the city! I never had any time to be romantic; but I confess I have always been so for you, Lizzy. You are a handsome woman, and you were a very pretty girl. I used always to expect some one to come riding up out of the distance for you. When we first came here I always thought some carriage would break down at the gates, or a gentleman be thrown off his horse, or something. But it never happened. I was dreadfully disappointed when you got to twenty-one and nobody had ever come for you. Some girls have these things happen by the dozen. I never could understand why they didn't happen to you.'

'Poor auntie, how I must have disappointed you!' cried Elizabeth, laughing. 'I feel quite sorry that Prince Charming has never appeared, for your sake.'

'But you have him under your hand now, or I am much mistaken. Next time he comes home on leave, you will just see if he

isn't over here on some pretext or other before he has been two days at home, Lizzy——'

'Because he has heard that—I am my uncle's heiress, aunt?'

'Well,' observed Mrs. Travers, 'you can never leave money out of account in affairs of this sort. A man like that wouldn't dare to propose to you unless you had money, for he has none: and how could the pair of you live? I don't call that fortune-hunting. He has a very good position, he belongs to an old family, he's a soldier, which always counts for something, and I am quite sure that he admires you very much. The money 's not his object; it only makes his object possible.'

'What a clever woman you are, auntie! You are a casuist as well as a romancer. I never should have seen it in that light.'

'Wouldn't you now?' said Mrs. Travers, with gratification. 'Oh, I am not such a fool as I look. My father always said so. And, my dear, in such a case as that, I need scarcely say—a man whom I liked, and who would cheer us all up, and throw a little *éclat* upon the place—there would be no need of think-

ing of another establishment, Elizabeth. You would be welcome, and more than welcome, like my son and daughter in my house.'

The tears trembled in Elizabeth's eyes, a hot colour came over her face. She felt guilty and ashamed, and yet she could hardly restrain the laugh in which alone sometimes a perplexed soul can express itself. 'You are always the kindest of the kind, dear aunt,' she said.

'You should have your own set of rooms,' the old lady went on, quite pleased with her plan—'sitting-rooms and everything. You should choose them yourselves, and have them furnished to your own taste. I should do everything I could to make you feel—I mean to make *him* feel quite at his ease: and of course you would succeed to everything at my death. Now, Lizzy, if this does happen, as I hope it will, and I am almost sure it will, don't you take any notion into your head that he should have spoken before; for how could he speak before, having no money of his own, and not knowing whether there might be anything more than that thousand or two of your mother's, on your side?'

'My dear aunt, Stephen Mitford has never spoken a dozen words to me in my life,' cried Elizabeth, a little vexed. 'He has not the remotest idea of anything of the kind, nor of me, at all, I am sure.'

'Well,' returned Mrs. Travers, 'we shall see, we shall see; and certainly he is the one that would be my choice.'

## X

### THE LAWYER

ELIZABETH received the lawyer, when he arrived, in the room which had been her uncle's business-room, a plain, dark-complexioned little place, with a large writing-table and a few comfortable chairs, but no paraphernalia in the way of books to distract the attention. The charms of business by itself were sufficiently great to make other pleasantnesses unnecessary, Mr. Travers had thought, and accordingly, though the window was quite large and of plate-glass, it looked out upon no panorama of varied landscape, but upon a close little corner of shrubbery which rose to a climax in a large larch, very feathery and fine in its way, but which certainly did not add to the light or even cheerfulness of the small, square, brown, uncompromising room. The spring sunshine did

not get near this place, nor even the blue of the sky. It was all larch and laurel, and a very modified dull light. And it cannot be said that Elizabeth's companion was an entertaining one. He was a spare man, with a lock of hair growing upon his forehead as if it had somehow strayed there, leaving the crown of his head ungarnished, of a sallow gray colour, not unlike parchment, and features that seemed too small for his face; his nose appeared to have remained the size it was in childhood, and the mouth to have grown into a little round aperture by some spell or freak of nature; but the extraordinarily bright little twinkling eyes which completed the countenance seemed to promise that Mr. Gavelkind's intellect had not been arrested in its growth. They dwelt upon Elizabeth with a very kind, paternal look as he shovelled away into a bag the papers he had been placing before her. She had not much more knowledge than she had professed to have, and did in reality prove her confidence very completely in the adviser who had managed all her uncle's affairs; but Elizabeth's ignorance was very intelligent, and he had been

explaining a great many things to her, which gave her a certain interest in the large transactions which were now carried on in her name.

'And now,' he said, shutting his bag with a snap, 'tell me, Miss Elizabeth, what face am I to put on before the poor lady, whom you are deceiving for her good?'

'Oh, don't say deceiving, Mr. Gavelkind.'

'What shall I call it, then? Give me your name for the business, and I shall use it. I know no other, according to my own lights.'

'Then you must not use your own lights. Fancy not allowing her to believe that she is mistress in her own house. I would rather lose it altogether, and be dependent upon her bounty, as she thinks would have been more just.'

'You would not have liked that.'

'No, perhaps I shouldn't; but that is not the question. I have told her—I hope it is not too dreadful a fib, but what can I do?—that it is my own little bit of money you have come to me about.'

'Well, it is your own money, so far as that

is concerned; but you will have to tell a great fib before you are done, which is what I warned you; and if she should once get a clue, and begin to suspect, you will be very easily found out.'

'Oh, please don't say so, Mr. Gavelkind. I admit it isn't so easy as I thought. Little things occur which I had not foreseen, and I am quite frightened when I see how clever I get in explaining. Do you think it will give me the habit of telling fibs?'

'Very likely indeed. But I hope you can trust your memory, for that is the worst of it —when we step beyond the truth we are so apt to forget what the last l—— fib, I mean, was.'

'You are dreadfully severe,' said Elizabeth, half laughing, not without a little inclination to cry. 'That *is* exactly what I feel; and sometimes I contradict myself, and can't remember what I said last.'

'Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive,' said the lawyer. 'The thing I fear is that you will not be able to keep it up.'

'Oh yes, I shall be able to keep it up,'

she cried hurriedly, and led the way out of the room. At times this deception, at which everybody who knew of it shook their heads, got too much for poor Elizabeth. She took Mr. Gavelkind to the cold lightness of the drawing-room, and ran up to her own room, to bathe her forehead and refresh herself. The situation occasionally got upon her nerves, as people say. She felt disposed to laugh and cry, with a sobbing mixture of sounds, and could not stop herself for a minute; but Elizabeth was not at all a hysterical subject, and good sense and cold water soon got the better of this.

'Well, Mr. Gavelkind,' observed Mrs. Travers, 'I hear you have come to see my niece about her investments. Have you got some new chance for that little money of hers? I expect to hear it has quite doubled its value, since you take so much interest in it.'

'I take an interest in the money of all my clients,' said the lawyer, 'and I am glad to see that Miss Travers begins to understand business, which is what a great many ladies can never be taught to do.'

'Yes, indeed,' said the old lady. 'I was of that kind myself, so long as I had my husband to think for me. But now if you were to give me the benefit of your instructions, as you do Elizabeth,—you know I am a stockbroker's daughter, I ought to have a little aptitude,—I think I might begin to understand too.'

'There is no occasion, my dear lady, no occasion,' said the lawyer hastily; 'everything is as comfortable as possible. If there is any need, then it will be time enough. Your niece is getting back her colour, Mrs. Travers, I am glad to see. For some time after your great loss, whether it was altogether distress or something to do with the deep mourning, I quite feared that Miss Elizabeth——'

'She is always very well, thank you,' interrupted the widow rather sharply, 'Elizabeth's health need give nobody any trouble. What should be the matter with her, at her age? At mine these great shocks are a very different matter.' It was indeed a little hard upon Mrs. Travers to have her attention called to the depth of her niece's sorrow,

when no notice was taken of any paleness or changed looks of her own.

Elizabeth came in at this moment with something of a flush upon her face, owing to the large application of fresh cold water with which she had been driving away the momentary hysterical sensation produced by all the contrarieties of feeling in which she was involved.

'She is red enough just now, certainly,' her aunt remarked, choosing, as elderly relatives not unfrequently do, the least complimentary expression possible. 'Is luncheon ready, Elizabeth? Mr. Gavelkind has begun to think already about catching his train.'

This anxiety, though, perhaps, it really existed in the lawyer's mind, had not been expressed, but he only smiled, and owned that he was anxious to get back to town as soon as possible; and Mrs. Travers, taking his arm, led him into the dining-room, which was on the opposite side of the hall, and commanded the same extended prospect through the clear sheets of plate-glass.

'What a view, to be sure!' Mr. Gavelkind exclaimed. 'I suppose you are higher

up than anybody in the county. Why, some of the trees are quite green already; and I like that sort of purply down over them that shows spring 's coming. Why, you have the air quite fresh from the sea.'

'Five hundred feet above the sea-level,' observed Mrs. Travers, with a touch of pride; 'and nothing so high between us and the Channel. You can smell the air quite salt sometimes, and even see it, they say, on fine days; but I can't say that I put very much faith in that.'

'And that's Whitelocks Common just underneath. Such a sweep of land as that is quite good enough without any sea. And that's Whitelocks itself among the trees. I used to know it very well in the late lord's time. I knew all the country about pretty well. What's that brown house to the west, with the little square tower? Oh, it's Melcombe, I remember. Are the Mitfords still there? I suppose you know everybody as far as you can see.'

'We know the Mitfords, at all events,' replied Mrs. Travers significantly, with a glance at Elizabeth. 'There are three

young men in the house; and that is a fact which can't be without interest where there is a girl and an heiress.'

'It amuses you, at any rate, to think so, auntie.'

'Amuses me! Oh no; on the contrary, it makes me very anxious. Three young men, all marriageable, planted at my very door! And I think a young woman in Elizabeth's position, or rather, in what her position will be, ought to have a husband. It is all very well for her to understand her investments under your instructions, Mr. Gavelkind; but a woman never is very bright on such matters, you may say what you like, and her husband would understand them much better.'

'That is sometimes the case, I must allow,' said Mr. Gavelkind, 'but Miss Elizabeth——'

'I hope you don't want to turn Elizabeth's head with your compliments. She is just a girl like other girls. She will take up that sort of thing if she has nothing else in her head, and she will make you think she understands it. You will imagine that she

takes quite an interest, and cares more for it than anything else. But the moment other things come in which are more congenial, you will find it is like the seed sown on thin soil, where there is, as the Bible says, no deepness of earth, and that it has all withered away.'

'That's very natural, I believe,' said the lawyer.

'You talk me over very much at your ease,' said Elizabeth, with a laugh; but she was a little nervous, and slightly excited still. 'I am quite capable of taking care of myself and of everything I may have, without asking other assistance than Mr. Gavelkind's, I assure you, aunt.'

'You need not assure me anything of the kind, for I will not believe it,' Mrs. Travers answered, and then turning to the lawyer she said, 'What I am afraid of is that Elizabeth will choose the least suitable, if she is left to herself, which is what girls generally do. But, fortunately, she has not very much to think of in the way of money as yet.'

'Fortunately!' assented the lawyer. He

had shot one glance out of his keen eyes at Elizabeth, who had not replied with any sign or look from hers. Then he directed the conversation into another channel by commending the dish from which Mrs. Travers had helped him. She was very ambitious on the point of cookery, and delighted to hear that Mr. Gavelkind's cook had never been able to reach the perfection of these chicken cutlets. 'And she came to me from Lord Youngham's,' the lawyer said, 'where a great deal of attention was paid to the kitchen. There was a French man-cook, and this woman of mine was the first kitchen-maid, but we never have anything on our table that can come up to this.'

'Perhaps Mrs. Gavelkind does not take great interest in it herself,' said Mrs. Travers, well pleased. 'They all know I do, not for the sake of eating,—though I think that even in the way of eating we should all know what we are about,—but I love to see a nice dish, looking well and tasting well. I take a great deal of trouble about it altogether. I'm fond of seeing a nice luncheon and a nice dinner on the table. And my cook knows that.

Has Mrs. Gavelkind ever tried——' And here the old lady entered into domestic particulars such as her listener did not disdain. Elizabeth sat and listened vaguely, hearing the voices run on, though without any very clear perception of what they said. She was not interested in all the ingredients of the sauce, and the elaboration of the process by which that perfection was reached, but she knew it interested her aunt, and that there was no such good way of withdrawing her attention from much more important matters. Elizabeth sat at the foot of the square table, drawn near the window now that the weather was milder, and commanding the whole wide landscape, miles upon miles, in all the softness of the spring tints, stretching away into the horizon. In the midst of this wide scene her eyes instinctively caught the low square tower of Melcombe amid its trees. When the foliage was out the house was almost hid, but at the present moment the range of those windows along the south front, which made every one a little chamber of its own, projecting from the long line of the sitting-rooms, showed all the way, and reminded Elizabeth,

in spite of herself, of various little scenes. She had sat there on summer evenings, last year, with Nina and her chatter, with 'the boys,' as Pax called them, one after another. Her aunt's remarks brought those recollections back. Last summer had been the only one in which the Travers household had been fully received into the life of the county. There had been a certain amount of curiosity about them and their reported wealth, and their great new blazing house, and then there had been a certain hesitation before the neighbours 'took them up'; but that period of doubt had ended in a general advance, and during the last summer before her uncle died they had 'gone everywhere,' as people say. It was a good thing he had tasted such sweetness as there was in that, Elizabeth thought to herself, as her aunt discoursed and enlightened her appreciative listener. Poor old uncle! he had got as much good as the circumstances allowed out of the situation. It had been a great pleasure to him to build that wonderful house, with all the latest improvements in it, and to overtop everybody, looking down upon the lower-lying houses of the

gentry, and upon the villages that peeped at various corners. And at the last he had been very well received in the county; he had been asked to all the best houses, he had felt himself to be acknowledged by all the constituted authorities: no doubt that had given him pleasure. But now that he was dead, and had left so many complications and perplexities behind him, Elizabeth could not but ask herself whether it was an unmingled good to be thus uplifted, like a city on a hill, to be stared at, perhaps laughed at. The situation of the house and her own situation seemed to run into each other, so that she could scarcely keep them apart. She was the heiress, known far and wide, held out to public competition, as it were, just as her house was held out in a blaze of colour and reflection, so that all the county could see it. If they had stayed in town, Elizabeth would have been but one of many, and she would have lived in the unobtrusive level of a street, in the midst of other houses like her own. What a pity that it had ever occurred to him to plunge into this new way of living, to begin afresh for so short a time, in this new world!

Presently, however, the conversation in which she took no part came to an end, and Mr. Gavelkind began to fidget and to talk of his train. He had time to walk, but no more than time, and the walk would be more pleasant, he declared, than the dogcart which was at his service. 'Perhaps Miss Elizabeth will walk down the hill with me,' he said. And Elizabeth took him through the new plantations, still so straggling and unfinished in their youthfulness, by the short cut to the railway, which was another thing Mr. Travers had prided himself upon. 'Poor uncle liked to think he had so short a way to the station. He used to say that though we were so much higher up than anybody, we had still the nearest access to the world.'

'Poor old gentleman,' remarked Mr. Gavelkind. 'What a pity, what a pity! Just when he had got everything ready for his own enjoyment, to go and leave it all! He must have regretted it so; and who can tell whether there will be all the modern improvements where he has gone?'

'You must not laugh,' said Elizabeth.

'He was very good to me. I can't bear laughing on such a subject.'

'My dear young lady! Laugh! No, you need not fear, there was no laughing in my mind. It is a curious question, though, and one I often think of: What will happen to us, with all our artificial wants, in what I may call Another Place? Don't you know what I mean? It should be primitive there, if it's anything; like Eden, don't you know?—quite pastoral or agricultural at the most; and an old gentleman accustomed to a town life and all sorts of conveniences—— If you think I am laughing you are very much mistaken. I often think of it, and how much at a loss we shall probably be,' Mr. Gavelkind said, with a sigh.

Elizabeth felt, with a humorous suggestion at which she was shocked, the ruefulness in her companion's tone,—an old city man, full of his little habits, in the Garden of Eden! It was not possible to exclude a sense of the ludicrous from that image.

'I should think,' she said, with a little trembling of her lip, which, to tell the truth, was caused more by a struggle to preserve her

gravity than to repress her feelings, 'that all good people would be at home there.'

'Yes, yes, oh yes!' cried Mr. Gavelkind; and then he changed the subject abruptly, pausing upon a knoll to take breath, and pointing with a wave of his hand toward Melcombe. 'My dear Miss Elizabeth, I've known you all your life, and I am one of your trustees: tell me, is there any truth in what Mrs. Travers said?'

## XI

### THE SQUIRE

ELIZABETH came quickly up the slope, having parted with the lawyer at the gate. Perhaps the colour on her face was partly from the climb, but it was no doubt a little from the cross-examination to which she had been subjected. Something in it! She had answered quickly, 'Nothing whatever!' with a little start almost of offence. Then she had laughed, and said it was silly of her to feel annoyed. 'My aunt is not a matchmaker,' she said, 'but she likes to speculate on possibilities, which are possibilities only in her own mind.'

'Many ladies do,' said Mr. Gavelkind. 'It is like making up a novel. It seems to give them a great deal of amusement.'

'To be sure,' said Elizabeth. 'It is too silly to object to what amuses her, only she

ought not to speak of it as if it were, or might be, true.'

The lawyer gave a sidelong glance at the young lady by his side, whose colour had risen though she laughed. 'No; that's imprudent,' he said. 'It sometimes spoils sport.'

They had reached the gate as he said this, and Elizabeth had not time to object or protest. But she was red with indignation as well as other sentiments, as she hastened up the ascending path. The air was very fresh in her face, coming from the west, the rainy quarter, and charged with moisture. The gravel glistened, and so did the polished leaves of the evergreens, with the occasional showers. It was not a cheerful day, on the whole, for the ordinary pedestrian, but Elizabeth, in the revulsion of feeling after six months of partial seclusion, and with the consciousness of the spring in her veins, found a certain excitement, if not exhilaration, even in the hostile weather, the dash of rain in her face, and the capricious puffs of the changeable wind. After that quiet period her mind had sprung up afresh. She felt a tumult of life in it, pushing forward to new efforts.

She walked briskly up and down the broad walk in front of the house. Mrs. Travers had left her usual place in the great window of the drawing-room, and retired to her bedroom for her equally usual dose, so that there was no one to disturb or to be disturbed by Elizabeth as she paced up and down, keeping the confusion of her thoughts in restraint rather than actively producing them. There was too much rain in the sky to justify a long walk, even in the close-fitting dark-gray ulster and cloth hat, which were things which could take no harm; and nowhere could she have got more air or a more extended prospect. There is little doubt that Mr. Gavelkind, with his questions, had given a fresh start and impetus to her thoughts. They hurried on far more quickly than her steps, which scattered the gravel; they went as quick as the clouds careering over the sky. Now and then, when she came to the end of her promenade, as she turned quickly, the immense landscape below suddenly attracted her, and made her stand still for a moment. What a breadth of undulating country, what ridges of trees, what soft down of the new corn upon the fields!

Everything was full of promise and new life; the very sap showing as it coursed in the veins of every tree.

But there was one spot which above all others attracted Elizabeth's look. Her eyes turned there instinctively, she did not know why. Seriously she did not know why, unless because the recent talk had directed her that way in spite of herself. For, she said to herself, she had no connection with Melcombe to turn her face that way,—none whatever! There was nothing in it; neither in her aunt's foolish talk, nor in the questions which Mr. Gavelkind had put, and to which Elizabeth believed she had been very decisive and even peremptory in her reply.

Nothing in it? After all, was that quite seriously and sincerely true? Or if so, why, in all that landscape, did her eyes light continually upon the little square tower of Melcombe among the trees?

Elizabeth was disturbed by the interposition of the question put against her will by herself to herself. One can answer a lawyer, though he may put his question very cleverly, much better than one can answer one's self.

When one's self chooses to be inquisitive, there is nothing for it but sophistry and a wrapping up of the question in evasions, which, however, do not conceal the truth from that all-scrutinising judge. Was there nothing in it? There was this in it: that there were two young men at Melcombe (Elizabeth characteristically replied to her aunt's imaginations on the subject by forgetting that there was a third), about her own age, in her own position, likely enough either of them. She turned abruptly round and gave her head a shake, to throw off any irrelevant thoughts. Well, what about those two young men? They were nothing to Elizabeth. They were well looking enough, well mannered, well educated, on the whole nice enough. You could not better them in a summer's day. A woman could not complain if either of them fell to her lot. At Whitelocks the eldest son was a shambling boy, but the Mitfords were excellent representatives of manhood. That was all that there was to say, and the reader will perceive that it was nothing. There was nothing in it; and Elizabeth Travers, so

far as these young men were concerned, was fancy-free.

She laughed softly to herself, after she had got over the little shock with which she had been conscious that herself to herself was putting that question. There is safety in numbers, she thought; one does not fall in love with two. But both were interesting to her, she could not venture to deny. Nay, she would admit it, proclaim it, holding her head high. In all the county she had not become acquainted with any other two human creatures so interesting. They had both been in love with Pax, in their day,—dear Pax, who called them 'the boys,' and was so fond of them, and their most faithful friend. There was something in all this which pleased Elizabeth's imagination. It was quite a beautiful point in the moral landscape, as in the scene before her it was pretty to see the tower of Melcombe rising homely and brown among the trees. If there were anything in it, that was all, and what was that? Nothing whatever, as she had said.

At this point Elizabeth became aware of a figure on the road below, walking briskly in

the direction of the lodge, which lay almost at her feet. There was something in his air which made it apparent to her that he was coming to call. How it is that this is always so unmistakable it would be hard to say, and yet it is so. You can tell even by the pace of the horses when a carriage is aiming for your own door; how much more by the attitude of a man! He was coming to call. Who was he? A large, imposing presence of a man; holding his head high, walking as if the place belonged to him. That was how the lodge-keeper's wife described him afterwards. 'Mr. Mitford's a fine man,' she said; 'he's like a nobleman. He walks as if the ground wasn't good enough to set his whole foot upon, kind of starting off from it, like he scorned it.'

Elizabeth looked at him for some time, with his springy step, not making out who he was. When it suddenly dawned upon her that it was Mr. Mitford of Melcombe, not the son but the father, the blood flushed again to her face, and she hurried indoors, feeling as though she were escaping; and yet she had no wish to avoid the visitor. She ran upstairs

to her aunt's room, and tapped at the door. 'Dear aunt, I don't want to disturb you, but here is Mr. Mitford coming to call,' she said. Then she went to her own room, and threw off her ulster and her cloth hat, in which she looked very pretty, though she was horrified at the idea of being found in them, and smoothed her ruffled locks. Her hair, thus blown about by the wind, and sprinkled with diamond drops by the rain, was extremely becoming in its untidy condition. Perhaps Elizabeth, as she glanced into the glass, was not unconscious of this, but she brushed it all flat and smooth with a remorseless hand.

Then slowly, decorously, she went downstairs, and took up her place in the drawing-room, in front of the great window, to prepare for the visit,—which, after all, was no more than any other visit, if there were nothing whatever in what her aunt had said to the lawyer. Elizabeth's heart beat a little, all the same, she could not have told why, and she had more colour than usual and a brighter reflection in her eyes.

'I understood that Mrs. Travers was

seeing her friends at last,' Mr. Mitford said. 'I am glad of it, heartily glad of it. It is not good to shut one's self up with one's grief, if you will let me say so.'

'It was scarcely that. My aunt has not been well. She is always delicate, and it was a great shock.'

Elizabeth did not like to take the sacred name of grief in vain. She felt with a movement of shame that even in the case of Mrs. Travers the sorrow which had followed her uncle's death had not been of that sublime and majestic kind, devoid of consolation, in which youth hopes and believes.

'No doubt, no doubt,' assented the Squire, 'but we must not let our emotions swallow us up. Something is due, my dear Miss Travers, to our friends and to society. Because one is absent, however dear, we must not shut out all the world.'

Elizabeth was silent, not knowing how to reply to such a broad statement, and Mr. Mitford went on to make various inquiries about her own tastes and habits. He had heard that she had been at the Rectory, with that noble mare of hers. It would have

been very pleasant to him if she had come as far as Melcombe; but he was aware that his little Nina was too much of a child to be any attraction, and that he and a parcel of sons could scarcely expect such a visitor, 'though we should all have felt it a great honour,' he added. He had always been civil to Elizabeth, being the kind of man who is never unaffected by the presence of a woman with any pretensions to good looks; but he had never before paid his court in this deferential way. The effort was somewhat bewildering, slightly amusing, half oppressive; and Elizabeth was glad when Mrs. Travers appeared, to whom he made some of these pretty speeches over again.

'I have no one to pay visits for me,' he said; 'my little daughter's too young. You must accept me as the representative of my family, Mrs. Travers—and let me express my pleasure in the thought that we shall have you in the midst of us again.'

'You are very obliging, Mr. Mitford,' returned Mrs. Travers. The little lady was much surprised and slightly excited by this unexpected *empressement*. It looked as if

he must mean something; but what to a six months' widow of her respectable standing could the man mean?

'My sons have just left me,' said the Squire. 'One can't easily keep young men out of London at this time of the year. Roger, indeed, is not at all a man about town; but it takes some time to get out of the engagements which a young fellow plunges into without thought. He'll make a good family man one of these days.'

'He ought to marry,' declared Mrs. Travers. 'That is the best thing to steady a young man.'

'The very best, my dear lady,—the foundation of all real happiness, as you and I, alas, have good reason to know.'

Mrs. Travers eyed her visitor with some curiosity. 'I don't see why you should say "alas." It has been the very best thing for me that ever happened in my life, and I am sure my poor dear would have said so too. He has left me only a life interest in the property,' she added abruptly, fixing her eyes coldly upon the visitor, in whom, with all directness and a good deal of the pleasure of

being acute enough to see through and through him, she saw a possible candidate for the reversion of Mr. Travers's possessions. The widow felt that there should be no deception practised upon him in that respect.

'A life interest,' Mr. Mitford said. He knew all about the will, much better than she herself did. 'I thought that Miss Travers—I thought that——'

Elizabeth looked quickly up at him with a keen glance of meaning, which he did not understand, though it startled him. 'I am sure, aunt, that Mr. Mitford does not care to inquire into our private affairs,' she said.

'I have no secrets, Elizabeth; everything has always been quite clear and above-board with me. So near a neighbour might easily be interested. Yes, the property is all locked up hard and fast. It was his own, to do what he liked with it, and I never should have gone against him. The only thing that I feel a little is that he might have known me better, and had more confidence; but no doubt everything is for the best.'

'That is always a satisfaction,' remarked

the Squire piously, 'whatever our circumstances may be.'

'So it is,' said Mrs. Travers, 'but no doubt you have noticed that people seldom say so when they are pleased with their circumstances. I care nothing about the property, for in any case, of course, Elizabeth should have had it after me, all the same. It is only the want of confidence that is a little vexing. But you great proprietors, I have always heard say, have just as little freedom with your entails.'

'Not I,' replied Mr. Mitford briskly. 'There is no entail to speak of on my property. I can leave it to whom I like, the youngest as easily as the eldest,—or away from them altogether, if I please.'

'Dear me,' exclaimed Mrs. Travers; then, after a pause, 'It must give you a great deal of hold on them to have that in your power.'

'It does,' he said, with a satisfied expression, shutting his mouth after the words were said, as if he had closed and locked the door of his treasures. Elizabeth sat and looked on with a curious terror and repugnance growing

upon her. These two old people comparing notes with a certain eagerness of fellow-feeling, over their power to influence the generations after them, sent a chill into her blood. One of them, at least, might be impotent to do anything, but there was a gleam in Mrs. Travers's eyes which told how much she also would like to have the power of posthumous revenge or injury in her hands.

'Well, it is a great thing to be able to do what one pleases,' Mrs. Travers observed, with a long-drawn breath. 'It must make you feel that what you have is really your own. But that can never be a woman's case unless she is an heiress in her own right, as Elizabeth will be when I am gone. She will be like you, quite free to leave it to whom she likes.'

'We must tie her down in her marriage settlements,' said the Squire, with a laugh.

'If I were she, I should not let myself be tied down. I should keep it in my own hands. Money is power, don't you know? I never was in that position. My husband's money was almost all of his own making, and I never questioned his right to dispose of it. Lizzy is his natural heir, as we never had any

children of our own—his natural-born heir, being his brother's daughter; while I,' she continued, with an irony which gave her a certain enjoyment, 'was only his wife.'

Mr. Mitford was completely puzzled. He could not but ask himself whether there was not some codicil, some rider to the will which he had seen, which made her a more important person than he had thought. If it were only after her death that Elizabeth inherited!—and she was not an old woman from his point of view. He continued the conversation with unabated cordiality, and took his leave with many pretty speeches, but he carried with him subject for thought. If after all there should be nothing to be got by it till after her death!

'Dear aunt,' Elizabeth said when he was gone, 'since you care so much for it, I wish the money had been yours, and yours only; but may we not keep that grievance to ourselves?'

'I don't see why I shouldn't speak of it, Lizzy. It is no grievance. I should have done the same whatever had happened; but there are circumstances in which everybody,

and a gentleman particularly, ought to know the exact truth——'

'A gentleman particularly!' Elizabeth repeated in consternation; but the meaning of the phrase entirely escaped her, though it seemed to mean more than reached the ear.

## XII

### MR. MITFORD'S INVESTIGATIONS

MR. MITFORD, it is needless to say, had no such ideas in his mind as those which had been suggested by his remarks to his widowed neighbour. As a general rule he disliked women, having found them in his way all his life. His daughters had happily gone off, and had not troubled him,—all but Nina, who was not a disagreeable plaything in her way, and for whom one of her married sisters would probably provide before long. He did not contemplate with any pleasure the introduction into his house of even a Mrs. Roger, though he was aware that a certain additional respectability, a greater claim upon the regard of your neighbours, follows the presence of a mistress in the house. He scorned, indeed, the notion that a house could be better ordered, or its expenses regulated better, under

feminine supervision than under his own. Nay, he knew that he was a better housekeeper than any woman, as a man when he gives his mind to it is sure to be, the Squire believed. But he was a little disturbed in his mind by Mrs. Travers's statements. He had looked up the will in Doctors' Commons without making any fuss about it, and he was aware exactly how things stood. The idea of a codicil was impossible, since that must have been registered and in evidence also. But nobody could say what a romantic young woman might do. Elizabeth might personally have executed some deed to put herself in subjection. She might have signed some instrument which she could not annul, to please her aunt, or in accordance with some whim of her own. Women are full of whims. There is nothing they are so fond of doing as rushing into all sorts of muddles with lawyers; it gives them importance, it gives them occupation, and an adroit man, probably an old ally of Mrs. Travers, could persuade the girl into anything. These were the troublesome thoughts with which Mr. Mitford went down the hill, not any idea of proposing himself

to the widow to fill the old stockbroker's place.

He had a great many things to disturb him, it must be allowed. Roger had gone away, refusing or postponing the execution of his father's wishes; and Mr. Mitford, who was not without sense, began to see that it was a mistaken policy to urge upon a young man a marriage which there was any hope of bringing about in a more natural way. He felt that he had taken a wrong step, and that the probable effect would be to drive his son farther off from Elizabeth, not to make her seem more desirable. This consciousness of wrong on his own side neither made his reflections more pleasant, nor softened his anger. When, indeed, should a man be angry, if it is not when he has made a mistake? Roger's abrupt departure, though he was aware that in itself it was no bad thing, had left him in that impotence of displeasure which is one of the greatest burdens of the choleric man. For there was nobody to find fault with, nobody to express his wrath to or pour out its vials upon. The servants had all felt it,—but there is comparatively little satisfaction in wasting

your rage upon servants,—and Nina had fled in tears from the breakfast-table, which, instead of affording relief, had only made the Squire ashamed of himself. The two fellows had gone away together, mutually siding with and abetting each other, forming a sort of conspiracy against their father's lawful power. Words could not express the indignation of the father thus driven to silence. He had taken a walk to Mount Travers, partly to get the better of his wrath, partly to make up for the shortcomings of those 'cubs,' as he called them to himself, and keep the way open in case of after-ameliorations of the situation. But he came away much sobered, wondering if, after all, it was so much worth the while. Perhaps he had been a little hasty; perhaps it might be just as well to wait and see how things would turn out. After slowly revolving this in his mind, Mr. Mitford returned to his original way of thinking. If any silly thing had been done by Elizabeth, she must be made to alter it; or if she had been so much more silly as to commit herself by a deed-poll, or any of those confounded legal instruments which are popularly considered

irrevocable, why then—at the worst the old woman could not live for ever. Mr. Mitford thought remarks upon his own age were in the very worst taste, and Mrs. Travers was not by several years so old as he was; but he did not hesitate to characterise her as the 'old woman,' and to conclude that she could not live very long, even had her niece been silly enough to make any effort to put back the 'life interest,' as she called it, into her hands. No, there could not surely be any great harm done there; if that confounded boy had not run away just at the least desirable moment. Mr. Mitford had a consciousness that it was he who had driven Roger away, which made him more angry still at the 'confounded boy.'

The nearest way from Mount Travers was by the West Lodge, which, as it was out of the way for most ordinary purposes, seldom attracted the Squire's attention. When he perceived it in the distance, however, there came back to his mind something that he had heard of Roger's visits there. Mr. Mitford was not straitlaced; he thought the presence of a pretty daughter in the keeper's lodge was

a likely enough explanation of a young man's visits; and though he considered it right to put a stop to such things, which always eventually do a man harm, yet he was at the same time of the opinion that among such people, as in other classes, it was their own business to take care of their girls. He might have launched a thunderbolt at his son for mixing himself up in any discreditable story, but at the same time he would have felt that if Blowsabella thrust herself into the way she must take the consequences. It occurred to him at the moment that he would look in, as he passed, and see what Blowsabella was like, and perhaps give her mother a word; for the last thing that was to be desired was any scandal, so long as there was even a chance of Elizabeth Travers and her wealth.

He marched into the little house with the ease of a man to whom it belonged, and took Mrs. Ford's frightened welcome without paying much attention to it. 'Ford out?' he inquired. 'I daresay you'll do as well. All right about the house, eh? No leakages? drains in order? I like these things to be seen to in the spring, if anything's wrong.

It used to be thought rather marshy about here.'

'Oh no, sir,' replied Mrs. Ford, with another curtsy, 'it's as dry as a bone, sir. We've never had no floods here.'

'Well, that's a good thing,' said the Squire, glancing round. He was looking for the girl, but he could not say so. 'You have made the little place look very comfortable,' he added approvingly, 'and I hear you've got a nice little garden. What, another sitting-room, too! I never knew these lodges were so large.'

Mrs. Ford's mind was sadly divided between pride and alarm. When a poor woman has a daughter like Lily, it is hard not to want to show her, especially when there is a parlour like Lily's parlour in addition to be shown off. But she had an instinctive feeling that the Squire meant no good by his visit, and that it might be wise to keep these glories of her life to herself. She had no time, however, to think; for while Mr. Mitford directed his keen eyes to the little dark passage evidently leading to that best room which is the ideal of such homely house-

keepers, there suddenly appeared in the doorway before him, floating in with all the ease of one at home, such a radiant apparition as took away the Squire's breath. Her mother said afterward, in awe-stricken tones, that never before had Lily looked so beautiful. The western sun came in at the cottage window, and just reached her, touching her hair till it glittered as if it were all mixed with threads of gold. In colour, in bloom, in everything that goes toward that first dazzle of physical perfection which the French call the *beauté du diable*, Lily was at her best. She did not know there was any one there, therefore she was free of any of the little affectations of self-consciousness; and when she did perceive that there was some one, and who it was, Lily's first thoughts were not of her own appearance, nor of the impression she would like to make. She had a sense of fright, a sort of suspended animation till she should know what the object of this visit was. The Squire stood before her, astounded, not knowing what to think. He plucked off his hat, which he had (naturally, according to his ideas) kept on his head when he went into

the keeper's cottage, a remarkable evidence not only of the effect produced upon him, but of the bewilderment of his mind under this sudden impression. He thought for the first moment that it was some young lady of the district, who had come to give Mrs. Ford orders about needlework, or to visit her in a benign and angelic way, as ladies are in the habit of visiting poor women; but when he had taken a rapid note of the circumstances, of the young lady's uncovered head and indoor dress, and her evident air of being at home, Mr. Mitford could not but gasp with astonishment and consternation. 'I—don't think I have met this—young lady before,' he said.

'Oh, sir, it's no young lady,' cried Mrs. Ford, tremulously enveloping her arms in her apron, and making an unnecessary curtsy, which brought shame to Lily's face; 'it's my little girl, as madam was so kind to. You've not seen her, sir, for years and years, and she's grown up, and had a fine eddication; but bless you, sir, it's only Lily; it's my little girl.'

'Lily!' exclaimed the Squire, with a sort

of roar. He did not put his hat on again, as might have been expected, but held it behind him, ashamed of the politeness to which he had been driven.

'Make your curtsy to the Squire, child,' said her mother, in a loud whisper; and then she added, once more trembling, and smiling with deprecating civility, 'Will you step into the parlour, sir? This ain't a place for the likes of you.'

'Oh, there's a parlour too!' muttered the Squire, stupefied. He felt that he must at least follow the adventure to the end, though some confused association with the words 'walk into my parlour' came across him, bewildering and confusing his mind still more. The bright vision melted away, leaving the entrance free, and the Squire stamped through it, making a great noise with his heavy boots and blundering tread; for the little angle of a passage was dark, and he not adroit enough to find his way, as young eyes can do. Mrs. Ford followed humbly, scarcely knowing, between fright and pride, what she was doing. She felt that the sight of Lily's bower would complete the evident effect made upon the

master by the sudden appearance of that unexpected figure; but whether he might look with favour upon these strange adjuncts to a keeper's cottage, or whether he might roar out an order to somebody to cast all such unsuitable accessories away, she could not tell. He might condemn the furniture, but he could not pronounce any decree of separation from Lily, the mother in her panic thought.

'Hallo!' Mr. Mitford cried. He was not much impressed by the room. He considered it rather a poor thing in the way of a fly-trap. 'Will you walk into my parlour?' By the time he got there the Squire had recovered himself, and felt like pulling all the delicate cobwebs to pieces, and tearing to the ground the machinery of conquest. Lily had gone before him; she had made no curtsy. She turned round with a little gesture of welcome, putting a chair for the visitor as a young lady might have done, not like the keeper's little girl. Mr. Mitford drew the offered chair out into the middle of the room, and sat down upon it facing the two women, without the least suggestion that they also

should seat themselves. Had Mrs. Ford the keeper's wife sat down in his presence without a special invitation, he would have thought the world was coming to an end.

'So this is your little girl,' he said. He cast a careless glance at Lily, scanning her over from her beautiful head to the neat little shoes which she was so careful about, noting all her little lady-like pretensions, and the faint astonishment at himself which began to show in her eyes. 'She is a well-grown girl,' he said calmly, 'and I see you keep her very nicely. What do you mean to do with her, Mrs. Ford?'

'To do with her, sir?' The keeper's wife was choking with mortification and humbled pride. A well-grown girl!—was that all the praise that was to be awarded to her Lily? In her outraged devotion she could have struck the man before whom she trembled, the master upon whom everything depended, whom she dared not offend. Her voice died away in her throat.

'What kind of a place do you want for her,—a lady's maid, or in the nursery? I suppose of course, at that age she's been out.

You can't afford to keep great girls like that idle at home, Mrs. Ford.'

'Oh, sir!' the mother began. It was difficult to form any words. And Lily, who had stood there first in consternation, then in wrath, hearing herself so discussed, here felt that she could bear no more.

'Mother,' said the girl, 'if you want me, you will find me in my room. I am going upstairs.'

'Oh, Lily!' exclaimed Mrs. Ford. It was a double trouble. She did not know which was the more difficult to deal with, the terrible master sitting there in the middle of her beautiful room, discussing her beautiful daughter as if she had been a mere village girl, or Lily, who could not bear to be so looked at, who dared the Squire and all that he could do. The mother's heart was torn in two; she did not know to which she should make her appeal.

'Doesn't like to be interfered with, I suppose; prefers to set up for a lady at home. Mrs. Ford, I fear that you are preparing trouble for yourself, and that you have given her a great deal too much of her own way.'

'Oh no, sir,' protested the keeper's wife, almost sobbing. 'You are in a mistake, sir, —indeed, you are in a mistake.'

'Ah, that's possible enough,' said the merciless Squire. 'I am sure I hope it is a mistake. I have been taking some dressed-up milliner's girl for your daughter? I am quite glad to hear it. I could not think how anything like that should belong to my honest Ford and you.'

'Sir,' cried Mrs. Ford, in a tone which indignation and horror made steady, but which came out with a rush like the sound of a trumpet, 'Ford and me, we have served you honest for many a year, but our Lily, sir, as madam was so good to, she's more to us nor master and service and all. It's not her fault if she's more like the quality than she is like her father and me.'

'Do you call that being like the quality, you silly woman?' asked the Squire, with a laugh. 'Take my advice, Mrs. Ford, send her to service. I daresay Mrs. Simmons will help you to hear of something; but don't spoil your girl, if that is your girl, by keeping her at home. She will only get into mischief.

There's a number of young fellows about, and this parlour of yours is deucedly like the spider's parlour, where she invited the fly, don't you remember? "Will you walk into my parlour? said the spider to the fly." By Jove! I'd send her off before the week was out, if I were you.'

With this he rose abruptly, shook himself, put on his hat, and with a slight wave of his hand by way of good-bye, strode again through the narrow passage, and emerged into the open air with a 'Pouff!' of restrained breath. He had made himself as disagreeable and offensive as it was in his power to be, and he had a certain satisfaction in the certainty of having done so. But even this did not neutralise the shock which he had himself received. This was the house which Roger had been in the habit of visiting, and this the keeper's daughter who was said to be the attraction. Mr. Mitford was not brutal by nature, though he had done his best to appear so. He knew his son well enough to know that Roger was no libertine, but yet he had felt that if Blowsabella put herself in the young man's way the consequences must be on her own silly head.

He had no exaggerated sympathy for the rustic flirt, however tragical might be the circumstances into which her folly might betray her. But all his ideas about Blowsabella had died out when that radiant young figure suddenly walked into the doorway of Mrs. Ford's kitchen. He had plucked off his hat in his surprise, and all the courage had gone out of him. This was no Blowsabella, this was no buxom, forward, romping girl, to meet with a reward for her folly. The consequences, if any followed, so far as Roger was concerned, would be disastrous for the young man and the family, not for the young woman. This was what had given a sting to his tongue and brutality to his look. If it had only been Blowsabella, he would have been kind and sorry for her. But this affair was something that must be crushed in the bud.

Curious to think that from Elizabeth he should have walked direct into this adverse camp, into the heart of the other influence which made Roger insensible to Elizabeth! These two images withdrew themselves from the rest, and came and walked with him as he

hurried across his own park, striking with his cane at any taller growth, angry and anxious, turning over in his mind the strange combinations of which he had been unconscious before. The Squire knew, the conviction flashing across his mind like an arrow, that in Roger's place it would not have been the high-toned and serious Elizabeth, in the maturity of twenty-five, that he would have chosen, but the other, in that dazzling early bloom of hers, that apparition of light in the dimness of the cottage. Good heavens! Ford the keeper's daughter! To see her seated at the head of the table at Melcombe would be a revolution indeed.

## XIII

### NINA'S VIEWS

It was very surprising to the Squire to find himself at table with no other companion save Nina, the only member of the family left at home. When he had been alone in the house before, this little person had been still in the schoolroom, and her father had not been incommoded by her company; and to see her rise from her seat, as he passed through, forgetting all about her, and timidly precede him to the dining-room, took him entirely aback. He felt, somehow, that she must disappear with her brothers, and that his dinner would be the easy and solitary 'square meal' which it had been many times before, without the least idea on his part that it was dreary to be alone. She was not even at the other end of the table, where he could have ignored her, but, by the consider-

ateness of the butler, who thought Miss Nina would feel lonely, her place had been laid quite near her father's, so that they might entertain each other mutually. The situation was one for which Mr. Mitford was not prepared. He had nothing to say to his own little girl. Politeness might have suggested a few nothings to answer the uses of conversation with other juvenile members of Nina's class, but a man has no need to be polite to his own child, and he had not a notion what Nina was capable of talking about, or if there was anything, indeed, that was likely to interest her among the subjects with which he was acquainted. Asking her rather gruffly if she would take soup, if she would like some fish, served the purpose for a little; but when it came to the beef and mutton stage, which was with the Squire—an old-fashioned Englishman, priding himself on an excellent appetite—a prolonged period, the sight of her, saying nothing, eating nothing, sitting with little hands clasped before her, ready with a timid smile whenever he looked at her, became more and more an embarrassment to him. He broke forth at last with a

question in which his own *ennui* found vent, though it appeared to be intended to gauge hers: 'Isn't it a great bore to you, Nina, to sit at table with me alone?'

'Oh no, papa,' cried Nina, in a tone of surprise.

'Not a bore? Well, you are a better creature than I am, which is very likely at your age. Aren't you sorry, then, that your brothers are away?'

'Very sorry, papa,' Nina answered; and then there was a pause again.

'It's your turn now to fire away,' he said, after a moment. 'I've asked you two questions; now you can ask me two.'

'Oh, may I?' said Nina, faster than seemed possible, clapping her hands softly with apparent pleasure. 'That is exactly what I should like: for I want above all things to ask you why it was that Roger and Edmund went away so very suddenly. They said nothing of it at dinner, and next day they were off by the early train.'

'I suppose,' said the Squire, with his mouth full, 'they had got tired of the country.'

'No, I'm sure it wasn't that; they are both fond of the country. Either they heard some news, or something happened, or perhaps you scolded them. You talked very loud after dinner, and you were angry with me when you dashed in and found me sitting near the door.'

'That was because I don't want you to get into that mean sort of womanish way. You looked as if you had been listening at the door.'

'Oh no, papa, never; but I always sit at that end of the room for company. To hear voices is something; it makes you feel as if you were not quite alone, though you may not hear a word they say.'

'Oh!' said Mr. Mitford. He resolved from that moment to put a guard upon his tongue; for if it is only saying 'deuce,' and other words that begin with a *d*, a man would rather not say these things in a girl's ear.

'And when I heard this morning that they had gone away, I thought that perhaps you had been scolding them, papa.'

'Scolding does not make so much difference

at your brothers' age as at yours,' he said, softening in spite of himself.

'Doesn't it? Roger had an angry look last night, as if he were going against his will, and Edmund was anxious to get him to go. The servants say——' But here Nina pursed up her mouth suddenly, perceiving Mr. Larkins, the butler, in the background. It was difficult to see the attendants, except the footman in his white stockings, which were visible low down, going round the table; for the lamp which hung over it was shaded, and left everything beyond in an uncertain aspect. But she saw Larkins like a shadow standing by the great sideboard, and her mouth was closed.

'What do the servants say?'

'I will tell you afterwards, papa,' the little girl said.

'Prudent, by Jove, that little thing,' the Squire said to himself, as if this had been a crowning wonder. He did not speak again till the beef had gone, and something of a savoury character, replacing the exhausted game, smoked upon his plate, while Nina ate her rice pudding. Then he resumed, quite

unconscious that such keen observers as his child and his servant could easily trace the line of connection between his present utterance and what had been last said.

'Do you ever pass by the West Lodge in your little walks?'

'Oh, the Fords, papa? Yes, to be sure,' cried Nina. 'Lily is just a little older than I am. I have always known her. Oh, isn't she pretty? We all think so in this house.'

'Who thinks so? I don't understand what you mean by "all,"' exclaimed the Squire, with lowering looks.

'They are a little jealous of her,' said Nina, 'which is not wonderful, for she does not look like them at all. She is quite a lady, Mrs. Simmons says. You may think how lovely she must be when Simmons allows it. They say she has a great many admirers, and that——' Here Nina gave a little cough of intelligence, and made a slight gesture with her hand towards the flowers on the table. '*Him*, you know,' she said, nodding her head.

'What do you mean?' cried the Squire, confounded—Nina's confidential communica-

tion being more than any man's patience could bear.

Nina drew closer, and put her hand to her mouth. 'The gardener, you know,' she said, 'but I don't like to mention his name aloud, because of the men.'

'Oh!' murmured Mr. Mitford. He had been very careless of his little girl; he had paid no more attention to her, as she grew up, than if she had been one of the hounds; but in that moment he got his reward. 'Do you know,' he said angrily, 'that you talk like a little village gossip, Nina?' What have you to do with such stories? If I hear you discoursing again upon the servants and their love affairs, or any other affairs, I shall send you back to the schoolroom, and you shall not appear here again.'

Poor Nina gave a little frightened cry. She did not know what she had done. The colour went out of her cheeks. She sat quaking, thrown back upon herself, her eyes filling with tears that she dared not let fall. 'Oh, papa!' she said faintly. This threat penetrated to her very heart, for no one could know so well what the schoolroom

was as the last of the little victims who had languished there, to be delivered only by marriage. Nina saw with very clear prevision that it was very unlikely she ever should be emancipated by marriage, seeing that she never met any one, and that nobody ever came to Melcombe who was not, she said to herself, half a hundred. The poor child's heart sank within her. She had been bolder than usual, encouraged by her father's attention to her little chatter, and she did not know into what pitfall it was that she had dropped. She sat quite still, sometimes lifting a pair of wistful eyes towards him, while the wearisome dinner concluded. The servants, stealing about in the shade, with their subdued steps silently offering all the fruits of the dessert, which she would have liked very much, but had not the courage to touch, were like ghosts to Nina; and her father's severe face, in the light of the lamp, shone upon her like that of an awful judge who should presently pronounce sentence upon her. Larkins and his satellites were a kind of protection; they saved her temporarily, at least, from receiving her sentence,

and when she saw them preparing to go away, her heart sank. The Squire did not say a word during the conclusion of the dinner. He did not hurry over it; he took everything as leisurely as usual, showing no burning desire to proceed to the execution of Nina. But in this she could not take any comfort, not seeing in reality how it was.

When the servants had left the room, Mr. Mitford, after a brief interval, spoke, and his voice seemed to fill all the room with echoes. Nina was so paralysed with fear that she did not perceive its softened tone.

'You have no business with the affairs of the servants. Keeper and gardener, or whatever they are, you have nothing to do with them. It is not becoming in the young lady of the house to discuss their concerns or intentions; remember that, Nina.'

'Yes, papa,' assented the girl, scarcely venturing to breathe.

'However,' said the Squire, 'now those fellows are gone who have ears for everything, you may tell me what you know about this business. That daughter of Ford's is going to marry the gardener, is she? And

a very good thing too; it will keep her out of the way of mischief; and when is *that* to be?'

'I don't know, papa,' said Nina, without raising her eyes.

'You seemed to know all about it a few minutes ago. I didn't mean to frighten you, child. Speak up, and tell me what you do know.'

Nina began to pluck up a little courage. 'It is only what they say. They all think a great deal of Mr. Witherspoon, the gardener. They say he is quite the gentleman, and so clever. They think he is too good for Lily. Mr. Witherspoon was once after Miss Brown, the steward's sister. You know, papa, she is Scotch too.'

'I know,' said Mr. Mitford, with a nod of his head; 'go on. So little Ford has cut out the red-haired one? I shouldn't have thought by Miss Lily's looks she would be content with such small game.'

'Oh, she is not in love with him at all,' cried Nina, forgetting her caution. 'It is all her father and mother, just like a story-book. But some take Miss Brown's side. Old Sim-

mons is all for Lily; she is always having private talks with Mr. Witherspoon. They say she wants to get her married and out of the way; for, papa,' said the girl, dropping her voice, and putting out her hand with the instinct of a true gossip for the dramatic climax, —'papa, they say that all the gentlemen are always going to the West Lodge. They all think so much of her—for to be pretty is all the gentlemen think of; and they say that Roger——'

'All the gentlemen!' cried the Squire, with a sudden quiver of rage which appalled Nina. 'What do you mean by all the gentlemen, you little gossip, you confounded little—— How dare you say anything about Roger! How dare you discuss your brother with the servants! Do you mean to tell me that Roger —that Roger——'

'Oh papa,' cried Nina, beginning to weep, 'I don't talk about Roger. I only hear what they say.'

'What *they* say! The people in the servants' hall? By Jove,' said the Squire, 'you ought to go out to service yourself; you seem just of their kind.' He got up in

his impatience, and began to pace about the room, as he had done on the previous night. 'I have a nice family,' he went on. 'A son who is after Lily Ford, the keeper's daughter; and you, you little soubrette, you waiting-maid, you Cinderella! I believe, by Jove, you have been changed at nurse, and it is Lily Ford who is the lady, and you that should be sent to the servants' hall.'

Nina sank altogether under this storm. She began to cry and sob. Instead of getting better, as things had promised to do, here was everything worse and worse! The school-room, with which she had been threatened first, was bad enough; but the servants' hall! As the Squire went on enumerating his own misfortunes, piling darker and darker shades of reprobation upon the children who were bringing him to shame, fear and dismay overwhelmed the poor little girl. She was at last unable to keep down her misery, and ran and flung herself, half on the ground before him, half clinging to his elbow. 'Oh papa! send me to Geraldine or Amy,—they will take me in; send me to Aunt Dacres; send me to school, even, if you are so very, very

angry; but don't send me to service; don't put me in a place like one of the maids. Oh, papa, papa! I am your own daughter, whatever you may think. I am Nina,—indeed, I am, I am!' cried the girl in a paroxysm that shook her little frame, and even shook his great bulk, as she hung upon him. He was moved in spite of himself by the passion of the girl's panic and the matter-of-fact acceptance of his unmeaning threats, which to Nina, with her childlike apprehension, seemed so horribly real and imminent. He took hold of her shoulder, which was thrown against him, the slight, round, soft form, in its white muslin, all quivering with measureless fear.

'Get up, child,' he said; 'sit down, dry your eyes, don't be a little fool. Of course I know you are Nina. Do you think I can stop to weigh every word, when you drive me out of my senses? Of course I don't mean that. But you oughtn't to listen to the servants and their gossip, or put yourself on a level with the maids; you ought to have been taught better, you ought——'

'Oh papa, I know it's wrong,' cried Nina,

rubbing her head against his arm and clasping it with both her hands, 'but I have never had any one to care for me, and I have no one to talk to, and it's so lonely.'

He took a little trouble to soothe her, partly moved by her words, and partly by the childlike clinging; and presently dismissed her upstairs, bidding her go to bed and take care of herself—an injunction which Nina obeyed by holding a long chatter with her maid, in which she disclosed the fact that papa had given her a dreadful scolding for something she had said about Lily Ford. Mr. Mitford returned to his wine with thoughts that were not at all agreeable. His son publicly reported to be 'after' that roadside beauty, his daughter talking like a little waiting-woman, full of the gossip of the servants' hall,—these were not pleasant reflections. He had taken a certain pride in the young men who were his representatives in the world, which stood more or less in the place of paternal love; and even Nina, of whom he knew little more than the outside, had gratified occasionally, when he thought of her at all, that rudimentary sentiment. They had

all done him credit, more or less. But there was not much credit to be got out of a little thing who talked like a village gossip, nor out of probably a degrading marriage on the part of the young man who considered himself his heir. 'My heir, by Jove!' the Squire said to himself. The veins stood out on his forehead and on his hand as he clenched it and struck it against the table. He was not a man to bear with the follies of his children, and this was not the first occasion upon which he had reminded Roger that he was entirely at his mercy. Let the boy take but one step towards the accomplishment of that act of madness, and he should see, he should see! No gamekeeper's daughter should ever be received at Melcombe, much less placed at the head of that table where he himself had so long sat. A hot flush of fury came over him at the thought. If that was what the fool was thinking of, if that was what had made him turn away from Elizabeth Travers, a fine woman with a fine fortune in her hands, then by Jove—— It is not necessary in such circumstance to put a conclusion into words. The threat was well enough expressed in

that angry exclamation. A man must submit to many things when he is bound down and cannot help himself. It is a very different matter when he has all the power in his own hands.

## XIV

### A NEW ACTOR

It was some time after these events, after a period of great quiet, during which Mr. Mitford had been living alone with his daughter, seeing her at every meal, and with a curious compound of compunction and fatigue endeavouring to talk to her, and to encourage her to talk to him, an exercise which bored him infinitely, when he received one day a letter from Stephen, in itself a somewhat unusual event. Stephen had heard, he said, that his brothers were away, though he did not inform his father how he had found it out, and he thought, if the Squire did not disapprove, of taking his leave and coming home in their absence. 'You know, sir,' he wrote, 'though it is no doubt my fault as much as theirs, that we don't pull together as well as might be desired; and as it happens

that a lot of our fellows are in barracks,—for town is very handy from this place, and they can run up almost every day,—it would be a good moment for getting leave, as I'm not going in for town much this year. Perhaps you wouldn't mind my company when there's nobody else about.' Impossible to be more surprised than was the Squire by this letter. Stephen himself to propose to come home in April, exactly the time when there was nothing doing! Stephen to give up town and its delights and the possibility of running up every day, in order to come home and make himself agreeable to his father, when everybody of his kind turned, like the sunflower to the sun, towards the opening joys of the season! Mr. Mitford was so much astonished that he instinctively cast about in his mind to make out what motives the young man might have, presumably not so good as those which he put forward; but he could not discover anything that Stephen could do, nor any reason why he should wish to bury himself in the country in spring, that least attractive of all seasons to the child of fashion, the young man of the period. It was not with

much pleasure that the Squire contemplated the offered visit. Stephen interfered with his own habits and ways more than any other of the family; he turned the household in the direction he himself wished more than either of his brothers ever attempted to do; he was less amiable, more self-assertive, than either, and showed much more of that contempt for the judgment of the elder generation which exists so generally, whether displayed or not, among the younger, than either Roger or Edmund had ever done. On the whole, Mr. Mitford would rather have been left to his own devices; he did not yearn for sympathy or companionship. If there was one thing that consoled him, it was, perhaps, the thought of being delivered from that *tête-à-tête* with Nina, which began to be a very heavy necessity. But whether he liked it or not, he could not refuse to receive his youngest son.

It was almost the end of April when Stephen arrived. He came home in the spring twilight some time after his baggage, having chosen to walk, as the evening was fine. It was not a long distance from the station, but he explained that he had made a

little round to see how everything was looking. The explanation was quite unnecessary, for Mr. Mitford was not like an anxious mother who counts the moments in such circumstances. He was quite willing to wait till his son made his appearance in the natural course of events. Stephen was the biggest of the family, a large, strongly-built, well-developed young man, with a soldier's straight back and square shoulders, and he had altogether more colour about him than was usual to the Mitfords. His hair was reddish-brown, crisp and curling, every ring and twist of it looking like a demonstration of vigour and life. Edmund was pale, and Roger had no more than the average Englishman's health and vitality (which is, however, saying a great deal), but Stephen had something exuberant, almost riotous, in his strength and life. He began at once to interfere, to suggest and meddle. He paused even before he took his place at table. 'Nina, you should come up here; come along, young 'un,' he said. 'It's your place, now you've grown up, to take the t'other end.'

'Let Nina alone,' interposed Mr. Mitford.

'If you don't like taking your brother's place, take your own, and let's begin dinner. "For what we are about to receive——"' The Squire's murmur of thanksgiving seemed to lose itself in the fumes of the soup from which Larkins lifted the cover as he sat down.

'Oh, I don't mind taking my brother's place,' cried Stephen, with a laugh, 'not a bit! I'll cut him out whenever I can, I promise you. There's no reason why a fellow like that should have all the good things. But now Nina's out, as I suppose she calls it——'

'Let Nina alone,' said the Squire again briskly. 'She doesn't understand your chaff, —and neither do I, for that matter. Did you see either of them as you came through town?'

'Roger or Ned? No, we don't belong to the same sets. I never see them in town, and I was there only for an hour or two. I was impatient, as you see, sir, to get home.'

He said this with a slight laugh, and the Squire replied with a Humph! through his nostrils. Stephen did not even pretend to be

serious in this profession of regard for his home. What did the fellow want? What was his object? His father could give no answer to this question, which was asked mutely by Nina's wondering blue eyes. She had not sufficiently advanced in knowledge of life, indeed, to question her brother's motives, but her look was full of an incredulous surprise.

'Are you so fond of home, Steve?' Nina inquired timidly, in the pause that ensued.

Stephen burst out laughing over his soup. 'Are you, little 'un?' he said. 'Tell the truth and shame the—— I don't believe you are, a bit. Yes, I'm devoted to home: but I wish the Squire had a better cook. Do you call this *bisque*, Larkins? I call it mud.'

'I will see the name in the *menu*, sir,' said the butler, with grave severity.

'Sure enough. That's what comes of having a woman. You should give yourself the luxury of a *chef*, sir. The women are less expensive, but they always make a mess. You appreciate good living, and you can afford it. Hallo, what's this? *Sole au gratin;*

why, it's black! I say, Larkins, you must really tell Mrs. Simmons, with my compliments——'

'That's enough, Stephen,' exclaimed Mr. Mitford. 'What's good enough for me must be good enough for my company, even if that company happens to be my youngest son, fresh from a mess-table.'

'Ah, that's bitter,' said Stephen, with a laugh. 'Your youngest son happens to care for what he's eating. Now my elders don't know the delicate *bisque* from the common gravy, or what your cook no doubt calls clear. Clear soup, that's the word. As for the mess-table, just you come and dine with us one day, sir, and if you don't forgive me all my impudence—— Larkins, some chablis. Why, man alive! you don't serve sherry, I hope, with the fish?'

'I suppose there's no news, except what's in the papers,' said Mr. Mitford, to stop these remarks.

'Well, sir, I don't imagine that you expect to see any real news *in* the papers,' said Stephen. 'I hear there's all sorts of things going on,—a pretty to-do in the war office,

and the devil to pay among the ordnance. They tell the public there's no evidence against those big-wigs, don't you know, which means that the witnesses have been squared, of course. Government don't dare to stir up that dirty pond.'

'Will you tell me, sir,' cried Mr. Mitford, 'that British officers, gentlemen, men of honour——'

'Oh—oh!' cried Stephen. 'Softly, sir, softly. The British public ain't here, unless it's for Larkins you do it. Officers and gentlemen are just about like other people; a little percentage is neither here nor there. The country doesn't really mind, and a little more money to spend is good for everybody. Why, that's political economy, isn't it?—or so I've heard.'

'I don't see how money spent in bribes can be good for anybody,' said the Squire. 'I hope we're not going to take a lesson from Russia at this time of day.'

'The Yankees do it,' said Stephen calmly, 'and they're the most go-ahead people on the face of the earth. As for the Russians, we shall probably have to fight them, but I don't

mind them in a general way. They're up to a lot of things. In the way of life there's not much to teach those fellows. I'd like you to meet Salgoroufsky, sir. He's the last new thing in accomplished foreigners: lives better, and plays higher, and—in short, goes the whole——'

'I don't put any faith in Russians,' said the Squire. 'Oh, I suppose they're fast enough, if that's what you like. You know the old proverb, "Scratch a Russian and you'll come to the Tartar."'

'Ah!' said Stephen. 'Don't you think we've got a little beyond the range of proverbs nowadays? A real Russ wasn't known to our seniors, sir, in the proverb-making age. By the way, I hear Salgoroufsky is coming before the public in a more piquant way. They say he's one of a half dozen Co——'

'Stephen!' said Mr. Mitford, 'none of that here; you're not at the mess-table now.'

'What's the matter, sir?' asked Stephen, arching his eyebrows with surprise. 'Oh, Nina. Good gracious, what does it matter? I daresay she wouldn't understand; and if

she did, why, a girl can't go anywhere nowadays without hearing such things talked about. If you think the women don't discuss them as much as we do——'

'Then I can tell you they shan't be discussed here,' cried Mr. Mitford, who had the traditions of his generation. 'What do you fellows think about the chances of war? That's more to the purpose, and a subject upon which a soldier may have an opinion.'

'Oh, if you like shop!' said Stephen, with an indulgent smile. 'I make a point of avoiding it myself. We're always game, you know, and that sort of thing, "by jingo, if we do"—and so long as it happens at the dull time of the year, when there's nothing much going on—modern warfare's capital for that; a man can arrange his engagements so as to lose next to nothing.'

'Unless he chances to lose his life by the way!'

'Exactly so, sir,' said Stephen coolly. 'Of course that's on the cards, but fellows don't calculate upon it. Our only general's a good 'un for that. He knows pretty well how long

it will take to do a business,—or to come to smash,' he added philosophically. 'The one or the other is sure to happen, don't you know, within a certain time.'

'And I suppose nowadays,' said the indignant father, 'with all your new enlightened views on the subject, you don't mind much which it is, so long as you get back in time for your engagements?'

'Well, sir, it fits in somehow,' returned the young warrior calmly. 'I don't know whether, in a social point of view, the smash, on the whole, isn't the best, for you are always the victim of circumstances, and all the women are quite sure that if it had depended on you——'

'And as for the country, or the cause, or anything of that old-fashioned sort——'

'Oh, well, sir!' said Stephen, shrugging his shoulders, elevating his eyebrows, and putting out his hands.

Nina sat listening to all this with very wide-open eyes, turning from one to the other with a rapt attention which was not wholly accompanied by understanding. Her mind did not travel quick enough to follow all these

changes of subject, and she was quite unaware how much of the unknown element of chaff lay within the utterances of her brother. Chaff is not a thing which is easily understood (without careful training) by the very young. She took it all seriously, wondering at Stephen's wisdom, who by this time felt that he had done enough in the way of enlightening his father, and that a little time might be given to dazzling the sister, whose eyes regarded him with so much admiration. Stephen liked to be admired by ladies; even, when no one else was about, was capable of appreciating the worship of Nina, and open to the gratification of getting a little fun out of her, as he would himself have said.

'I say, little 'un! you should see Gerry in all her grandeur,' he said. 'Statham's joined the Four-in-Hand, don't you know? and there she is on the top of the coach with all her fast friends; little Algy Banks in close attendance, of course, and Petersham and Beckerbaum, and all that lot. Why doesn't she ask you to stay with her, little Nines? You should tell her you're coming—don't

stop to be asked. You'd have such fun you can't think.'

'Oh, Steve!' cried Nina, her blue eyes growing rounder and bigger.

'Once they have their heads loose, how these girls do go it, to be sure?' remarked Stephen, with benign admiration. 'Amy's to be met with all over the place, wherever there's anything going on. And to think they were just such little mice as you, a year or two since; never a word above their breath! They're ungrateful little cats, too,' said this philosopher, indifferent to the change of metaphor; 'they never throw anything in a fellow's way. Let's hope they'll give you a hand, Nina, though they take no notice of a brother: and then you'll remember me, my dear, and say to yourself it was Steve who put it first into your head.'

'Let Nina alone,' said the Squire once more. 'I tell you she doesn't understand your chaff. And I hope this is chaff as well as the rest, Stephen. I hope you don't mean that Geraldine, a child of mine——'

'Oh, for that matter, sir!' returned Stephen, with cool contempt; then he added quickly,

perhaps thinking better of it, for his father's eyes shone across the pyramid of flowers in the middle of the table, 'Statham 's quite able to look after his wife. He is one of the coolest hands going. If they go too fast, he knows exactly when to pull up. As for that, they are in a very good set, and have lots of fun. I'd let them introduce the little 'un, sir, if I were in your place. Gerry ought to do something for her family. Great exertions were used, as we all recollect, to get her off,' and Stephen laughed, aware that under the protection of Larkins he was safe for the moment, at least, Mr. Mitford being much too great a personage to compromise himself, so long as the servants were in the room, by any outbreak of temper. And looks do not hurt. He was rather pleased than otherwise, amused and tickled by the barbed darts that flew across the table at him from Mr. Mitford's eyes.

'Oh, papa,' cried Nina, 'I wish you would! I am eighteen and I have never been at a dance, certainly not at a ball, a real ball, all my life. Geraldine and Amy were asked out on visits, but I think people have forgotten

there is a third one of us. And I am the last. Oh, papa, let me go.'

'You had better wait till you are asked,' said the Squire morosely; and the rest of the dinner went over in comparative silence, broken chiefly by Stephen's remarks and comments. He thought the *soufflé* was like lead; he suggested that his father was using up *that* cheap claret 'that you thought you had got such a bargain, sir,' he added cheerfully, and with a laugh.

When Larkins left the room the Squire broke out, almost before he had shut the door; and indeed he need not have waited, for Larkins was perfectly aware of what was about to take place, and as he passed immediately into the drawing-room, to see that the lamps were burning properly, got the advantage of it in a great degree, as Nina had done, when she sat near the door 'for company,' on a previous occasion. But Stephen was not discomposed by his father's temper. Having spent all his time in 'poking up the bear,' according to his own refined description, he would have been disappointed had the excited animal refused to dance.

Mr. Mitford delivered his mind in very forcible language, driving Nina off to her retirement in the drawing-room, and following her in a gust of wrath a few minutes afterwards. Stephen's arrival at Melcombe was generally signalised in this way. Papa, as Stephen now chose to call him, shut himself up in his library, slamming the doors like an enraged waiting-maid, while Nina sat and trembled, and listened not without a certain demure satisfaction in the mischief. She admired her brother for the brilliancy of his appearance in general, and for the effect he had produced now, and hoped that he would come in and tell her more of Geraldine's fast and furious proceedings and the splendour of Amy. Ah, if she could but go, if she had but an invitation! She saw herself on the top of the coach, with all the ecstasy of happiness foreseen; and, as Stephen said, why should she wait to be asked? Why not say she was coming? A sister could surely take that liberty. Nina drew forth her little cabinet of ornamental stationery, hesitated, took out a sheet of notepaper and put it back again. Could she venture upon it, in spite of what

papa had said! Oh, if Stephen would but come in and advise her!

But Stephen apparently found something more attractive to do. He sat a while at the table his father had left, and smoked a cigarette, which was a thing no one else dared to do, considering the close vicinity of the door which led into the drawing-room, and smiled to himself at something, perhaps at his success in routing the Squire; and he held up his glass of claret to the light with an admiration of its colour, which was in strong contrast to his scoff at his father about the cheap wine. He had the air of enjoying himself very much, as he balanced himself on the hind legs of his chair, and finished his claret and his cigarette. Nina, who had gone to her favourite corner in one of those deep window-recesses, heard him laugh to himself, and smelt his cigar with all the pleasure which attaches to the forbidden. She admired him for smoking and doing what no one else was allowed to do, but she did not venture to steal in and join him, which was what she would have liked. Presently, however, this heavenly odour died away. Stephen got up,

still smiling, and went out into the hall, where he put on a light overcoat and lit another cigarette; then, with that smile of triumph still upon his face, he stepped forth into the soft darkness of the April night.

## XV

### LOVE

INTO the April night! It was very light, for there was a new moon, which, without giving the effect of white light and profound shadow which moonlight generally gives, produced a sort of mystic twilight, the sky still showing all its soft colour, the park lying half seen, with dim trees in groups, and soft undulations, all harmonious in the faint and dreamy landscape. The weather was warm, for the season, and all the scents and sensations of the evening were indescribable, so full of balm and movement, everything still tingling with life. The impression of peace and soft conclusion which belongs to the hour was contradicted, yet enhanced, by the deeper sentiment of the sweet spring, with all its renewals. The dew fell like a benediction, and it was answered by the noiseless but

almost audible (for is not paradox the very law of this soft, self-contradictory nature?) rising of the sap in all these trees, and of life refreshed throughout all the old framework of the earth. It scarcely needed Fine-Ear, with his fairy sense, to hear the grass growing. The air was full of it, and of the breath of the primroses, which were almost over, and of the bluebells, which had but newly come. There was a rustle, and a tingle, and a sigh, a something which was at once silence and sound, inarticulate, uncertain as that faint darkness which yet was light. It was an hour of dreams and lingering, delicate vision, —an hour in which the young man's fancy, as the poet says, turns lightly to thoughts of love.

Alas! there are so many ways of that. The young man whose thoughts we are about to trace stepped forth in the splendour of his evening clothes, the broad white bosom of his shirt showing under his open overcoat at a quarter of a mile's distance; his quick step ringing over the gravel where he crossed it, coming down rapid but resistless on every daisy bud and new blade of grass; his red-

brown hair curling all the more crisply for the humidity of the evening air; his whole vigorous, relentless being moving on through those soft influences unaffected, bent upon one aim, moved by one purpose, in which there was nothing akin to the charities of the blowing season, although what was in his mind was love,—after his kind, love—with no anxieties, humilities, doubts of itself or its own charm, with a smile of conquest half disdainful, and superiority assured; love triumphant, elated with a sense of power, patronising, and yet humorous, too, amused by the delusions which it meant to encourage and develop. The smiling lips sometimes widened into a laugh, the elated imagination blew off a little strain in a snatch of song. He was going to conquest, going to success, and he knew his own power.

About the same time there stole out of a low garden gate, opening directly into the park, a figure, very different, more ideal, yet perhaps not quite ideal either; a slim, lightly moving form in a neutral-tinted dress, which made her like another shadow in the ethereal twilight, scarcely more marked, except by her

gliding, noiseless movement, than the bushes among which she threaded her way into the silent glades. Lily Ford had stolen out, as it had long been her romantic habit to do—sometimes on pretence of meeting her father, oftener still, and especially on moonlight nights, for her own pleasure. It was a habit which had seemed in keeping with the poetic creature whom her parents worshipped. She was as safe as in their own garden, and it was like a poem, Mrs. Ford thought, to think of Lily's moonlight walks, not like the strolls of the village girls with their sweethearts. The mother, with a little pang made up of mingled pride and exultation, saw her go out. It was scarcely warm enough yet for these rambles. But it was so sweet a night! She wound a shawl about the child's throat, and begged her not to be long, to come back at once if she felt cold. 'It's a little bit chilly,' she said. But Lily would hear no objection. A new moon, and the wind in the south, not a bit of east in it. 'And I'll be back in half an hour, mother,' she said. Her heart beat as she glided away over the grassy slopes and hollows; her steps made no sound upon the old

mossy turf. She was all athrill with excitement, and expectation, and awakened fancy, lightly turned to thoughts of love. She thought so, at least, as she skimmed along, a noiseless shadow, lifting her face now and then to the tender moon, which was new, and young like herself, and full of soft suggestion. She was going to meet—him. How she knew that he had come and that she was to meet him she never revealed. It was not the first by many times, and there was no reason why she should not have told that by accident, as first happened, she had met the Captain in the park. She had meant to say so at the time. She held it in reserve to say now, if there should ever come a moment in which it would be expedient to make known the accidental nature of that meeting. Lily's entire being thrilled with the expectation, with the delightful excitement, with something which, if it were not love, answered all the purposes of love, making her heart beat and the blood dance in her veins. Roger's visits had never caused her such palpitations, by which she knew that it was not ambition, nor the delight of having a lover so much above

her and out of her sphere. It was not that. She stood half in awe of Roger, though there was a pleasure in seeing him come night after night (in the cold weather, and while the other was away); but Stephen filled her with a dazzled admiration and delight.

She had been bewildered at first by the careless splendour of him in his evening dress. That was one glory of the gentleman lover which was doubly seductive to Lily's aspiring heart. The gardener, in his respectable Sunday clothes, was 'quite a gentleman' to the servants' hall; but even Mr. Witherspoon did not attempt an evening suit; and nothing had ever so flattered the girl's longing to belong to the patrician class, to get a footing in that paradise above her, as the splendour of Stephen's fine linen, the whiteness of his tie and his cuffs, the perfection of the costume, which nobody wore who did not dine late and live in that world for which Lily's soul sighed, which was, she felt, the only world in which she could be content to live. All this was in her mind to-night, as she stole out to keep her tryst: the lover, with all his ardour and warmth, not respectful like Roger, and the

ove which drew her to him, which was like wine in her own veins, and the sense of being drawn upward into the heaven she wished for, and the intoxicating consciousness of all that he could give her—of the life in which she should be like him, in which those evening clothes of his should be balanced by her own gleaming white shoulders and the flowers in her hair. Let it not appear that this was mere vulgar vanity of dress with Lily. That was not at all how it moved her. It was the last refinement of the change for which her heart was longing, her transfer from the gamekeeper's lodge and all its incongruities into what she felt was the only life for her, the real world.

Was it, then, not love on either side ?

Stephen was aware that it was something more than ordinary, a sentiment much deeper than the usual easy entanglements, which had brought him down from all the attractions of town to the country at the end of April ; and though he laughed a little at Lily's conviction that it was a *grande passion* for both herself and him, yet there was no small excitement in the pursuit which he was carrying on

at so much trouble to himself. In her inexperienced soul there was the sweep of a great current of emotion, swiftly, irresistibly, drawing her toward him with an impulse which sometimes seemed altogether beyond her own control. There had been times, indeed, when she had tried to stem it, to stop herself, to ask whether what she was doing was right; and Lily had learned, with an intoxication of mingled pleasure and terror, that her power to do so was small, and that this high tide was carrying her away. With terror, but yet with pleasure too; for the girl was eager for all the high sensations of life, and wanted to be heroically in love almost as much as she wanted to be a lady; so that the thought of being unable to stop herself, of being swept away by that great flood of feeling, was delightful and ecstatic, elevating her in her own opinion. As for any moral danger, or the possibility of ever finding herself in the position of the village heroines who abound in fiction, the victims of passion, it never at any time entered into Lily's imagination that anything of the kind was possible to herself. There are evils which can be, and there are

some which cannot. We do not, on the top of a hill, consider how to save ourselves from being carried off by a flood, for instance. That she should ever be a poor creature, betrayed and abandoned, was as impossible a contingency. Indeed, it did not even touch the sphere of Lily's thoughts.

They met in a little dell, where the trees opened on each side, leaving a long, soft line of light descending from the pale, clear blue of the sky, with the young moon in it, to the scarcely visible undulations of the turf. It was scarcely light so much as lightness, a relief of the evening atmosphere from the shadows of the trees, and the vista slanting upwards towards that pure, far radiance of the heavens. It was a spot in which the tenderest lovers in the world, the gentlest hearts, most full of visionary passion, might have met, and where all things, both visible and concealed, the soft light and softer dark, the silent watch and hush of nature, the guardian groups of the trees, protectors, yet sentinels, enhanced the ideal of that meeting. But perhaps even Lily, discovering before anything else her lover, by that spotless expanse

of shirt front which Stephen exposed without hesitation to the night, was scarcely quite on a level with the scene, notwithstanding the thrill in her nerves and the sound of her heart in her ears, which was, according to the last requirements of *banal* romance, the only sound she heard. She glided along towards him, admiring him, with a sense that he was, if not a god, nor even a king, in the phraseology so largely adopted by love-lorn ladies nowadays, yet in all the entrancing reality of that fact a gentleman, able to confer upon the girl he loved the corresponding position of a lady and all that was most desirable in this world. But perhaps we do injustice to Lily. In the enthusiasm of the moment she did not think of what he could bestow, but of himself in that climax of perfection, exquisite in those circumstances and surroundings which nowhere else had she ever touched so closely, —not only a gentleman, but one in full dress, in the attire only vaguely dreamed of by admiring visionaries in villages, in his evening clothes.

It is very probable that Stephen would have been, though not of very delicate sensi-

bilities, extremely mortified and shocked had he been aware of the part which his shirt front, his white tie, and that one very tiny diamond stud, bore in the fascination which he was conscious of exercising over Lily. Fortunately, no such idea ever entered his mind, any more that the possibility of harm occurred to Lily. The thoughts of the one were so far entirely incomprehensible to the other. But at the moment of their meeting, perhaps, on both sides the reserve fell away, and they were what they seemed for one big heart-beat—lovers; forgetting everything in a sudden flash of emotion, such as banishes every other feeling.

'Well, little 'un,' Stephen said. 'So you've come at last.'

'Oh, Stephen!' Lily cried.

After a minute, this transport being over, they entered upon details.

'Have you been waiting long? I couldn't get away.'

'Never mind, now you're here. You are a darling to come on such short notice. I was awfully afraid you wouldn't.'

'Do you think there are so many things

to occupy me that I haven't always time to think——'

'Of what, my little Lily? Say of me. I know it's of me.'

'Oh, Stephen!'

'You are the most enchanting little—— Would you like to know exactly how it was? As soon as I heard Roger was out of the way—— You are sure you didn't cry your little eyes out for Roger?'

'Stephen!' with indignation.

'Well, little 'un. He ain't half bad—for——' 'you,' he was about to say, but paused, with a sense that Lily's meekness was not sufficiently proved. 'As for looks—but looks are not everything; he has his backers, as I have mine. What side would you be on, Lily——'

'Oh, *Stephen!*' She rung the changes upon his name in every tone from enthusiasm to indignation.

'Well,' he cried triumphantly. 'As soon as I heard they were out of the way I got my leave like a shot. The Squire can't make it out, Lily. A fellow like me, fond of being in the middle of everything, to turn his back on

the fun just as the fiddles are tuning up,—he can't make it out.'

'Oh, Stephen! and you are giving that up, and the balls, and all the grand ladies, and everything, for me!'

'Well, ain't you pleased? I should have thought that was just what you would like best, Lil. To know you're more attractive than the whole lot, eh? that I'd rather come here for this—for a look of you—even when I can't see you,' he cried, laughing.

'Oh, Stephen! it is too much.'

Her cheek touched the polished surface of that shirt front, but for the moment she was not sensible of it, being swept away by the feeling that there was no one like him, no one so noble, so disinterested, so true.

'Well, it's a good deal, my pet; it's about all a fellow can do, to show—— I shall get the good of it all the more another time, when we're no longer parted like this, having to meet in the dark; when we're ——'

'Together!' she said softly, under her breath, with a sense of ecstatic expectation, as if it had been heaven.

He laughed and held her close; he did not

echo the word, but what did that pressure mean save a more eloquent repetition? Together! Before Lily's eyes the darkness of the dell lighted up with a light that never was on ballroom or theatre, a vision of entertainments indescribable, happiness ineffable, splendours, raptures, visions of delight. She saw herself walking into marble halls, leaning upon his arm, dancing with him, riding with him, always together, and in the first circles, among the best people in England. Her heart melted in the softening of enthusiasm and gratitude and joy.

'Oh, tell me one thing,' she said.

'A hundred, my pet, whatever you please.'

'Are you sure—oh, tell me the truth! don't flatter me, for I want to know—are you sure that when you take me among all those grand people, you will never be ashamed of your poor Lily? Think where you are taking me from, a poor little cottage. Won't you ever feel ashamed? Oh, Stephen! I think it would kill me—but I want to know.'

'You little goose!' he said, with various caresses; 'if I were ashamed of you, do you think I'd ever take you among the grand

people, as you say?' He laughed, and the echoes seemed to catch his laugh and send it back in a fashion which frightened Lily. 'We'll settle it in that way,' he cried; 'you may trust me for that.'

'If you are sure, if you are quite sure?'

'I'm sure,' he returned, 'and I'll tell you why; for whether it would put you out or not, it would put me out horribly, and I never expose myself to an unpleasantness,—don't you understand that, Lily? So you needn't be afraid.'

The form of this protest did not quite satisfy Lily. It was not exactly the reply she expected; but after all, was it not the best pledge she could have? Did it not show how certain he was that never through her could he be shamed? But she went on with him a little in silence, daunted, she could scarcely tell why.

'We've something to talk of, of much more importance, Lily. There are to be no silly fancies, mind! We'll not often have such a good time as this, with nobody spying. When are you coming to me for good and all?'

'Oh, Stephen!'

'Yes, my pet, I know all that. I've thought it over and settled everything. Lily, you *are* a little goose, though you're a very sweet one. I believe you're hankering all the time after the white satin and the veil, and church-bells ringing, and village brats scattering flowers.'

What a leap her heart gave at the suggestion! Ah, that she did,—hankered, as he said, longed, would have given her finger for the possibility, not, to do her justice, of the white satin, but of the orderly, lawful, peaceful rite which everybody should know.

'No,' she replied, with a falter in her voice, 'not if that—would be against—your interest.'

'Against my interest! I should think it would be,' he said, 'and a nice quiet registrar's office is as good in every way.'

'Ah, not that; a little old church in the city. Don't you remember what we agreed?'

He looked at her a moment, then broke into a laugh again. 'To be sure,' he cried, 'a little old church in the city; St. Botolph's or St. Aldgate's, or something of that sort, with an old sexton and pew-opener, and every-

thing mouldy and quiet. I know where you have taken that from, you little novel-reader; they're all alike in the romances. Well, it shall have its little old church, if it won't be content without.'

'Oh, Stephen, you are not to think me fanciful: but unless it was in a church I should never believe it any good.'

'What, not with a special license, and a ring, and everything orthodox? Do you think,' he said with a laugh, 'that I should want to deceive you, Lily?'

'Oh no!' she cried, with a vehemence which seemed to push him from her, so earnest was she. 'Oh no, no!' She was wounded even by the suggestion, which never could have come from her own mind. 'I would as soon think of the sky falling,—sooner, sooner!'

He laughed again, but in a less assured and triumphant tone. He added nothing to the strength of her denial; why should he? She was sure enough to make all other asseveration unnecessary. And then they went on, slowly wandering in the soft darkness of the night, getting under the shadow of the

trees as they turned in the direction of the West Lodge, for it was time for Lily to go home. Their figures disappeared amid the groups of trees, where the clear skylight and the faint radiance of the moon reached them but by moments. Not the keenest-eyed spectator could have followed them through the wood, which they both knew so well, every step of the way, round the boles of the great beeches and the gnarled roots of the oaks. They spoke of all the details of that event, which had been already arranged and agreed upon ; to which Lily had long ago worn out all her objections, and now regarded almost as a matter settled ; which had come, by much reasoning over it, to look like an ordinary event. She had ceased to think of the misery of her father and mother, which at first had weighed very heavily upon her ; for what would that be ?—the distress of a morning, the anxiety of a single night, ending in delight and triumph. All these points were disposed of long ago ; the sole thing that remained was to carry out this project,—to carry it out so effectively, so speedily, so quietly, that until it was done and over nobody should

suspect its possibility. For no one was aware of these silent and darkling meetings. No spy had ever encountered them, no prying eye seen them together. Roger, indeed, was well enough known to be a constant visitor at the cottage, but of Stephen, who was so seldom at Melcombe, and who knew nothing of the country,—Stephen the officer, the one who had always been away,—of him nobody knew anything; nor had he ever seen Lily Ford, so far as the country neighbours were aware, in his life.

## XVI

### THOUGHTS AND TALKS

ROGER and Edmund Mitford had gone away together, much against the will of the elder brother. He had not consented to it even at the moment when, obeying a hundred half-resisted impulses, he had finally, without any intention of doing so, refusing at the very moment when he yielded, gone away, to Edmund's surprise and his own. So unlikely up to the last had it been, that they went off finally by the night train, without any provision for going, making — a step which commends itself, somehow, in all cases to the imagination of the miserable—a sudden rush into the night, an escape from all the known and usual conditions of ordinary existence. Edmund so understood and humoured the capricious, fantastic misery of Roger's mind as to go on without pause or inquiry, not to

London only, as everybody thought, but as ast as the railway could carry them across France, till they reached those soft shores of the Mediterranean, where so many people go when life ceases to be practicable, as if there were something healing in the mere contact with those mild breezes and in the sight of that tideless sea. Even the journey, occupying so many long hours, in which he was at once tired out and shut up in a moving prison from which he could not escape, did Roger good, and restored, or seemed to restore, his mental balance. He broke out into wild ridicule of himself when he got to the Riviera. What did he want there, a fellow in such health, who did not know whereabouts his lungs were, or had anything that wanted setting right in his constitution? He stalked through the rooms at Monte Carlo, observing the play with the scornful calm of a man whom this kind of superficial excitement did not touch, and who could scarcely suppress his contempt for the human beings whose souls were absorbed in the attractions of a colour or the number of a card. The greater part of them, no doubt, however conscious of their own

folly, would have considered the plight of a young man in his position, disturbed in all the duties and responsibilities of life by the pretty face of a gamekeeper's daughter, as an idiocy far more unaccountable. Thus we criticise but do not better each other.

After a few days, in which he composed himself thus by the observation of other people's imbecilities, Roger turned back, always humoured by his anxious companion, by whose motion it was that they paused in Paris, then brilliant in all the beauty and gaiety of spring; and it was only after Stephen had been for some days at Melcombe that the brothers came back to London. It was by this time the beginning of May. Easter was over, and with it all country claims upon the attention of society. The season had begun its hot career, and there were a thousand things to do for all those who were affected by the influx of the invading class, and by many who were not. Roger had got back, as his brother thought, much of his self-command and healthy balance of faculty. He allowed himself to float into the usual current, and do what other men did.

If he said something bitter now and then about the men, or particularly the women, whom he encountered, or betrayed a scornful consciousness of those little attempts to attract so excellent a *parti*, to which the intended victims of such attempts are nowadays so very wide awake—these, though very unlike Roger, were not at all unlike the utterances of his kind, and roused no astonishment among those who heard them. A fine and generous mind, bent out of nature by some personal experience, is rarely bitter enough to equal the common sentiments of the vulgar and coarse-minded in society or out of it. The cynical outbursts which grieved Edmund, and jarred upon Roger's own ear like false notes, were not so false as the common jargon which men were accustomed to listen to and give vent to, without thought of any particular meaning at all. In this way the state of mind of which the brothers were so painfully conscious scarcely betrayed itself outside. And they ceased to be each other's constant companions in the familiar circles of town. Edmund had his own 'set,' which was not that of his brother. It was at once a humbler

and more exclusive world than that into which Roger allowed himself to be drawn, without any special inclination one way or the other, drifting upon the customary tide. Edmund avoided the ordinary and inevitable, to which Roger resigned himself. He had friends here and there of quite different claims and pretensions. Sometimes he would be at an artist's gorgeous house in St. John's Wood, sometimes at the big plain dwelling of a lawyer or *savant* in Russell Square. He did not at all mind where it was, so long as he found people who were congenial, and whose notions of existence were more or less in keeping with his own. These notions of existence, it is scarcely necessary to say, were not confined to the habits of Belgravia or even Mayfair.

It cannot be denied that Edmund, when thus freed of all responsibility for his brother, and the position which had been little less than that of Roger's keeper, or his nurse, felt much more at his ease, and began to enjoy himself. He liked the beginning of the season. The stir of renewal in the veins of the great city, a stir which runs through

everything, and in which all her various developments have a share, was pleasant to him. He went to all the exhibitions, and to the scientific gatherings, and—what we fear will greatly impair any favourable impression he may have made for himself upon the mind of the reader—even to some which are far from being scientific, those which flourish in the neighbourhood of Exeter Hall. He did this without a blush, and realised with a smile how wonderfully alike they all were, both in their good qualities and in their bad. In all there was a certain ground of honest enthusiasm, and in all a superstructure of humbug and make-believe, and not one of the actors in these scenes was aware where the reality ended and the sham began. In some of these places he encountered Mr. Gavelkind, the lawyer who had charge of the affairs of the Travers family, whom Edmund had met at Mount Travers in the late proprietor's lifetime. Mr. Gavelkind was something of an amateur in life, like Edmund himself, notwithstanding that he was a sober married man, with a family. He was so sober, so respectable, so out of place in some of the haunts

where the young man found him, that the lawyer felt it necessary to explain. 'You will wonder to see me so much about,' he said. 'You will think I ought to be at my own fireside, a man of my age.'

'I was not thinking specially of firesides,' said Edmund; and indeed there was but little occasion, for a lecture was then going on at the Royal Institution which was of a nature altogether to discountenance such old-fashioned ideas. There was a large audience, and the occasion was supposed to be highly interesting. But Edmund and Mr. Gavelkind were both among that restless and disturbing element, the men who hang like a sort of moving, rustling fringe round the outskirts of every such assemblage,—men who could evidently have found comfortable seats, and listened at their ease to all the lecturer's demonstrations, had they chosen, but who preferred to stand, or swing on one foot, looking on, with their heads close together, and making remarks, which were not always in the subdued tone which recognises the sanctity of teaching, whatever the character of that teaching may be.

'Yes,' said the lawyer, 'I ought to be at home; but my family are all grown up and settled, Mr. Mitford. My youngest girl was married a year ago, and the consequence is that their mother is after one or the other of them for ever, and nobody takes any trouble about me. There is always a baby come, or coming, or something. It's all very well for half a dozen other houses, but it doesn't add to the charm of mine. We don't think it worth while to change our house, my wife and I, but it's a great deal too large for us, that's the truth, and a little bit dreary,—just a little bit. Mrs. Gavelkind has always one of her brood to look after, and I come here, or there,' he added, with a gesture of his thumb over his shoulder; where that was, whether Exeter Hall, or the theatres in the Strand, or the House of Commons, or Mr. Spurgeon's Tabernacle, it would have been difficult to tell, for Mr. Gavelkind frequented them all.

'It's not particularly lively here,' Edmund remarked.

'You mean the lecturer? Well, I imagine I know all his arguments by heart. But then, why should he take trouble about

me? I don't want to be convinced. I don't care much for what he believes, one way or another. It's *that* lot he's thinking of, and quite right too. It is not you or I, Mr. Mitford, who will ever do him any credit.'

'Softly,' said Edmund. 'I may be an enthusiastic student seeking enlightenment on this particular point, for anything you know.'

'Oh,' said the other, with some curiosity and surprise. He paused a little, and then resumed: 'Are you really interested in this evolution business, now? Well, we're a strange lot; that's what I always say. I see strange things in my way of business every day. Bless us all, what's a thumb, or half a dozen of 'em, to what you can see, going about with eyes in your head, every day?'

'Indeed, that is my opinion too,' assented Edmund, thinking rather sadly of his brother and his arrested life.

'I knew it. I've a little experience among my fellow-creatures, and I generally know from a man's looks. We are a droll lot, Mr. Mitford. Last time I met you, it was at that Fiji business. Odd, wasn't it? What you

call unconventional those fellows ought to have been, if anybody. Dear me! they were just as cut and dry as the best of us,' said Mr. Gavelkind, with a sort of admiring pity, shaking his head.

'That is true too,' returned Edmund, with a laugh. 'You are a desperate critic, Mr. Gavelkind. From Exeter Hall to this sort of thing, do you never get any satisfaction? —for we have met now at a number of places.'

'Not the sort of places people generally mean, when they say that,' said the lawyer, with a chuckle. 'I tell you now, Mr. Mitford, that actor man,—that's the fellow, of all I've seen, that has got the most confidence in himself. It isn't a cause, or anything of that sort—but for going at it helter-skelter, whether he can do it or not, and carrying the whole hurly-burly along with him—this man here's got no convictions,' the lawyer added. 'It puts him out to look at you and me.'

'Perhaps it is not very respectful to stand and talk while he is doing his best.'

'That's well said too. Perhaps I don't think enough of that. If you're going my

way, Mr. Mitford, I don't mind breaking off in the middle of his argument. A stroll in the streets is just as instructive as anything else, when you've got a rational being along with you. I know how to get out without disturbing anybody.' When they had emerged into the streets, however, instead of pursuing the course of his reflections, Mr. Gravelkind said—

'I've been down in your part of the country since I saw you last.'

'Indeed?' said Edmund. He was taken entirely unawares, and it brought a colour to his cheek, which was not lost on his companion. 'I suppose with Miss Travers,' he continued. 'I hope that all is well there.'

'Well enough, and very ill, too,' said the lawyer, shaking his head. 'You know the deception she's got in hand?'

'Deception!' said Edmund, with surprise.

'Perhaps you don't know. By her uncle's will she has everything, but to save the feelings of that little, useless, uninteresting person——'

'I remember,' said Edmund; 'but surely it's a sacred sort of deception.'

'A sacred falsehood,' said the other, shaking his head; 'all that doesn't make it easier to manage now. She has wound herself up in coil on coil, and unless the poor old lady dies, which would be the only safe ending, I don't know how she's to come out of it. It's better to let things take their course. You can't play providence with any success that I have ever seen.'

'But surely it was most natural, and, indeed, the only thing which Miss Travers, being the woman she is, could have done.'

'Being the woman she is,' the lawyer repeated, shaking his head. 'She's a very fine woman, Elizabeth Travers. I don't mean in the usual sense of the words, though she's a handsome girl, too. There are not many like her, Mr. Mitford—though I don't know whether she's properly appreciated among all the old fogyisms of a country neighbourhood.'

'I think Miss Travers is valued as she ought to be,' said Edmund, again with a slight embarrassment. 'At least, as near that as common understanding goes,' he added, after a moment.

'Ah, there you're right,' cried Mr. Gavelkind; 'that's never within a long way of the reality. A country neighbourhood—begging your pardon, if you're fond of it—is the devil for that. They're all so precious set up on their own merits. And the new people, as you call 'em, the new people get no chance.'

'All that has been got over in this case,' Edmund said. 'The old people—had very little in common with——'

He was going to say 'Elizabeth,' the lawyer felt sure. The puppy! And yet what a natural and, on the whole, pleasant thing to do!

'Mrs. Travers is not a badly bred woman. She has some sense, in her way. But now they've both got wound round and round in the coils of this huge mistake, and the worst is that everybody knows. You might as well have tried,' declared Mr. Gavelkind, 'to smother the scent of that ointment, you know, in the Bible, as to keep a will from being known. Who tells it you never can find out, but before the seals are broken it's everybody's property. That's one of the things that can't be hid. And some time or other it will

all come out, unless the old lady dies, which would be the best.'

'It seems a pity to doom the old lady on that account.'

'Then Miss Travers should marry, sir, as great a fool as herself, who would accept the position and keep it up. And I don't suppose a saint like that is easily to be met with in this commonplace sort of a world.'

'Should he be a saint?' Edmund asked, with a faint laugh. They were crossing a stream of bright light from an open door, and Mr. Gavelkind, looking sharply up, saw the wave of colour which went once more over his face.

'If you know anybody so disinterested, put the circumstances before him, and tell him that the man that marries Elizabeth Travers will get——'

'Excuse me,' said Edmund, putting up his hand quickly, 'but don't you think we're going rather far? I have no right, on my side, to discuss such a question, whatever you may have.'

'Oh, I've right enough,' cried Mr. Gavelkind. 'Good-night, Mr. Edmund Mitford.

We are a queer lot in this world. Lord, to think of a man troubling his head about evolution that can see the contradictions of human nature every day!'

With this curious bombshell or Parthian arrow, the lawyer gave Edmund's hand a hasty shake, and before he could draw his breath had turned round and darted away.

The man that marries Elizabeth Travers will get—— Edmund went along Piccadilly, when he was thus left, with these words ringing through his mind. They formed into a kind of chorus, and sung themselves to the accompaniment of all the rhythm of life around, as he passed along quickly, silently, absorbed in the thought. It was not a new thought, though it was one which he had never allowed himself to entertain. Nobody could understand like himself the chill resistance of the county neighbourhood first, the flutter of discussion after, and all those levities about the heiress which had flown about like thistle-down. The man who marries Elizabeth Travers will get—— What should he get, that happy man? Was it so many hundreds of thousands that old Gavelkind

had been about to say? Half the people in the county could have told that with a glib certainty, and had repeated it till an honest heart grew sick. Was that all that the husband of Elizabeth Travers would get? Edmund unconsciously flung his head high, with a half sob of generous feeling in his throat. That was not what the old lawyer had been about to say. Even that old fellow knew better. The man that marries Elizabeth Travers—— The man that—— Fortunate man, favoured of Heaven! The tumult of the streets changed around Edmund to a ring of mingled echoes, all chiming round these words. They pressed upon him so, and rang in his ears, that presently, when he reached that corner where all the lights were flashing, and the streams of the great thoroughfares meeting, and the carriage lamps darting past each other like fireflies, he took refuge in the quiet and comparative seclusion of the Park, like a man pursued. But when he got there, and caught sight of the soft May sky over the wide spaces of the Park, and felt upon him the shining of that same moon, only a little older, which shone

upon Stephen and his wooing at Melcombe, instead of escaping, he found himself caught again by softer echoes, like the sound of marriage-bells. The man who marries Elizabeth Travers—— Who, in the name of all happy inspirations, who — was that to be?

END OF VOL. I

*Printed by* R. & R. CLARK, *Edinburgh.*