THE

SECOND SON

BY

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

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THE SECOND SON

XVII

SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

THE two brothers lived in the same chambers, though they did not see very much of each other; for Roger generally was not out of bed when Edmund went out, and Edmund had retired to his room before Roger came in at night. They were in different 'sets,' as has been said. Roger, whom society held as the more desirable of the two elder Mitfords, though inferior in many ways to the third, had been sucked into a very usual, very commonplace round of engagements, which, without any pleasure to speak of, to himself or any one else, kept him perpetually occupied, and in the condition of which it is said of a man that he cannot call his soul his own. But it so happened that on this night, of all nights, Roger had an engagement which he disliked particularly, or else he had a head-

ache, or something else had happened which made him break off abruptly for once in a way from that absorbing round; and to the astonishment and temporary embarrassment of both brothers, the elder came in while the younger was still lingering, smoking a cigarette, over the dying fire, which was not out of place even in the beginning of May.

'Hallo! is that you, Roger?' said Edmund; and 'Hallo! are you still there, Ned?' said Roger. These were their only salutations, though they had not met all day.

'Yes, I'm still here,' said Edmund, poking the fire to give himself a countenance; 'naturally—it's not quite twelve o'clock.'

'I didn't know that it was so early,' Roger replied with some embarrassment, bringing forward his favourite easy-chair.

'Some of your engagements fallen through? By the way, I thought you were to be at the Stathams to-night?'

'Ned,' returned the elder brother, with a seriousness which perhaps was partly put on to veil other feelings, 'when girls do run amuck in society, it's appalling the pace they go. I've laughed at it, perhaps, in other

families, but, by Jove, when it's a little thing you've seen in long clothes, or short petticoats——'

'Gerry?' said Edmund, looking up, with the poker still in his hand.

Roger only nodded as he threw himself down in his chair. 'It's enough to make a fellow forswear society altogether,' he remarked.

'She means no harm. It's because she was kept in so much in her youth. We are partly to blame, for we never attempted to do anything for the girls. There's poor little Nina. I don't wonder if they are wild for pleasure when they get free: but Gerry means no harm.'

'Harm!' cried Roger, 'that little thing that never spoke above her breath! She is as bold as a fishwife, and as noisy as—as noisy as—I can't find any comparison—as her kind. They are noisier than anything else out.'

'It is all ignorance—and partly innocence,' said the apologetic brother. 'They tell her it's fun to startle the old fogies—and she knows no better. I believe most of them are

like that. They fear nothing, because they don't know what there is to fear——'

Roger kept on shaking his head during this speech. 'That's all very well,' he said—'that's all very well; but when it happens to be your own sister, it takes away your breath.' To show, however, how little his breath was taken away, Roger here breathed a mighty sigh, which disturbed the calm flame of the candles on the table, and made a slight movement in the room. The fastness of Geraldine had given him occasion to let forth some of the prevailing dissatisfaction in his mind; but the trouble in him did not arise from that alone. 'And what's the good of it all,' he went on, 'even where there's no harm, as you say? Good Lord! was life given one to be spent in a round of stupid parties night after night, and stupid nothings all the day? What do I care for their Hurlingham, and Lords, and all the rest of it? I'm not a boy; I'm a man. I tell you that I'm sick of all those fellows that say the same things, and wear the same clothes, and make the same silly jokes for ever and ever. Jove! if a war would break out or something, a good, savage,

man-to-man business, like the French Revolution; but the beggars would fight, I can tell you. We'd neither stand to have our heads cut off, nor run away.'

'No, I don't suppose we should—but why such a grim suggestion? We'll have no French Revolution here.'

'More's the pity,' declared Roger, with a sigh. 'It might clear the air all over the world, and dispose of a lot that could do that, but are not much good for anything else.'

Edmund feared above all this fierce mood, which was half made up of longing for those scenes and objects of living from which he had been instrumental in drawing his brother away.

'You should try my haunts for a bit,' he said, with a laugh. 'My friends are bent—the most of them—on mending the world. And now and then one meets an original who is fun. To-night there was old Gavelkind——'

He regretted it the moment he had mentioned the name.

'Gavelkind! who's that? It's an odd name; I remember the name. Something to

do with law; now I recollect. It is the old fellow one used to see about with Mr. Travers. An original, is he? And so was the other old man.'

'Old men seem to have the better of us in that way,' remarked Edmund. 'They have had a longer time in which to form their opinions, I suppose.'

'Not the old fellows about town,' said Roger fiercely. 'Old beasts! holding on like grim death to what they call life.'

'You are severe to-night. If you knew them better, no doubt you would find there was some good in them too.'

'Let us have no more of your moralities, Ned. I can't stand them to-night. Look here, did he tell you anything about—about *them*, you know—about—Elizabeth—and the rest? He's always coming and going. What did he say about them?'

'Roger,' said Edmund, turning from his brother, and playing with the poker upon the dying fire, 'I am not much of a fellow to ask questions—but I should like to know—— If you will let me—I should—like to understand——'

'What, in the name of Heaven? Am I to be brought to book by you too?'

'Bringing to book is folly, and you know it. There is one thing I should like to be sure of. It may be among the things that a man has no right to ask.'

'Not from a brother?' asked Roger, with something like a sneer.

'A brother, I suppose, least of all—and yet—I may as well say out what I mean. There is one name which you have singled out to inquire after. I don't want to bring that name under discussion: we have had enough of that. Roger, as one fellow to another, without any right to ask or pry into your business—— After all that has come and gone, have you any—feeling about her, or intentions, or—— Right?—no, I have no right to ask. I said so to begin with: only the right,' Edmund added, with a little harsh laugh, 'of wanting to know.'

He had put down the poker and risen from his chair, but not to aid his interrogatory by his eyes. He stood with his back to his brother, staring into the glass, all garlanded with cards of invitation, which was over the

mantelpiece, and in which the only thing he saw was his own overcast and clouded face. There was a momentary silence in the room, into which the creaking of the chair upon which Roger was leaning heavily, the fall of ashes from the grate, and even the sound of footsteps outside, came in as with a curious diversion of interest, which, however, was no diversion at all. Roger replied at length, with his chin set down, and the words coming with difficulty from between his teeth, in the tone which all the Mitfords knew :—

'I can't see why you should want to know, or why I should submit to be questioned—or what my affairs are to you.' These phrases were uttered with a little interval between each, and then there was a longer pause; after which Roger exclaimed, suddenly striking his hand upon the table, 'I feel like the very devil to-night. Why do you provoke me with questions? There is no woman in the world that is worth a quarrel between you and me.'

Edmund made no reply. He sat down again in his chair without turning round. On his side, he thought, no doubt, that the

question he had asked was one that ought to have been answered should the whole earth fall to pieces; and as for no woman in the world being worth—— He could not but say to himself with some bitterness that the women Roger knew were indeed worth but little, which, at the same time, he was aware was not true. An uncomfortable moment passed thus. Edmund could keep himself under, and restrain all words of impatience, but words of kindness were beyond him. Presently, in ten long minutes or so, in the course of nature, he would say something on some profoundly indifferent subject, and the incident would be over, without sequence or meaning of any kind.

This, however, was not to be. The silence was broken by Roger, though only by the sound of his chair drawing a little nearer to the half-extinguished fire; then he lightly touched his brother on the shoulder. 'Ned, I say, no woman's worth a quarrel between you and me.'

'I have no intention of making any quarrel——'

'No, but I know what you think. I asked

about Miss Travers because—because that old fellow was connected with her; because hers was the first name that came uppermost; because—— Ned, her name is nothing to me more than any other; and it's a pity. My father was quite right, notwithstanding. No, more's the pity,—her name means nothing to me.'

'But it may, if you regret it already.'

Edmund turned round for the first time, and looked his brother in the face. Roger's eyes seemed full of a moisture which was not tears; a strange, softening liquid medium which made them glow and shine. The look of them went to Edmund's heart. He put out his hand and grasped his brother's, which was hot and not very steady. 'Old fellow,' he said, and said no more. Emotion in England does not know how to express itself between two men. Pity, tenderness, an awful sense of the impotence of humanity, came into Edmund's heart and overwhelmed it. No man can save his brother. The tragic folly, the passion which would not loose its hold, the infatuation which appeared to have laid its hand upon one, and which the other

understood with an intolerable conviction of the madness of it, the unworthiness, were beyond the reach of help. Anger, indignation, wonder, all mingled together, and all obliterated in pity could do nothing. Edmund understood, yet could not understand. He would have given up all thought of happiness for himself, if that would have sufficed to pluck Roger from the edge of the precipice. But what could he do? Words were of no avail, remonstrances, arguments; nor even the pointing out of a better way. No man can save his brother. He sank back in his chair with a groan.

'There's nothing to make yourself unhappy about, Ned,' said Roger, with sudden cheerfulness. 'I am safe enough, and out of the way of mischief here. Out of the way of mischief!' he repeated mockingly. 'I should think so. There is nothing in poor little Gerry's set, is there, to tempt a man to folly?'

'I wish there were!'

'You wish there were? You would like to see Melcombe turned into Vanity Fair, or into a sort of ante-room to the stables,—which? You would like to see dogs and

horses, and horsey men crowding up the place; or a rabble rout, acting, dancing, rushing about; something going on for ever and ever. Which is better, I wonder,' said Roger, 'a stable-boy disguised as a fine lady, with the best of blood and all the rest of it, education and so forth, or a woman descended from nobody in particular,—just a woman, no more?'

'Is that a question we need to ask?' said Edmund. But Roger had left his chair, and gone to the other end of the room to supply himself with some of those drinks which seem indispensable when men sit and talk together, and he did not hear; or if he did hear, did not think it necessary to pay any attention. He came back to his chair with his glass in his hand, and began to talk upon ordinary subjects, to the great relief, yet disappointment, of his brother; and they sat thus through the small hours, discussing matters not of the least importance; or, indeed, not discussing anything; sitting together, while the fire went out at their feet, making a remark once in five minutes or so; now and then fortunately hitting upon some subject

which called forth a little rapid interchange of words for a few seconds; then dropping off again into that silence occasionally broken with an indifferent phrase. They had both many things to think of, but carefully abstained from approaching again the edge of any subject that was of the slightest interest. They would both have been a great deal better in bed, and they had nothing in the world to keep them out of it; no particular pleasure in this companionship, nothing but habit, which kept them with their feet on the fender, though the fire was out; and, especially with a window open, it is not always balmy in London in the middle of the night in May.

At last Edmund got up, stretching his limbs like a man fatigued. 'I think I'll go to bed,' he said. Then after an interval, 'I've half an idea of running down home to-morrow. There is nothing much for me to do here.'

'Home!' cried Roger, rising too. 'To-morrow! That's sudden, isn't it?'

'No; I don't think it's sudden. I'm not one of your fashionable men. I never meant to stay——'

'Oh!' Roger said, and that was all. The remark, however, had a great deal in it. It meant a little surprise, a slight shock, indeed, as of a thing not at all expected or foreseen; and then a half doubt, an uncertainty, a dawn of purpose. All this Edmund divined and feared; but he made as though he saw nothing in it except that universal English exclamation which means anything or nothing, as the case may be. He lighted his candle with sudden expedition, so as to leave the room before the dull air should tingle with any more words; before Roger should say, 'I don't see—why I should not go too.' Edmund escaped to the shelter of his own room before these words could be said, if ever there had been any intention that they should be said. The elder brother left behind did not say them to himself. All that he did was what Edmund had done before, to lean upon the mantelpiece and gaze into the glass, about which were stuck so many cards, large and small. Gazing into a mirror is not an unusual trick with people with troubled minds. Sometimes one does but look blankly into that unreal world, with its mystery and

suggestions. There is a kind of fantastic charm in it. Roger did this blankly, not caring for his own face, in which he could read nothing he did not know, but gazing into the void, which was something different from the well-known room reflected in it,—something with depths of the unseen, and darkling shadows as profound as fate. What did he see there? No prevision of what was coming; only a blank such as there was in his heart, without power to anticipate, much less to decide, what was to be.

Going home to-morrow! Presently he began to take down and turn over in his hands the invitation cards. At first mechanically, without any thought; afterwards with flashes of imagination, of realisation. So many crushes through which he would make his way, hat in hand, shake hands with a few people, say half a dozen indifferent words here and there to individuals whom he had probably met half a dozen times before the same day, and whom he did not care if he never saw again; dinners where he would eat the same delicacies out of season, and maintain the same talk evening after evening.

'The Row was very full to-day. I did not see you at Lady Grandmaison's. It was rather a pretty party, considering that so many people stayed away. We shall meet, I suppose, to-night at old Bullion's,—oh, everybody is going.' These were the jewels of conversation which he would gather, unless horses were in question, or the prospects at Ascot, or the opinions of the grooms and trainers; or perhaps, which was worst of all, there would be a young lady in the house, gently urged upon him, carefully thrown in his way, sometimes to the girl's own indignation, sometimes with her consent. As he went over them all, Roger, being somewhat jaundiced in his view of society, and glad to think the worst of it, felt a sickness and faintness steal over him. Why should he stay for that? Was this enjoyment? Town was supposed to be exciting and delightful, and the country dull and flat. Well, perhaps the country was dull and flat. There was nothing in it, save one forbidden thing, which tempted him very much. But town!—the vulgar routine of it, the commonplace, the vacancy, the same thing over and over again. Why,

a labourer on the road, a gamekeeper in the woods, had something to say that varied at least with the weather or the season. He did not ask, Are you going here? Have you been there? Yet it was for that that a man was supposed to stay in London. To give up, to sacrifice——

What? Roger did what Edmund had done. He lighted his candle hastily and went off to his room, to escape—from himself, which is a thing not so easily done as to escape from a brother. 'I don't see why—I shouldn't go too.' Edmund had got away before these words were said, though he had seen them coming. But Roger was not so quick, and could not get away.

XVIII

THE RETURN

It is not very excellent policy, perhaps, when you see the words upon a man's lips, and know they must be uttered one time or another, to run away before they can be said. As likely as not they will be worse instead of better when you do hear them, taking harm by the delay. When the two Mitfords met next day, which was not till Edmund was ready for his journey, it was to him as if some explosive which he had thought dead and harmless had suddenly developed and exploded under his feet, when Roger said abruptly, 'I think I shall go home too.'

'What!' his brother cried, with mingled astonishment and dismay.

'What? Is there any harm in it? I'm sick of town.'

Edmund said nothing, but waved his hand

towards all the cards on the chimney-piece, remarking, however, as he did so, with a chill of alarm, that they had been taken down from the glass, and lay together like a pack of cards among the ornaments of the mantel-shelf.

'Oh, these! What do they matter? Half the people will never remember that they asked me; the other half will never find out that I have not been there. I might not have thought of it but for our talk last night: but why should I make a martyr of myself for a pack of people who care nothing for me?'

'Not that, Roger; but a man like you has —duties. No one leaves London at this time of the year.'

'You are leaving London. Ned, don't talk any nonsense. Duties! I'm not a young duke, if that's the sort of thing you mean.'

'You are the eldest son, which comes to much the same thing,' said Edmund.

'With a father who is always threatening to disinherit me, and can if he pleases; and after all, no such mighty position, were it as safe as the Tower. Come, Ned, no folly;

London will never put on mourning for me. Should it shake society to its foundations, I am still going home.'

'If that is so, you will do what you please, no doubt,' said Edmund, with much gravity; and the consequence was that they travelled down to Melcombe together, as they had left it, but with no such eagerness on Edmund's part to amuse and keep his brother from thinking, which had transformed him into an exuberant, not to say loquacious, conversationalist on the way from home. The brothers now sat each in his own corner, moody and silent: Roger, not unconscious that he was taking a step which might be fatal to him; Edmund, vexed and disappointed, saying to himself that he might have spared all this trouble, that after all he was but an officious busybody, and that after one tantalising moment of hope everything was as before.

They reached home while Stephen's traces were still warm. He had returned to his regiment only the day before. 'I wonder you did not knock against each other somewhere on the road,' said the Squire. 'He's

always a queer fellow; he told me you were coming home.'

'I did not know it myself till this morning,' said Roger; 'he must have the second sight.'

'He has very keen eyes of his own, at all events; he gave me a number of tips,' said Mr. Mitford, who was apt to exalt the absent at the expense of the present. This was the welcome the young men received. It left an uncomfortable impression on their minds that their shortcomings had been talked over between Stephen and their father, which was not at all the case. To Edmund this gave scarcely any uneasiness, but it lit up a dark glow of anger under Roger's eyes. They had been talking him over, no doubt, in that which was his most intimate and sacred secret, putting vulgar interpretations to it, hideous developments. Roger thought he could hear the mocking of Stephen's laugh, and it raised in him a responsive fury. What did Stephen know about anything that was sacred? He had his own vulgar amours, and judged others by that standard. Roger quivered with indignation as the image of

these possible conversations, which had never taken place, came before him.

The weather seemed to change all in a moment as they left town, as it sometimes does in the capricious English spring. It had been ungenial and cold there; here it was May, as that month should be, but so seldom is, in all the softness of the early year, the air sweet with growth and blossom, the skies shedding balm. Something in this delicious sudden transformation went to the young men's hearts, softening and charming them. The first dinner, the domestic gathering for which Edmund had trembled, passed over quite harmoniously. Mr. Mitford appeared for the moment to perceive that to irritate his son was bad policy, and Nina's soft storm of questions as to Geraldine and Amy filled up the silence at table. Here unexpectedly Roger and his father were in accord.

'Don't you think Gerry might ask me to come and see her? Don't you think I might write and say I should like to come?' Nina no doubt was bolder since Stephen's judicious drawing out had put so many new ideas in her head.

'No,' said Roger, 'certainly not, if you take my advice.'

'Oh! that's not what Steve said: he said they had such fun!'

'I don't think, sir,' said Roger to his father, 'it's the kind of fun you would approve of for a girl.'

'I have told her so,' returned the Squire. 'There, Nina, you hear what your brother says; your brother's a good authority; not like Steve, who is a rover himself. Run away now, and let me hear of Geraldine no more.'

'Oh, papa!' Nina exclaimed.

'I tell you I'll have no more of it,' said Mr. Mitford. 'I never liked that sort of thing. Your mother was a quiet woman, and I've always been used to quiet women. These girls ought to be spoken to—they ought to be spoken to. But Stephen tells me Statham is a fellow that can take care of his wife.'

'There is no need for alarm, sir,' remarked Edmund: 'the girls mean no harm.'

'I hate fast women,' said the Squire. 'I never could bear them. Your mother was a

pattern; out of her own house nobody ever heard a word of Mrs. Mitford. That's the greatest praise a woman can have.'

'That is no longer the opinion of society,' said Roger. 'They think the more a woman is talked of, the more noise she makes, the more absurdities she does, the better. If she has a moment's quiet, she thinks she's out of the swim. If she stays a night at home, she's half dead with the bore of it. Women are not what they used to be.'

'The more's the pity. It's all the fault of this ridiculous education, which, thank Heaven, I never went in for,' said the Squire. 'They think themselves emancipated, the little fools, and they don't care how far they go.'

Edmund had an observation trembling on his lips, to the effect that education, which the Squire thanked Heaven he had never given in to, could scarcely be the cause of his sister's failings, but he was stopped by a certain nervous air of seriousness in Roger's face.

'My own opinion is,' said Roger, whose eyes had an abstracted look, as if he were

ruminating a general principle, 'that to find a woman of the old type, like my mother, sir,—sweet and womanly, you know, and fond of home, and satisfied to be happy there,—whoever she was, would be better than anything you could get,—family, money, rank, whatever you please, and a fast girl along with it. That's my opinion; and as I've just come from the midst of them, I think I ought to know.'

'All right, my boy,' assented the Squire; 'I'm with you as far as you go. Carry out your views, my fine fellow, and you may be sure you'll please me.'

This pregnant conversation was interrupted by a question on Nina's part, in which that little person took a very practical view of the matter. 'Should one always stay at home?' she asked. 'If Geraldine and Amy had always stayed at home, they would never have been married, and then you would not have got rid of them, papa. I have heard you say you were glad to have got rid of them. If I am never to go on any visit, nor see any one, you will never, never get rid of me.'

'Run away, Nina. We've had enough of

this. The first thing a woman ought to learn,' said Mr. Mitford, 'is when to go, after dinner. Five minutes after the servants,—that's long enough. Run away.'

But the conversation languished after Nina's little white figure stole reluctantly out of the room. The twilight was sweet, the windows were open, the air was balmy with the breath of early summer. The Squire talked on, but his sons paid slight heed. He continued the discussion of women which Roger had begun. But it is rare that such a discussion can be carried on without a jar, especially when the company is a mingled one, and youth, still accessible to romance, not to say actually touched by the glamour of love, has to listen to the prelections of an elder man upon this delicate subject. The Squire did not transgress decorum—he was not disposed that way; but he was full of that contempt for women which men of his age, especially when freed from all domestic intercourse with the inferior sex, often entertain. And it may be supposed that his talk about what constituted a good mother and continuer of the race, and all the domestic qualifications

which he thought necessary, was of a kind little congenial with the perturbed yet absorbing passion which Roger had held at arm's length so long, only to fall back into with redoubled force and *entrainement* now; or with the more visionary, yet at the same time more highly pitched sentiment of Edmund, whose feet were being drawn away by the sweet, rising tide, but who had not yet ventured to launch fairly upon it. Roger was the more impatient of the two, for his mind had gone much further than that of his brother. He was indeed moment by moment passing out of his own control, feeling his feet and his heart and his thoughts swept along by that resistless flood, and all the will he ever had against it gone like a useless barrier across a river. He bore his father's matter-of-fact discourse as long as human nature, in so very different a vein of sentiment, could do; and it was at last quite suddenly, with a start, as if he had been touched by something intolerable, that he rose from his chair. 'Excuse me,' he murmured; 'I've got a headache, I must try the open air;' and he slid out into the gathering grayness of twilight

like a shadow, leaving Mr. Mitford open-mouthed, with the half of his sentence unsaid.

'I'm afraid Roger is not very well,' cried Edmund, getting up; 'if you'll excuse me too, sir——'

'Nothing of the sort,' said the Squire. 'Excuse you? No, I won't excuse you; sit down, I tell you, Ned. What! your first night at home, and neither one nor the other of you can spend half an hour with your father after dinner? Let Roger alone: you're not a couple of girls to make yourselves interesting, fussing over each other's headaches. I suppose the truth of the matter is, he wants his cigar. I'm glad he's gone, for one thing. You can tell me what he's been about, and in what mind he's come home.'

'I can tell you neither the one nor the other,' said Edmund, not sufficiently under his own command to overcome his annoyance at being detained, and his fear as to what his brother might do. Then he added, 'I must follow him, father; for Heaven's sake, don't detain me! He may be going——'

'Sit down, sir,' exclaimed the Squire, with a powerful hand on his son's arm, forcing him back into his chair. 'Let him go to—the devil, if he likes: if he means to, do you think you can keep him back?'

'That is true,' said Edmund, yielding, with once more that sense of impotence which makes the heart sick. What could he do, indeed? Certainly not keep back Roger's fated feet from the path which any opposition would make him only the more determined to tread. No man can save his brother. To have to submit to his father's interrogations was hard, too.

'Where may he be going? What does he want?' asked Mr. Mitford. 'Do you mean to tell me he's come home as great a fool as ever? Do you mean to tell me—— Why, what was that about women? What did you understand by that? The fellow's a liar as well as a fool, if it wasn't Elizabeth Travers he meant. Right sort of woman, whoever she was; better than rank, and so forth,—well! *she's* nobody; but she's worth a score of the fast ones. Isn't that true? What do you mean, confusing my mind again,

when what he has said is as clear as daylight? I tell you, Ned, if he's deceiving me again——'

'I never said he was deceiving you. I am not my brother's keeper. I can't give you any account of Roger.'

'You mean you won't. I know, honour among thieves. You'd rather see your father's heart broken, and all his plans put out, than split upon your brother. That's your code, never mind what becomes of me. Your father's nobody, and his interests are nothing: but stand together like a band of conspirators, and keep him in the dark. Keep him in the dark!—that's what you think honour. It's not the first time I've found it out.'

'Father, I don't think you have any right to question me so. I should not betray my brother if I could; but as it happens, I can't, even if I wished, for I know nothing. We have not been very much together even in an outside way; and if you think he opens his heart to me——'

'To whom does he open his heart, then?' cried the Squire. 'Has he got a heart to open? It doesn't seem so, so far as his

family is concerned. Now look here, Ned, this sort of thing can't go on. He must make up his mind one way or the other. If he will not take my way, he shall not take my property; that's as clear as daylight. If he's meditating any disgrace to his family, it shall never be done in this house, I can answer for that. You'd better warn him; you shall have it, not he.'

'I, sir!' cried Edmund, springing from his chair.

'No heroics, for I shan't believe them. Melcombe is mine, to dispose of it as I please. Unless Roger does as I wish, he shan't have it, not a square foot of it. You shall have it; I've said so before. You think I'm joking, perhaps? I never joke on such subjects; you shall have it. There! my mind is made up, and there's not another word to say.'

'Stop a moment, father,' exclaimed Edmund. 'Nothing in this world,—neither your will, nor the law, nor any motive in existence,—would make me take my brother's place. I don't joke any more than you do, once for all.'

'Bah!' said the Squire; 'wait till you're tried. Your brother's place! It is nobody's place; it's my place till the last moment I can hold it, and then it goes to whoever I choose. Hold your tongue, Ned. And now you can go and look after your brother. Take care of him, pretty innocent; don't let him fall into bad hands. You'll take greater care of him than ever, now you know what'll happen if you don't succeed.'

He went off, with a laugh that rang through the room, tramping along the corridor with his quick footstep, which was not heavy for so large a man, yet vibrated through the house, finding out somehow every plank that sounded and every joint that creaked, as no other step did. When that hasty progress had concluded with the swing of the library door, another door opened softly, and Nina stole in.

'Oh, is papa angry? Oh, Edmund, is it about me?'

'Nina, you have been listening again?'

'No, indeed; oh no: besides I could not hear a single word; everything was quiet, as if you had been the best of friends. It is

only his step like that, and then he slammed the library door.'

'The library door always makes a noise; no one was angry; there was not a word said about you. Be satisfied, Nina; I'll come and talk to you afterwards. I'm going out a little now.'

'Are you going after Roger, Edmund? for I'm sure he's gone to the West Lodge.'

'What do you know about the West Lodge? What nonsense you talk, Nina! What should Roger do there? He has gone to smoke his cigar.'

'I know very well,' said the girl; 'he had no cigar. He came round to the hall to get a hat, and then he went off. Oh! I know quite well what it means when people walk in that way.'

'In what way?'

'I am not very good at explaining: going straight on, with their heads bent, as if they did not want to look where they were going, because they knew so well. Do you mean to say you don't know?'

Edmund, alas, knew very well what she

meant. He flung himself back into a chair with that sense of despairing which had seized him so strongly on various occasions already. What could he do to stop those steps of fate?

XIX

ANOTHER TWILIGHT

ROGER went out into the twilight without seeing anything, with his head bent, taking long steps straight forward, as his sister had said. While he had been musing the fire had burned. All the way down in the silence of the noisy train, all through the dinner hour with its needful ceremonials, the thoughts so long repressed had been flowing on and on in full stream, until his heart was full and could no longer contain itself. He had relieved himself a little by these enigmatical speeches about women. 'A woman of the old type, like my mother, sweet and womanly and fond of home, and satisfied to be happy there—whoever she might be—would be better——' It was a relief to say this: it was the last development of the thought which had given him so much comfort, per-

haps the first thought which had given him any comfort at all in the whole matter. Instead of a fast woman, or a horsey woman, or a woman given up to 'fun' and sport, to find one who was all a woman, the flower of life, the sweet, the gentle, and the true. No one could deny that; it was clear as daylight. It might be a good thing, if you so chanced it, to find such a woman in your own class,—one that knew all the little punctilios, how to receive your guests, and sit at the head of your table, and all that. Yes, it might be a good thing: one who had connections something like your own, though everybody says your wife's relations are a bore. That might be an advantage, if it so happened. But otherwise, instead of one of the society women, those creatures who cared for nothing but amusement, how much better to have a fresh and uncontaminated being, vigorous and pure as nature could make her, knowing no harm nor thinking any! A wife like that brought new blood and new possibilities to a house. It was a thing that ought to be done, for mere policy, from time to time. True, there might be drawbacks,—drawbacks

that were very evident on the face of them: the father and mother, for example, who would turn everything upside down. That could never be a pleasant thought; but it was better than a band of fast girls and doubtful men who would convert one's house into a bear-garden. People put up with these last because the offenders had good names, because they were in 'society,' though Heaven knows their manners were often bad enough, —worse than the Fords. The Fords—well, no doubt that would be a bitter pill! But at least it was a thing which nobody would have any business with—a skeleton which could be comfortably disposed of in the cupboard at home. Better that a thousand times than the other. He repeated this to himself again and again, or rather it turned over and over in his mind, giving him the most curious justification in everything he was doing. He had struggled before as against a thing that had no excuse, but now he had found one; now it seemed to him of two possibilities the better one,—far better for himself, for the race, and the name.

The spring night was very sweet. There

were great bushes of hawthorn here and there, gleaming whitely through the faint half light, filling the air with their fragrance. He wandered from point to point, half guided by those trees, taking much the same course that Stephen had done. It was a fortnight later, and the moon, which had been then young, was now on the wane and rose late. That was one element of enchantment withdrawn; and Roger, though much more apt to regard things poetically than his brother, was not doing so to-night. He did not think of the sweetness of the evening, scarcely even of her sweetness who was drawing him towards the place where she was. It was, he would have said, the serious, the practical part of the question that occupied him now. He had not any love meeting to look forward to, as Stephen had; no feeling of triumph, no excitement of the senses, was in him. He was going over the matter, as he thought, coolly, balancing the advantages and disadvantages, and for the first time seeing all that was to be said on the favourable side. He was hardly aware, even, that all this time he was coming nearer and nearer to Lily.

He had not had any thought, when he set out, of seeing her that night.

When he saw something moving among the trees, not far from the West Lodge, Roger was startled, almost alarmed. He went towards the thing by instinct, saying to himself, however, that it must be one of the servants, or perhaps some passing villager, not aware that this was not the permitted way. He was in the clothes he had worn at dinner, and, like Stephen, the whiteness of his linen was like a moving speck in the dark. He went on, quickening his pace, he hardly knew why; going up to the spot where somebody must be, partly with the instinct of proprietorship to warn off an intruder, partly with a less defined feeling. Something indistinct separated itself from the trees, as he went on, and turned towards him. There was a little cry, a tremulous Oh! and a sound like the flutter of a bird—and was it Lily, with a quick movement, who came to meet him, as if she had expected him, as if she would have run to him? He asked, with a sudden leap of his heart, 'Who is it? who is it?—Lily?'—making a

rapid step forward, so rapid that she was almost in his arms. Then there was a quick recoil, a cry almost wild, with a sharp note of wonder in it,—'Mr. Roger!'—and he saw that it *was* Lily, but Lily drawing back, startled and frightened; not ready, as he had thought for one moment of surprise, to fling herself into his arms.

'Yes, it is Roger,' he said. 'You thought it was—some one else?'

'I was looking for—my father—he is late, and I came out to look for him. Mother was—a little anxious.' Lily was breathless with alarm or some other feeling, and panted between the words—'and we did not know, sir, that you had come home.'

'You could not. I came on the impulse of the moment, I scarcely know why.'

'They say,' said Lily, still panting a little, 'that it is very gay in London at this time of the year.'

'Yes, it's very gay. I am not fond of gaiety. The park here, and a young gentle creature, like you, walking in it in the sweet evening, that is more delightful to me.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger!'

'You think I don't mean it, perhaps, but I do,' said Roger, feeling his own breath come a little quickly. 'You suit the soft darkness of the evening, Lily. It is like poetry, and so are you.'

'I am only a poor girl, Mr. Roger,' said Lily. It was not a speech such as she was usually disposed to make. She could not tell, indeed, by what impulse it came from her. There was a little vexation in it, for she could not help thinking, with a faint pang, that Stephen had never said anything to her so pretty as this. But then Stephen laughed at poetry: he was superior to it.

'Poor or rich makes little difference that I know of,' said Roger, who also had struck a quite unusual vein. 'A true woman is always in her fit place.'

'It is very good of you to say so, Mr. Roger,' exclaimed Lily, rousing up to the occasion, 'for there are some people who don't think so well of us as that: they scold poor mother for me, as if I were not fit for my own home.'

'I hope you will not be offended, Lily: but no one can help seeing that the keeper's

lodge is not the sort of place from which one would expect you to come.'

'It is my home, though,' said the girl; and she added tremulously, 'Do you think, if I were in the position of a lady, I wouldn't, I shouldn't — shame those that put me there——'

'Shame!' Roger cried, with indignation. It all seemed to him very strange, as if he had walked into some fairy place where there were no disguises, and carried his breast uncovered, so that the throbbings might be seen. 'I cannot imagine any place,' he added gravely, 'so beautiful or so refined that you would not be in your place there.'

Even in the uncertainty of twilight Roger saw the blush of delight that covered the girl's face; but he did not know that it was not for him.

'Thank you,' she said; 'perhaps I'll never be anything but what I am; but if I should ever be different, I am glad to know that you don't think I'd bring my—friends to shame.'

'Hush! hush!' he said, 'that can never have anything to do with you.'

Lily had gone on towards the lodge, and Roger walked by her in a curious fascination, like that of a dream. He had never expected nor planned to have this interview. He was not even prepared for anything it might lead to. He had never talked to her before in the freedom of complete solitude, with no one near them to interrupt. If he had ever seen her alone, it had been but for a few minutes, with Mrs. Ford always ready to come in. But the effect of finding himself thus with her bewildered rather than encouraged him. He had let the first overflowings of his heart have vent, which might be mere vague compliment, and no more. But her presence in the midst of this stillness, the sensation as if they two were all alone in the world, no one near them, was for the present as much as his mind could take in. He was prepared for nothing more. The silence was so long that at last Lily herself spoke.

'It's very sweet,' she said, 'to have the park to walk in. It's beautiful in the evenings. There has been a moon, but now it is on the wane, and does not rise till late.'

'Is this where you walk always,—not down to the village?'

'The village!—oh no! What should I do in the village? I have no friends there. It is hard upon a girl when she has got a better education, and cannot move in the class she belongs to, Mr. Roger. They don't like me for that; and they're so different, I don't care for them.'

'You can have nothing in common with them,' he said.

'No,' assented Lily. 'I should like to be with the ladies and gentlemen; but they would have nothing to say to me.'

'You are mistaken, Lily. That is not the case, at least so far as—some are concerned. Women, people say, are jealous. But on the other hand——'

'Oh yes, Mr. Roger,' said Lily, 'I know there are gentlemen who are pleased to come and talk. They think it amusing to see me in my father's cottage. But I hope you don't suppose that's what I care for. I think more of myself than that.'

'I beg your pardon,' he cried, 'with all my heart. I hope you don't imagine I could

ever mean—— Lily, you don't know with what reverence I think of you. I have been among women who are not fit to tie your shoes; and to think of you has kept me from despising my fellow-creatures and growing bitter and hard. You don't know what it does for a man to remember a girl so spotless and sweet as you.'

Lily was frightened by the meaning of his voice, the earnestness with which he spoke, and the fine words, finer than anything that had ever been said to her before. And she reflected that to have two brothers making love to her would be very strange, that it would scarcely be right. She hastened her steps a little over the soft undulations of the turf.

'You are too kind, Mr. Roger,' she said. 'If you knew me better, you would not perhaps think so well of me. I am well enough, but I am not so good as that.'

'It is not a question of thinking well or ill,' exclaimed Roger, with the strange sensation going through all his being that fate had got hold of him; that the current against which he had been struggling, sometimes so

feebly, had at last got the better of him, had swept him off his feet, and was carrying him away. 'I have long ceased to think so far as you are concerned. I can only feel that you have been a new life to me since ever I first saw you. I have fought against it—I will not conceal that from you—and tried hard. Lily, I wonder if you ever thought of me?'

'Oh yes, Mr. Roger,' she said tremulously, walking on faster; though in her agitation she kept stumbling as she went. 'We all thought you very kind. It has been very good of you, coming to the lodge. It is getting late, and I must hurry home. Perhaps father has got in the other way.'

'Lily, stop a moment: kind was not what I meant. Kind!—it is you who must be kind to me, Lily. Don't you really know what I mean?' he asked, touching her arm with his hand. 'I want you to be my wife.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger!' cried Lily, moving suddenly away from him with a voice and gesture of horror. She said to herself in her fright, her heart almost standing still for a moment, then leaping up again in a very

frenzy of excitement, that it was like being courted by a brother. Should she tell him? How could she answer him? And she engaged to Stephen! She had never felt so terrified—so overwhelmed, in her life.

'You are frightened,' Roger said. 'Why are you frightened? Don't think of anything but ourselves, Lily. Be selfish for a moment, if you can be selfish. Everything will come right afterwards for the others, if it is right between you and me.'

'For the others?' she repeated, faltering, gazing at him with large and tearful eyes through the dimness of the night.

'Yes, yes,' he cried impatiently. 'You are thinking of your father and of my father. All that will come right. Lily, you must have known: I have not taken you by surprise. Will you? will you? My Lily! Words cannot say what is in my heart for you.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger,' she exclaimed, again putting up her hands between them, 'don't, please don't talk so! I mustn't listen to you. It makes me feel as if I were—not a proper girl. Mr. Roger, oh, for everybody's sake, go away, go away.'

'For everybody's sake?' he said, the moisture coming to his eyes. 'Is that what they have put into your dear mind, that you must not listen to me, for everybody's sake? But, my dearest, if I answer for it that nobody shall come to harm, if I tell you that all shall be well? Surely you may trust me that nobody shall come to harm.'

She made no reply, but hurried along, stumbling over the inequalities in her path, with her head averted a little and horror in her heart. 'Stephen! Stephen!' she said to herself; but she dared not utter his name. What would Stephen think if he heard his brother thus offering her himself and all he had? In the shock of fancied guilt, Lily could not realise what was the offer that was being made. The heir of Melcombe and all that he had! Her brain was not even touched by the magnificence of the conquest. Perhaps she had not yet time to realise it. She was eager for the shelter of the cottage, eager to get away from him, terrified to betray herself, still more terrified lest she should do or say something that would make Stephen angry: his brother, which was the same as

her own brother,—something too horrible to think of! He went on speaking, she scarcely heard what, as he hurried on beside her; begging her to pause, to think; telling her he would wait for his answer, that he saw she was beside herself with fear. 'But why? why?' Roger cried. 'My sweet Lily, do you think I would risk your father's living? Do you think I would do him harm? If my father even should stand in our way, do you think I wouldn't keep *him* from suffering? Hear reason, dearest, hear reason!' He was out of breath, and so was Lily. She only cried, 'Oh, Mr. Roger!' as she hastened on.

Mrs. Ford stood at her garden-gate looking out for Lily, and saw with wonder and a shock at her heart the figure which accompanied her child, clearly a gentleman, with his white shirt front, otherwise indistinguishable in the night. Her first thought was that some one was insulting Lily.

'I'm here, dear, I'm here; you're all right you're close at home!' she cried.

'Oh, mother, it's Mr. Roger!' cried Lily in reply; but she did not pause as if her mother's presence reassured her. 'Good-

night, sir,' she said, and ran in. And in the stillness of the place the lover and the mother, facing each other in the dark, could hear her footsteps climbing hurriedly up the narrow, steep staircase till she reached her room, in which sanctuary both sight and sound of her disappeared.

Mrs. Ford and Roger were left standing, confronting one another, and the position was not without its disagreeable side. Mrs. Ford looked at Roger, and her fingers began to fumble with her apron. Fear for her daughter, uneasiness in the presence of her master's son, whom she was so unwilling to offend, took all assurance from her tone. And yet, if any wrong had been done to her child—— 'Mr. Roger,' she said, trembling, 'you have given my Lily a fright.'

'It appears so. Mrs. Ford, I hope you will stand my friend and bring her to hear reason. It must be Ford and my father she is thinking of. No harm shall come to Ford. I have asked her to be my wife.'

Mrs. Ford gave a shriek which echoed out into the stillness among the trees. 'Oh! good Lord!—Mr. Roger!' she cried.

XX

BROUGHT TO BOOK

THERE is at once something very exciting and strangely calming in having at last carried out an intention long brooding in the mind. The thrill of the real and actual through all the veins is suddenly met and hushed in the awe of the accomplished. And all the hundred questions which had been distracting the spirit,—shall I ? shall I not ? shall it be now ? soon ? a lifetime hence ? will it be for good ? will it be for evil ?—all these doubts, uncertainties, peradventures, cease and disappear, leaving a curious vacancy and awe of silence in the soul. No need for them any longer; no room for further debate. Whether it ought to have been now or never, whether it was for good or evil, it is done, done, and never can be undone. Perhaps to the most happy such a crisis is something of a shock,

and in the midst of rapture even a regret may breathe, for the time when everything was still wrapped in the mists of uncertainty, everything possible, nothing accomplished. Probably, even in such a matter as a declaration of love, the fact is always less delightful than the anticipation. Fancy alone is high fantastical; the imagination which gives us so many of our highest pleasures is exigent. A look, a touch, the inflection of a tone, may offend its overwrought expectations, and reality can never be so wholly sweet as the pictures it has drawn.

Far more than in ordinary cases was this the case with Roger. The melting of modest half-reluctance of which he had dreamed; the shy, sweet wonder of the girl to whom he was opening (how could he help knowing that?) gates as of heaven; the pause of delicate hesitation, doubt, alarm, all of which his love would have so amply cleared away,—these were not what he had encountered. His suit had been received with an appearance of terror very different from that veiled and tremulous happiness which he had imagined to himself. She had been not shy, not trembling only,

but afraid, in a panic of real terror, anxious to escape from him; too much terrified to hear what he had to say. To be sure, he felt himself able to account for this, in a way which exalted and ennobled Lily, since it was her utter unselfishness, her preference of her father's interests and of his, Roger's interests, to her own, her determination to allow no quarrel on her account, no family break-up, no endangerment of others, which had made her receive him so strangely. But yet it had been a disappointment. He had not, indeed, allowed his imagination to dwell on that scene; other questions, far more dark and tragic, had kept him from such lover's dreams; but yet by turns, in the pauses of his anxious thoughts, there had gleamed upon him a sudden picture of how that gentle heart would understand his, of the struggle in Lily's transparent countenance, the spring of delight, the pause of soft alarm. He had seen these things by a side glance. But the picture had not been realised.

This was the first sensation. Then followed others more personal. He had done this thing over which he had hesitated for

months, which he had recognised as a revolution in his life, full of terrible, perhaps tragical, consequences. He had foreseen all these, both great and little, from his own banishment from his father's house (which did not seem a very real danger) to the more horrible certainty of the close ties which would be established between him and the Fords, the place they would have a right to in his household, the gamekeeper father, the homely drudge of a woman, who would be brought so near him. All this he put behind his back now with disdain. What he had done he had done, and nothing could undo it. He raised his hand unconsciously as he hurried across the park, waving all these spectres away. He had accepted them, and their power was gone. He thought of them no more.

A kind of exaltation came into his mind as he went home. To have done it after all was much, to have got out of the region of conflict and doubt. Strange to think that he had been wasting his strength in futile conflicts only this morning; that yesterday he had been struggling in those nets of society which

he loathed, and had almost believed of himself that he never would have done this thing, which now it was as certain he must have done as if it had been planned amid all the counsels of the spheres. And who should say it had not been so planned? When the great crises of our life arrive, we are seldom unwilling to recognise that there is something providential in the way they come about; or at least, if we are very advanced and superior, to smile upon the weaker sweet imagination which seems to have some fanciful justification for thinking that Heaven itself might have taken that trouble. For how can there be a greater thing than the bringing together of two human creatures, from whom a greater and a greater life may spring, until the race touches again the spheres? Marriages, the simple say, are made in heaven. They are fit things to be made in heaven: not the marriages 'arranged' in society, with so much blood and beauty on the one side, and so much money on the other, or between two great estates which would naturally come together, or for any other horrible devil's reason, not Heaven's; but between two

genuine human creatures, man and maid, between the primeval Two, the pair on whom all life is founded and all society. Roger was not, perhaps, a man of poetical thought in general, but the mind which usually thinks in prose will sometimes strike a higher note of poetry in exceptional elevation and excitement than the more poetically disposed. Then he thought of the fast women, the girls like Geraldine and Amy, and of the contrast between the noisy racket of that unlovely life and the beautiful tranquil existence of the true woman, working all day under a humble, quiet roof, walking in her sweetness among all other sweet and tender influences in the soft May evening, amid the dews and balmy odours of the park. How different, he thought with a certain glorying in his own apparent unsuccess (which he did not believe, would not believe, was real), how still more different would have been the reception of his suit in that other world, the great world, where he was known as an excellent *parti*, the heir to a good estate! There would have been no hesitation about the girl he had chosen; the parents would

have accepted him with open arms. Lily's panic was sweet in comparison—how sweet! To her it was the obstacle that he should be the heir of Melcombe. How different! This thought carried his soul away, floating upon waves of immeasurable content.

He had reached the house before he was aware, going quickly in the abstraction of his mind. It stood solid in the summer dark, a big shadow softly rounded off by the surrounding trees; the great cedar on the lawn like a tower, more substantial even in its blackness of shadow than the human house with its flickers of light at the windows. He came to it upon the garden side, where were the long row of projecting windows. In Nina's, which formed one of the drawing-room bays, there was a light, and he saw her little face appear, suddenly pressed against the glass, peering out at the sound of his footstep on the gravel. A more subdued light, that of his father's shaded lamp, shone from the corresponding window of the library. Did his father rise too at the sound of his step, or was it only his imagination that suggested a stir within? He had passed these lights, and was making his

way round to the door, which he could see was open, showing the coloured lamp in the hall and a glow of variegated light upon the black oak carvings, when he heard himself sharply called from a little distance beyond. It was the Squire's voice. Roger felt in a moment that all that had gone before was as child's play, and that now the great crisis of his life had come. He went forward slowly, and I will not say that his heart did not beat louder. He was a man fully matured, not one to tremble before a father; and yet there went through him a thrill of something like alarm, —a thrill which did not mean fear, nor any disposition to yield to his father the arbitration of his fate, yet which was a summoning of all his energies to meet a danger which he had foreseen without ever expecting it, and which, far sooner than he had supposed, was to settle and decide the future tenor of his life.

'Roger, is it you? I might have known. What do you mean, bursting in at the windows and scaring poor little Nina? Nobody shall do that in my house.'

'Has Nina said so?' asked Roger sharply.

'I came in at no window, sir. When you called me I was making my way to the door.'

The Squire paused, and looked at his son as a bull might look, with his head down before charging. 'It doesn't matter,' he said, 'door or window. Where have you been, sir?—that's the question. Only a few hours at home, and here's somebody who must receive a visit, who can't be put off,—the first night! Where have you been?'

'Where have I been? Surely I am not a child, sir, to be questioned in that way——'

'No, you're not a child, more's the pity. A child can do no harm but to himself. You —can disgrace your family and everybody belonging to you. Where have you been, sir, to-night?'

'I have been,' said Roger, with a strong effort at self-control, 'in the park. When you think of it, you will see that a man of my age cannot be asked such questions. Let the night pass, father. If you have anything to ask that I can answer, let it be to-morrow.'

'It shall be to-night!' cried the Squire, with foam flying from his lips. 'And you shall answer what questions I choose to ask, or else

I will know the reason why. In the park? I know where you have been, you poor fool. You have been at the West Lodge!'

'Well, sir; and what then?' said Roger, the blood coursing back upon his heart, all his forces rallying to meet the attack. It subdued his excitement and made him calm. He stood firmly looking in his father's face, which he could scarcely see, except that it was infuriated and red. And there was a moment of silence,—dead silence,—into which the stirrings of the night outside and the movements of the house came strangely.

For a moment Mr. Mitford was speechless with rage and consternation. Then he turned and walked quickly into the house, waving to his son to follow him. 'We can't talk here. Come into my room.'

The library was a large room lined with books, a miscellaneous collection, abundant but not valuable, in dingy old bindings, which made the walls dark. One lamp, and that a shaded one, stood in a corner on the table where Mr. Mitford read his newspapers. This was the only light visible. The Squire went up to it, and threw himself

into his armchair. Roger did not sit down. He stood with his hand upon the table, which was in the light, but his face was in shadow. This gave him a slight advantage over his father, who was full in the light.

'You say "What then?"' said Mr. Mitford, 'and you say it mighty coolly, as if it didn't matter. Let's understand each other once for all. It's some time now since you have set yourself to thwart my plans. I was ready to settle everything for you, to make it easy,—and you had the best of everything waiting for you to pick up. By Jove, you were too well off,—that's all about it. Well, what's come between you and all this? Your mind's changed, and your ways. Once you were all straight, doing very well, though you were always a stubborn one. Now——'

'I am still a stubborn one, I fear,' Roger assented, with an attempt at a smile.

'None of your smiling!' cried the Squire. 'It's no smiling matter, I can tell you. What's the reason? Confound you, sir,' exclaimed the angry father, the foam flying from his lips again, 'do you think I don't

know what it is? A dressed-up, mincing milliner's girl—a doll with a pretty face—a—a creature! I've seen her, sir,—I've seen her. Ford's daughter,—the keeper! That's what takes you every night from home. And you come back from low company like that to your sister's—and look me in the face——'

'I hope,' said Roger, pale and trembling with passion, 'I can look any man in the face. And as for my sisters, any one of them, if they were half as good as she of whom you speak——'

The Squire was purple: it was not much wonder, perhaps. And he knew that was a bad thing for a man of a full habit, like himself; and with one big word to relieve his mind he forced himself into a sort of calmness, resuming his seat from which he had started. Losing one's temper does nobody any good. He puffed forth a hot blast of angry breath, which relieved him, and then he assumed what was intended for a polished air of composure.

'Good! I see you have made up your mind. May I ask what course you intend to

adopt in respect to this paragon? I suppose you've settled that too?'

'Sir,' said Roger, 'when a man loves a woman, and she is free to marry him, there can be but one course to adopt, so far as I am aware.'

'Oh! so that is it: "there can be but one course!"' repeated the Squire, with that highly offensive attempt to mimic his son's tone which was habitual to him. Then thundering, 'You mean to *marry* the baggage, sir, and bring her to this house, to your mother's place!'

'She was my mother's favourite; she has been trained upon my mother's plan,' said Roger, with white lips.

'Your mother's favourite—for a waiting-maid! Trained upon your mother's plan—to cut out aprons and sew them! Is that what you want her for? But let me tell you, sir, that girl shall never sit in your mother's place—never, if there was not a woman but herself in the world; never, if—— What is the use of wasting words? If you mean to make such a disgraceful match, you had better count the cost first, which is—Melcombe in

the first place, and your supposed position here. The land shall go to your brother; I withdraw your allowance. Love is a fine thing, isn't it? Go and live upon it, and see how you like it then.'

'Father!' gasped Roger; he felt it necessary to control his own passion, and caught at the word to remind himself of a bond that could not be ignored.

'It is of no use appealing to me. You think I have been uttering vain threats and have meant nothing; but, by Jove, you shall find out the difference. I've not been a pedant,' cried the Squire, 'nor a prude,'—they were the first words that occurred to him. 'I've paid your debts, and put up with —many things no father approves of.'

'You must think, sir, that you are speaking to Stephen, and not to me.'

'Hold your tongue, sir!' thundered the Squire. 'I know what I am saying and who I am speaking to. Stephen may be a fool, but not so great a fool as you are. He would not throw away his living and his place in the world for any woman. Look here! either you give up this business at

once, this very night (I'll pack the whole brood away to-morrow, out of your road), and settle down and marry as you ought, and do your duty by your family, or—good-bye!' cried the Squire angrily, kissing the tips of his fingers,—'good-bye! Take your own way; it's to be hoped you'll find it a wise one. As for me, I've nothing more to say.'

'Father!' exclaimed Roger again. The shock, for it was a shock, calmed him once more. There had been no very cordial relations in the family, perhaps, but never a breach. And his home exercised that charm over him which an ancestral home does over most Englishmen. The disinheritance did not strike him as anything real, but the severance had a horrible sound; it daunted him in spite of himself.

'I will listen to no appeal,' said the Squire. 'You think you can touch my heart by that "father" of yours. Pshaw! you're not a baby; you know what you're about as well as I do. We're both men, no such wonderful difference. I'll have no false sentiment. Do what I require, or if you take

your own way, understand that Melcombe will never be yours. I may settle some trifle on you for charity, but Melcombe——'

'In that case, sir,' said Roger slowly and stiffly, 'words are useless, as you say. I can't take your way in what's life or death to me. Melcombe—can—have nothing to do with it so far as I am concerned. It is yours, not mine, to dispose of. And as for charity——' His hand clenched upon the table, showing all the veins; but his face, which was white to the lips, was in the shadow, out of which his voice came tuneless and hard, with pauses to moisten his throat. It stopped at last from that cause, his mouth being parched with agitation and passion, on the word 'charity,' which, had he retained the power of expression, would have been full of scorn: but he had lost the power.

The door opened behind them at this crisis, and Edmund came into the room. Edmund had been uneasy all the evening, but his mind went no further than uneasiness. He feared vaguely a quarrel between his father and brother. He feared that Roger, in his excited and uncertain state,

would bear no interference, but this was all. He came into the room anxious, but scarcely alarmed, and took no fright from the words he heard. 'Charity,'—it had ended thus, he thought, amicably, on some mild matter of benevolence on which father and son were agreeing. But this delusion lasted a moment, and no longer.

'Here, Ned,' cried the Squire, 'you're just in time. Your brother thinks more of your interest than his own. Your name goes down in the will to-morrow in the place of his. Shake hands, old fellow; it's you that are to have Melcombe. You are a bit of a milksop, Ned, but never mind. Shake hands on it, my boy.'

'What does this mean?' cried Edmund, hurrying forward into the light. But Roger did not wait for the explanation. He caught his brother's hand as he passed him, and wrung it in his own; then hurried out of the room, leaving the two others, the one at the height of excitement, the other disturbed and wondering, looking strangely into each other's eyes.

XXI

SUBSTITUTION

EDMUND and his father stood looking at each other, as Roger's steps died away. They listened with a curious unanimity, though the one was at the height of unreasoning anger, and the other anxious and alarmed, — as people listen to steps that are going away for ever. There seemed some spell in the sound. Mr. Mitford was the first to break free from it. He threw himself down in his chair, making it creak and swing. 'Well!' he cried, 'there's heroics! And now to business. You were surprised, I don't doubt, at what I said just now, Ned. You thought I didn't mean it. You thought, perhaps, I had said it before. There you're wrong. If I said it before, it was but a threat, a crack of the whip, don't you know, over his head. I am in serious earnest now.'

'About what, sir?' asked Edmund. 'Pardon me if I don't understand.'

'You mean you won't understand,' retorted the Squire, who spoke with a puff of angry breath between each phrase, panting with anger. 'It is too late for that sort of thing now. You had better give me your attention seriously, without any quixotical nonsense. I don't say it is wrong to consider your brother. You've done so as much—more than he or any one had a right to expect; but you're doing no good, and that is a sort of thing that can't go on for ever. You had better accept the position, and think a little of yourself now.'

'What is it, father? You would not, I am sure, do anything hasty. Roger's not a prudent fellow, and he has a hot temper. If he has done or said anything that offends you, it was inadvertence, or carelessness, or——'

'I know very well what it was, without any of your glosses. If you mean to say that it was not with any intention of being cut out of my will in consequence, I grant you that. Most likely he does not believe I shall ever be aggravated to the point of cut-

ting him out of my will. What he wants is his own way and my property too. Yes,' said Mr. Mitford, with a snort of hot breath, 'that is what he intends,—it's simple. But there's a limit to that as to everything else, and I've reached that limit. I've been coming to it for some time, and he's clenched it to-night. I want to speak of yourself, not Roger. So far as he's concerned, there's not another word to say.'

'He can't have *done* anything since he came home—if it's only something foolish he has said——'

'Hold your tongue, Ned! There's not to be another word on that subject, please!' with fierce politeness. Then the Squire added with a snarl, 'He's asked Lily Ford to marry him,—or means to do so,—and tells me she was his mother's favourite, and therefore is fit to be put in his mother's place. By Jove!' cried Mr. Mitford, puffing out once more from his nostrils a hot blast, 'and the fellow thinks I'm to stand that! It's all quite settled; we may take it quietly; there's nothing more to say. Now comes your turn, Ned. You won't disgrace me in that sort of

way, I know. You may sink into a corner and do nothing at all,—that's likely enough, —but you won't disgrace your family. Try and be something more than negative, now you're at the head of it. You're not the man your brother is, though, thank Heaven, you're not the fool he is, either. Why, if you put your best foot foremost—there is no telling — Lizzie Travers might like you as well as Roger. You could but try.'

The Squire exhaled a part of his excitement in a harsh laugh. It sounded coarse and unfeeling, but in reality it was neither. It was anger, pain, emotion, the lower elements heightened by something of that irritation of natural affection which makes wrath itself more wrathful. Edmund did not do justice to his father. He was horrified and revolted by the supposed jest, and had he given vent to his feelings he would have made an indignant and angry reply; but the thought that he was Roger's sole helper restrained him. He must neither quarrel with his father, nor even refuse these propositions, however horrible they were to him, for Roger's sake.

'It would be very painful to me,' he said gravely, 'to be put in my brother's place.'

'What, with Lizzie Travers?' cried the Squire, with another laugh. 'Take heart, man. Women, as often as not, prefer domestic fellows like you.'

Edmund had a hard struggle with himself. He had the sensitiveness of a man whose mind was touched with the preliminaries of love, and in a semi-reverential state to all women; and to hear one name thus tossed about was almost more than he could bear. But there was a great deal at stake, and he mastered himself.

'You might leave me your heir, sir,' he said, 'but you could not make me the head of the family. After you, Roger is that, though he had not a penny. I am very strong on primogeniture, so far as that goes.'

'Primogeniture is all humbug,' said the Squire. 'If it were not that those Radical fellows are so hot against it,—as if it could do anything to them!—I should say myself it was a mistake. Let the father choose the son that suits him to come after him. That's what I say, and that's my case. As for the

head of the family, don't you trouble your mind, Ned. The head of the family is the one who has the money. You may take my word for that.'

'And yet, sir,' said Edmund quietly, 'if I were owner of Melcombe to-morrow, and had everything you could give me, I should still be obliged to bear the Mitford arms with a difference, to show I was not the first in descent.'

This statement made the Squire turn pale. It will probably not impress the reader very profoundly, unless, indeed, he belongs to an old county family, and knows what such a misfortune is. For a moment it took away Mr. Mitford's breath. He had not thought of that. Roger landless, with full right to the ancient coat; and Edmund rich and the proprietor of everything, yet bearing a mark of cadency, his younger son's difference! That was a bitter pill. He had not thought of it, and therefore received the blow full on his breast. The first effect it had was to make him more and more angry with his eldest son.

'Confound the fellow!' he cried, with an

earnestness of objurgation which was more than wrath. Roger was not only making his father angry, but giving him occasion for serious thought. A mark of cadency! It was an idea for which the Squire was not prepared.

'And if what you foresee should happen,' said Edmund, with grave persistency, following out his line of argument without raising his eyes, 'if we should marry and leave children behind us, there would be the Mitfords who are the elder branch poor, and the Mitfords who are——'

'Stop that!' cried the Squire; 'if it is so, it can't be helped. Do you think I'm going to let myself be balked and all my plans frustrated by a trifle like that? Let them be the elder branch, and much good may it do them! —the children of Lily Ford, my gamekeeper's grandsons! By Jove!' Mr. Mitford felt himself grow purple again, and saw sparks flying before his eyes: and he stopped, for he knew it was not good for him to let excitement go so far. To decide which of his sons should succeed him was one thing; to open the way for him to receive his inherit-

ance at once was very different. He had not the least intention of doing that. 'It's quite enough,' he said, 'for this time that you understand and accept my settlement. I have had enough of it for one night. To-morrow we'll have Pouncefort over and settle everything. You can leave me now. Why the deuce did you let the fellow come here?' he exclaimed, with a sudden outburst, as Edmund turned to leave the room.

'You may ask that, sir. It is my fault. I told him I was coming, which I had no need to do.'

'Need! I would as soon have told him to hang himself. And what did *you* want here? Couldn't you have stayed in town and kept him straight? What is the good of you, if you can't do a thing like that?' The foam began to fly from the Squire's mouth as the gust of irritation rose. 'A younger brother, sir, should have some feeling for the family. He ought to be able to sacrifice a little to keep his brother straight. Good Lord, what is the use of him if it isn't that? And here you come vapouring to the country for no reason, and tell him you are

coming! Tell him! For goodness' sake, why?'

'It was the act of a fool,' said Edmund, with bowed head.

'It was worse,' cried the Squire. 'It was the act of Jacob, he that was the supplanter, don't you know, that took his brother by the heel—it's all in the Bible. It's your fault, and it will be to your advantage: that's the way of the world. Oh, I don't suppose you thought of that,—you're not clever enough; but I should, in your position. I should have seen what people would say. You'll get the land and the lady, while Roger, my poor Roger——' And here the Squire broke down. Who could doubt that to cast off his eldest son was a misery even to this high-tempered and imperious man? Roger was lost to him,—there was no going back upon the decision; but still a man might rage at the things and chances which had turned his son aside from the right way.

'Father, for God's sake, let things be as they are!' cried Edmund. 'Do you suppose I would take Roger's inheritance from him? When you think of it you will relent; and I,

for my part, could only accept as his trustee, as his representative, to frighten him, since you think proper to do so, but to restore——'

The Squire looked up, suddenly brought to himself by this unguarded speech. His momentary emotion had blown off, and the watchfulness of the man determined to have his own way, and to permit no one to interfere, started up in full force. 'Oh!' he said, 'so that's it. Your compliance seemed a little too gracious. You're not so ready to humour me in a usual way. So that's it! I might have known there was something underhand.'

Anger flamed up on Edmund's cheek; but he restrained himself once more. If he let himself go and joined Roger in his banishment, who would there be to make any stand for the disinherited? Stephen? He did not trust Stephen. He said gravely, 'I do not suppose you mean, in this respect at least, what you say. I have never, that I know of, done anything underhand.'

'Well, perhaps that was strong,' said the Squire. I don't know that you have, Ned;

but I'll have nothing of the kind here. I hope Pouncefort knows his business. If you're to be my heir, you shall be so, not merely a screen for Roger. Go away now. I'm excited, which, if I had any sense, I shouldn't be. One lets one's self get excited over one's children, who don't care two straws what happens to one. That is the truth. You are interested about your brother; but as for me, who have brought you up and cared for you all your life——'

The Squire's voice took a pathetic tone. He really felt a little emotion, and he was not in the way of using histrionic methods: but yet everybody does this at one time or another, and he was not unwilling to make his son believe that he felt it a great deal.

And Edmund was aware of both phases. He knew that his father was not without heart. He was even sorry for him in the present complication of affairs; but it went against him to fall into the pathos which was suggested, and make any pretty speech about Mr. Mitford's devotion to his children and the manner in which they repaid it. He stood still for a moment, silent, making no

response, feeling to himself like an impersonation of the undutiful and ungrateful. What could he say? Nothing that would not be at least partially fictitious, as had been the appeal.

'I think I will take myself off, sir,' he said, 'as you tell me. To-morrow we shall all know better, perhaps, what we are about. I am very much taken by surprise. I never for a moment supposed that, in earnest, you meant to disinherit your eldest son.'

'You thought I meant it in jest, then?' said the Squire. 'It's a nice thing to joke about, isn't it, a man's eldest son? Well, go. I have had about enough of this confounded business for one night.'

He felt that his effort had failed, and he was vexed to think that his voice had trembled, and that he had really been touched by his own fatherly devotion, and in vain; but that soon went out of his head when his son had left him, and he sat alone surveying all the circumstances at his leisure in the quiet which solitude gives. He leaned his head upon his hands, and stared at the light, which came with so much additional force from

under the shade of the lamp. He was not a happy father, it was true. His children had gone against him,—Roger violently, Edmund with a silent disapproval which was very trying to bear, Stephen with the careless insolence of a young man who knows the world much better than his father does. Even the girls paid no attention to his wishes. The elder ones were fast young women about town, which was a thing he detested; and Nina was a little gossip, no better than a waiting-maid at home. These things all came to the Squire's mind in this moment which he passed alone. He had done a great deal for them all, especially for the boys, and this was how they repaid him. He protested in his own mind against it all,—against their indifference, their carelessness, their superiority to his opinion. That was what a man got for taking a little trouble, for trying to make a home for his family, for giving up all pleasure outside of his own house. It was rather a fine, disinterested, noble-minded picture he made of himself. It looked very well, he thought unconsciously. He might have married again; he might have spent his time

at race meetings, or gone into society, or amused himself in a great many ways; but instead he had lived at home, and brought up his children, and devoted himself to them. It was a fine thing to have done. He had been comparatively young when their mother died, and she, poor thing, had gone early. But he had never given her a successor, as he might have done; he had never abandoned her children: and this was how they rewarded him,—to propose to put Lily Ford in their mother's place; to pretend to accept his favour in order to give it back to Roger, whom it was his intention to disinherit; to go against him, cross him, show how little they cared for him in every way!

Mr. Mitford was not softened by his reflections; after that touch of pathos and admiring self-pity, he worked himself up into anger again. They might think to get the better of him, but they should not. They were all in his power, whatever they might think. He was not bound to give them a farthing, any one of them. He might marry again, for that matter, and have heirs who would be perfectly docile, who would never set up their

will against his. By Jove! and that was what he would do, if they did not mind. Who could say that even Lizzie Travers herself might not think a man of sixty-five, hale and hearty, a man who knew the world, as good as any one of the young fellows that did not know a fine woman when they saw her? She was not in her first youth, after all,—not what you could call a girl. She was twenty-five. The Squire said to himself that he might do a great deal worse, and that she might do a great deal worse. This gleamed across his mind for a moment with a triumphant sense of the universal discomfiture which he might thus create all around. But, to do him justice, it was not such a suggestion as found natural root in his mind; and presently he returned to the practical question. To disinherit Roger, yet leave the next heir free to reinstate him, was, of course, out of the question. The Squire drew his blotting-book towards him, and began to write out his instructions to Pouncefort. He was not at any time a bad man of business, and the excitement in his mind seemed to clear every faculty. He who had prided himself so on his freedom from all

bonds of entail or other restrictions upon his testamentary rights began, with a grim smile upon his face, to invent restrictions for his successor. He tore up several copies of the document before he satisfied himself at last; and as he went on, getting more and more determined that his son should have no will in the matter, the Squire finally decided upon conditions by which Edmund was to be tied up harder than any tenant for life had ever been before him, with the most minute stipulations as to who was to succeed him,—his own children first, then Stephen and his children, then the girls,—not a loophole left for Roger, nor for any arrangement with Roger. The Squire perhaps saw the humour of this when he read the paper over and shut it into his drawer before going to bed, for there was a smile upon his face. Nevertheless, he breathed out a long breath as he lighted his candle, and said to himself, 'He'll never be such a confounded fool,' as he went upstairs to his own room through the silence of the sleeping house.

XXII

A MIDNIGHT TALK

THE house, however, was not so still as Mr. Mitford supposed. It contained at least one room in which an exciting act of the same family drama was being carried on. The brothers had not met immediately after Edmund had left his father: for a few hours they had been alone, following each the thread of his own excited and troublous thoughts. Roger had gone out to calm the fever of his mind in the coolness and darkness of the night. Edmund, hastening out of his father's presence after his dismissal, had sunk into a chair in the hall, where all was vacant, the night air breathing in through the open door, the shadows of the trees waving faintly, the leaves rustling. He had thrown himself down there in the dark, where no one could see him, to escape from the

necessity of doing or saying anything. As he sat there Nina's little white figure came out from the drawing-room, peered about with anxious curiosity, then vanished upstairs; and Larkins appeared, with a footman after him, to shut up for the night. Edmund did not move while they passed from one room to another, closing the windows, letting down the bolts and bars. The jar of these noises gave a kind of unwilling accompaniment to his troubled mind. Then a quick step, unsteady with passion and excitement, approached rapidly and rang upon the pavement. 'Is it you, Roger?' his brother said, rising out of the shadows. Roger was in no mood to talk; he waved his hand as if to put all interruption away, and hastened to his room with an evident disinclination for any further intercourse. But an hour or two later, when all was still, Edmund, who had taken refuge in the meantime in the billiard-room, which was the one room of the house left alone by Larkins, always a refuge for the young men—their sulking-room when they were indisposed for family society,—heard the door suddenly open and his brother come

in. The only light in the room was from the lamp suspended over the billiard-table, and throwing a vivid glow upon the green cloth. The large bow-window at the end let in a prospect of pale sky and waving branches. The room was in an angle separated from the rest of the house. Roger came in like a ghost, scarcely seen, and threw himself upon a chair near the one which Edmund had himself taken; and there they sat for some time, stretching out their long limbs, extending, as it were, their minds, racked with distracting thoughts, with nothing to say to each other, and yet so much; communicating a mutual *malaise*, misery, difficulty, without a word said. They had a degree of family likeness which made this mute meeting all the more pathetic. They were antagonists in interests, according to any vulgar estimate of the case. The younger brother disapproved profoundly, miserably, of what the elder had done. He felt the inappropriateness of it, the folly of it, to the bottom of his heart; and yet in this troubled chaos, where all landmarks were disappearing and every established law being

abrogated, he was one with Roger, smarting with him under the wounds given by his father's rage, and even moved (though he was so much against it) by a sort of instinctive sympathy with that fatal infatuation of foolish love.

They began to talk at last in monosyllables, which dropped now and then into the silence with a question and answer half expressed. 'All settled, then?'—'Nothing to be done?'—'All'—'Nothing.' Then another long pause. By degrees a few more words came to Edmund's lips and a longer reply from Roger's; then, the ice once fully broken, the brothers settled into talk.

'Don't spoil your own life for me, Ned,' said Roger; 'the die is cast for me. And in every way it is better, when you come to think of it. I don't say there is not reason in it, from his point of view. I've never been blind to that side of the question. I know that it might not be easy to reconcile everything—the father and mother——'

'You see that,' exclaimed Edmund, 'and yet it makes no difference.'

'I have always seen it,' said Roger, almost

fiercely: 'you know I have. I see everything. No! it makes no difference,—rather the reverse.'

'It pushes you on?'

'It pushes me on. Ned,' he added, leaning forward, 'you don't know what it is to be caught in the tide like this. Every disadvantage pushes me on: because it is not what I may have dreamed—because, God help us! there may be, even afterwards, things to overcome——'

'Roger, for God's sake——'

'Don't speak to me,' he said, holding up his hand. 'I'll quarrel with you, if you do,—though, Ned, old fellow, Heaven knows I trust you and hold you closer than any other man in the world. Only don't touch that subject. Yes,' he went on dreamily, leaning back in his chair again, 'I don't disguise it from myself: there may be things to overcome. We have lived in very different spheres, we have different ways of thinking, and all the associations and habits—I scorn myself for thinking of them at all, but I overlook nothing, I am as cool and cold as any calculating machine——'

'And yet you sacrifice everything, you throw away everything.'

'Hush!' said Roger again, 'not a word. What do I sacrifice,—the chance of marrying a woman like my sisters? And suppose that there are differences between her and me,—what are they? Conventionalities on my side, things that mean nothing, mannerisms to which we choose to attribute an importance; to sit down in a certain way, to speak in a certain tone, to observe certain ceremonies. What is all that? Who would put these nothings in comparison with a pure nature,—a pure, sweet nature and a good heart?'

To this Edmund made no reply. A self-pleading so pitiful wanted none. The depths out of which Roger spoke, a happy lover, feeling the world well lost for the sake of the woman he loved, were too dark and tragic to be fathomed by any sympathiser, even a brother. And perhaps when Edmund did speak it was still more dangerous ground upon which he trod. 'Are you sure——' he said, then paused, feeling the insecurity of the soil.

'Am I sure—of what? That there is no further question as to what I have done and mean to do? Yes, quite sure.'

'That was not what I meant to ask—and you may be offended by my question; but it is serious enough to risk your anger for. Are you sure that she—loves you, Roger,—you who are giving up so much for her?'

Roger did not reply at once, but when he did so did it in haste, turning quickly upon his brother, as if he had not allowed a minute to elapse before giving him his answer. 'Would you like her to have thrown herself at my head, clutched at me as a good *parti*, not to be let slip? That's what she would have done if she had been a girl in society; but, fortunately for me, she is not that.'

'Forget the girls in society,' said Edmund; 'they are not what you choose to think them, or at least I don't believe it. But, Roger, there's no question so important to you as this. Think how many inducements there are for her besides love. I will say nothing else,—I will allow that everything has gone too far to be altered,—but only this: are you

sure that she shares your feelings? I don't want to bother you; you know that.'

'Am I so disagreeable?' demanded Roger, with a laugh; 'beside all the people she is likely to see, am I so little worth considering? You pay me a poor compliment, Ned. But of this I'm sure: if it is so, she'll have nothing to say to me. You can comfort yourself with that thought.'

'Perhaps not,' said Edmund, hesitating; 'but if so, she will have great strength of mind. Roger, for Heaven's sake, make sure. She has everything to gain, and you have everything to lose——'

'That's enough!' Roger rose impatiently, and held out his hand to his brother. 'You're a Job's comforter, Ned! I don't doubt you mean very well, but this is not the way to encourage a man when he's—when he's at a difficult point in life. Good-night, old fellow! I know you wish me well. Don't spoil your own chances for me, that's all.'

'Good-night!' Edmund said; and he sat still in the silent room after his brother had left him, thinking over this new danger,—that Roger might give up everything he had

in the world for the sake of a girl to whom he was merely the means of rising, a fine match, a gentleman elevating her out of her own small sphere. Love! how could it be love? What did she know of him to make love possible? It might even be that it was a hard thing to expect from such a girl indifference to the advantages which Roger could offer her: she would be flattered, she would be dazzled, she would see herself in a moment placed high above all her equals. Neither she nor her parents would believe in Roger's disinheritance; and he, with this fatal passion in him, this fate which he had not been able to resist, would barter away his heart and his life—for what?—for the privilege of making Lily Ford a lady; not to win love and all its compensations, but to serve as a stepping-stone to the ambition of an artificially trained girl. The tragedy deepened as he thought it all over, sitting alone, feeling the chill of the night steal upon him in the silent house. Oh, what a mystery is life, with all its mistakes and tragic blunderings! What fatal darkness all about us, until all illumination is too late! It is the

spectator, people say, who sees the game, not those whose whole fortune is staked upon it. But in this case it was not even so; the gamester, who had put his all upon the touch to win or to lose, saw too,—was aware of the ruin that might be before him, the wasted sacrifice, the spoiled life,—and yet would neither pause nor think. Perhaps it is the tender-hearted looker-on, in such circumstances, who has the worst of it. He has none of the compensations. Even the excitement which is sometimes so tragic is sometimes also rapturous for the chief actor: but the sympathiser can never get its realities out of his eyes; they overshadow everything, even the hope, which might be a just one, that, after all was said, the soul of goodness would vindicate itself even amid things evil. For Roger there was still the chance that joy might be the outcome; at all events, there was no happiness for him except in this way. But Edmund saw the evil and not the good, nor any good, however things might turn.

XXIII

GOING AWAY

WHEN Roger woke next morning, and opened his eyes in the familiar room, and saw the peaceful sunshine streaming in through that familiar window, as he had done for the greater part of his life, it was not for some minutes that he realised to himself all that had happened,—all the difference there was between this awakening and that of any other day. It flashed upon him suddenly after a moment of wonder and trouble,—a moment in which care confronted him, awake before him, but with the mists of morning over its face. What was it that had happened? Then recollection came like a flood. He had declared himself to Lily, his love-tale was told, he was hers whatever might happen. All doubt or question was over so far as that was concerned. A gleam

of troubled sunshine passed over his memory, a vision of her, timid, shrinking, with that frightened cry, 'Oh, Mr. Roger!'—nothing more responsive; but what could that be but her modest way, her shy panic at the passion in him, her unselfish fears for her father? It could be nothing more.

Then out of this sunshine, out of this transporting certainty, his mind plunged into the darkness again. He saw the dim library, the shaded lamp, his father, furious, opposite to him, calling for the renunciation of all his hopes. He raised himself slowly from his bed, and looked round him. All was so familiar and so dear; it was home. There cannot be two homes in this world: he had grown up here, he knew every corner of it, and there was not a nook, out of doors or in, that had not some association for Roger. As in a vision he suddenly saw his mother standing just within the door, shading the candle with her hand so that the light should not fall on his eyes. He seemed to see her, though it was so long since she had stood there: fifteen years or more: and all this time he had lived here, with short absences;

coming back always to the same place, always the chief person in the house next to his father, knowing that all was his whatever should happen. And now it was his no longer. To-day was to be the last he should spend under the paternal roof; to-day was the last day on which he could call Melcombe his home: and up to this time there had never been any doubt that he would be master of all. It was not a thing that had ever been taken into discussion or questioned. He was his father's eldest son, the head of the family after him. What could happen but that Roger should succeed his father? He had no more wished for this as an advantage over his brothers than he had wished for his father's death in order that he might succeed. There was no reasoning in it, no personal thought. It was the course of nature, taken for granted as much as we take it for granted that to-morrow's sun will shine.

Now the course of nature was stopped, and everything that had been sure to be was turned aside and would be no more. Bewilderment was the chief feeling in Roger's mind; not pain so much as wonder, and the

difficulty of accepting what was incredible,—a state not of excitement, still less of struggle, but of a certain dim consternation, incapacity to understand or realise what nevertheless he knew to be true. He knew it so well to be true and irresistible that, as he dressed, he arranged in his mind how his few private possessions were to be disposed of. Some of them he would no longer have any use for,—his hunters, his dogcart, the many things which somehow had come to be his, without either purchase or gift, the natural property of the heir of the house. Were they his at all? What was his? Almost nothing: a legacy his godfather had left him, a little money he had at the bank, the remains of the allowance he had from his father; that, of course, would stop. He must find work of some kind,—something which he could do, enough to maintain himself—and his wife. His wife! Good heavens! was it to poverty he was to bring her? Instead of transporting her to the higher sphere in which he had (O fool!) foreseen so many difficulties, was he to give her only the dulness of genteel poverty,—a poverty harder and less simple than that to

which she had been used? Was this what it had come to? He thought for the first time seriously of Edmund's question—'Does she love you?' She was not mercenary; no, not like the society women. She would not count what he had or weigh the advantages of marrying him, but—— The question had become more serious even in the very moment of being put. It might have been enough for the future master of Melcombe to love his bride, whom he could surround with everything her heart could desire. But if Lily were to wed a man disinherited, she must love him. The chill of that thought came over him like a sudden storm-cloud. He had not asked if she loved him. She was a timid, modest girl, who perhaps had never even thought of love. She would love him *after;* she would come to love him: he who could make her life like a fairy-tale, who could change everything for her, realise her every dream,—what could she do but love him? He had expected to be the fairy prince to Lily, the giver of everything that was delightful and sweet. He had never been exacting, he had not expected from her a

return which he believed she was too innocent, too inexperienced, to have thought of. It would almost have wounded the delicacy of Roger's passion had she thrown herself into his arms, and acknowledged that her heart had already awakened and responded to the fervour of his. But now the question was altogether changed. Now that he had nothing to offer, nothing to give her, it was necessary before she accepted the only remainder, which was himself, that Lily's heart should have spoken, that she should love him. He had not thought of it in this light even when Edmund put the question to him, nor had Edmund thought of it in that light: but he saw it now.

The effect upon Roger of this thought was extraordinary. Certainly he had not intended to carry away from Ford's cottage an unwilling bride. He had looked for a sweet consent, a gentle yielding to his love, a growing wonder and enchantment and delight; but now—— In spite of himself, a chill got into Roger's veins. What had he to offer her? Poverty, obscurity; an existence differing from that in which she had been

brought up in nothing except that it would be far harder in its necessities than those of the gamekeeper's cottage ever could have been. Acquiescence would not do any longer. Lily must choose, she must know what her own heart said. This change altered all possible relations between them at once. She must take a woman's part, which, he said to himself with a groan, she was not old enough nor experienced enough to take, and judge for herself. It was for her sake that he would be poor, but perhaps she would be in the right if she refused his poverty. It would have to be put to her, at least, and she must decide for herself. The shifting scenes which surrounded this resolution in Roger's imagination were many and various. He imagined what he would say to her, and half a dozen different ways in which she might reply. She might put her hand in his and say, 'You need me more if you are to be poor;' or she might whisper that it was he, and not his fortune, that had ever moved her; or she might tell by nothing but a smile, by nothing but tears, what her meaning was. There were a hundred ways. Ah! if that were so,

it would be easy to say it; but if it were not so?

He set out with a very grave face, after the pretence at breakfast which he had made alone, having waited until the family had dispersed from that meal,—all but Nina, who sat faithful by the urn, with large eyes expanded by curiosity, watching all her brother's movements, waiting till she had poured out his tea for him. Roger did not even notice her watchful looks. He had not an idea that she perused all the faces at that table, one after another, and made them out. But something more was going on than was within Nina's ken: it was not enough, she knew, to conclude that papa had been scolding the boys, —that was the only way of putting it which she was accustomed to; but by this time she was aware that it was more serious than that. Roger's face, however, was all shut and closed to her scrutiny; the upper lip firmly set against the lower, the chin square, the eyes overcast.

'Will you have another cup of tea, Roger?' she said.

'No, Nina, thanks.'

'Won't you have something to eat, Roger? You have had nothing. A gentleman can't breakfast on a cup of tea.'

'Thank you, my dear; I have had all I want.'

'Oh, Roger, I'm afraid you are not well. Oh, Roger, do eat something before you go out.'

Her voice was so much disturbed that he paused to pat her upon the shoulder, as he passed her.

'Don't trouble about me, Nina. I have more to think of than breakfast,' Roger said. His tone was more gentle than usual, his hand lingered tenderly upon her shoulder. Nina got very quickly to her window, when he had left the room; there was no more occasion for keeping her place by the urn. She watched till he came out from the other side of the house and took his way across the park. To the West Lodge again, and so early! It became clear to Nina that something more must be involved than a scolding from papa.

Roger had not the air of a happy lover; his face was grave and pale and full of care.

He went straight across the park as the bird flies, not even perceiving the obstacles in his way. It was a mode of progress as different from the manner in which he used to approach that centre of his thoughts, circling and circling until, as if by accident, he found himself close to the little humble place in which was his shrine,—as different as the evening leisure, the soft nightfall, when beasts and men were alike drawing homeward, was to this morning hour of life and labour. Ford's cottage was different, too; it was astir with morning sounds of work and the rude employments of every day. One of the helpers about the Melcombe stables was busy outside with something for the pheasants, with half a dozen dogs following him wherever he moved; and the sound of his heavy footsteps coming and going, the rattle of the grain in the baskets, the scuffling and occasional barking of the young dogs, jarred upon Roger, whose first impulse was to order the man away. But he remembered, with a half smile which threw a strange light upon his face, that he had no longer any authority here, and passed on to the house.

Mrs. Ford was busy with her domestic work within,—very busy cleaning bright copper kettles and brass candlesticks, which stood in a row upon the table and made a great show; but though she seemed so hard at work, it was probable that Mrs. Ford was not working at all. Her honest face was disturbed with care. She was red with trouble and anxiety. When she curtsied to the young master, as he came in, the salutation concealed a start which was not of surprise, but rather acknowledged the coming of a crisis for which she was on the outlook and prepared.

'I have come,' said Roger quickly, 'to see Lily, as you will understand; but I have also come, Mrs. Ford, to see you. Where is Ford? I suppose you told him what I said to you last night.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger!' cried Mrs. Ford, wiping her hands in her apron, with another curtsy. 'Oh, sir, yes, I told him.'

'Is he here? You must have known I should want to come to an understanding at once.'

'Oh, sir! It's early, Mr. Roger—we

never thought—Ford's away in the woods; he wouldn't bide from his work.'

'I suppose he told you his mind; of course you know it well enough. Mrs. Ford, I've got something more to tell you to-day.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger,' said Mrs. Ford, 'don't, sir, don't tell me no more! I've not got the strength for it. Oh, don't tell me no more! We are that upset, Ford and me, that we don't know what to think or what to say.'

'Am I not to be trusted, then?' asked Roger, with a smile of conscious power, grave as he was. 'Have you higher views? No, I oughtn't to say that. Why should you be so upset, Ford and you?'

'Oh, Mr. Roger,' she said again, 'oh, when we thinks how it would be—— What will the master say, as has been a good master, taking one year with another, ever since him and me was married,—what would he say? He has a rough tongue when he's put out of his way. He'd say as we'd inveigled you, and set snares for you, and I don't know what. He'd think this is what we've been aiming at first and last, giving her her eddication for, and all that.'

'You need not trouble yourself to think what he'll say; he'll take no notice. We have had some words, he and I, and I don't think he will interfere any more. Where is Lily? I have much to say to her. And as for you, my father will not be unjust to you.'

He was turning along the narrow passage which led to Lily's parlour, when Mrs. Ford caught him by the arm. 'Mr. Roger! Lily's not there.'

'Not there? Where is she? I hope you don't mean to interfere between her and me?'

'Oh no, sir, not *I* wouldn't,' cried the keeper's wife. 'She's out somewhere; I don't know where. She is just distracted, Mr. Roger. Speak of being upset, she's more upset than any one. Oh, wait a bit, sir; don't go after her. She's distracted, Lily is. All this morning she's been wringing her poor hands, saying, "What shall I do?—what shall I do?" She's very feeling, too feeling for her own good. She takes thought for us, and for you, and for every one afore herself. I shouldn't wonder if she were to go and hide herself somewhere. I don't know at this moment where she is.'

'Mrs. Ford,' said Roger almost sternly, 'I must know the truth; is this because Lily does not—care for me?'

'Oh, sir!' exclaimed the woman, trembling, watching him with furtive eyes; and then a small hysterical sound, half cough, half sob, escaped her. 'Mr. Roger, is it possible she shouldn't be proud? A gentleman like you—and stooping to our little place to seek her out! Not but what my Lily is one as any gentleman might——'

'Yes, yes,' he cried,—'yes, yes! There is no question of that. The question is, Has she any answer to give me? It is not because I am a gentleman, but because I am a man, that I want my answer from Lily. Does she want to avoid me? Am I not her choice,—am I not——' Roger paused and turned to the door. 'I must find her, wherever she is,' he added.

Mrs. Ford caught his arm again. 'Oh, Mr. Roger, she do find such places among the trees as nobody 'ud ever think of. Oh, don't go after her, Mr. Roger! Is it natural, sir, as she shouldn't give her 'eart to you? Who has she ever seen but you? You're

the only gentleman—— Oh, sir, don't stop me like that. My girl, she's a lady in her heart. Do you think she would ever look at the likes of them common men? And she has never seen nobody but you. It's not that. I understand what it is, Mr. Roger, if you, that are young, don't understand. It's turning everything wrong, everything upside down, everybody out of their way, all for one young little bit of a girl. She can't abear it. Her father and me as will be turned out of house and home, and you as will be put all wrong with the Squire, and everything at sixes and sevens! Oh! I understand her—though it mayn't be so easy for a young man like you.'

'As for Ford and you, I'll see to——' Roger had said so much before he recollected how powerless he now was. He stopped short, then added hastily, 'I don't think you have any cause for fear, Mrs. Ford; my father has done all he can. He will not trouble himself with other matters. He has disinherited me. It does not matter to him now what I do. Of course, you have a right to know it; and I must see Lily; I must

speak to Lily; there must be no doubt upon the subject now. She must look at it, and think of it, and make up her own mind.'

'Disinher——' It was too big a word for Mrs. Ford's mouth, but not for her understanding. She gazed at Roger with round, wide-open eyes. 'Oh, sir, has he put you out,—has he put you out? and all for our Lily!' She wrung her hands. 'Oh, but Mr. Roger, it's not too late. You mustn't let that be. A girl may be both pretty and good, and that's what my Lily is; but to be turned out of house and home for her! Oh no, no,—it's not too late,—it mustn't be.'

'There is nothing more to be said on that subject,' said Roger, with a certain peremptory tone. 'But tell me where she is. Where is she? Why am I kept from her? You understand that I am leaving to-day, and that I must see her. To keep her back is no kindness; it is rather cruelty. Let me see her at once, Mrs. Ford.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger!' she cried again, wringing her hands, 'you can go into the parlour and see for yourself. She has been distracted-like in her mind since last night.

She's gone out, and I can't tell where she is. Oh, sir, for all our sakes, make it up with the Squire. Don't make a quarrel in the family; go back to your father, Mr. Roger, and don't mind us no more!'

A smile passed over his face at the strange futility of the idea. As well suggest that the pillars of the earth might be shaken, to make his seat more comfortable. He waved it aside with a movement of his hand.

'You will perceive that I must see her to-day. I will come back before the time for the afternoon train. Tell her—tell her to think it all over; and don't attempt to come between us, for that is what cannot be done now.'

Was he almost glad in his heart to put off this interview, although he was so anxious for it? There are times when, with our hearts beating for the turn of an event, Nature, sick with suspense yet terrified for certainty, will with both her hands push it away.

XXIV

MR. MITFORD'S WILL

ROGER left Melcombe by the afternoon train, to which his brother accompanied him with feelings indescribable, but no faith in anything that was happening. It seemed to Edmund like a feverish dream, which by and by must pass, leaving the world as it was before. Roger was not very communicative as to what he was going to do. Indeed, it would have been difficult, for he had not any distinct plans. He meant to get something he could work at, with a great vagueness in his mind as to what that would be. Something would be found, he had no doubt, though what he was fit for, what he could do, it was still more difficult, nay, almost impossible, to say; but that was the least of his preoccupations. He was sombre and downcast about matters which he did not confide to his

brother; saying, indeed, nothing about the Fords, or Lily, or anything that went below the surface of affairs. His father and he had met at luncheon, but nothing had been said between them. He left the house of his birth without a word of farewell, without any sign on his own part or that of others that he was doing more than going out for a walk. Nina, who had gained an interest in his eyes, he could not himself tell how, by dint of the anxious curiosity in hers, which Roger, forlorn, took for affectionate interest, received from him a kiss upon her cheek, a most unusual caress, which astonished her greatly. 'You are not going away, Roger?' she said, scanning him all over with those keen eyes, seeing no indication of a journey, no change in his dress, yet suspecting something, she did not know what. 'Good-bye, little Nina; be good, and take care of yourself,' said he. And these were all the adieux he made.

When they reached the station, Edmund observed that his brother glanced round him anxiously as if looking for some one; but he did not say for whom he looked. His last glance out of the carriage window was still

one of scrutiny; but it was evident that he did not find what he was expecting, and it was with an air of dissatisfaction and disappointment that he threw himself back into his corner, not making any response to Edmund, nor, indeed, seeing him as he stood to watch the train go away. The station was as little frequented as usual; one or two passengers, who had been dropped by the train, dispersing; one or two vacant bystanders turning their backs as the momentary excitement died away; Edmund watching the line of carriages disappear with a sensation of sickness and confusion of faculties far more serious, he said to himself, than could be called for. There was nothing tragic in the matter, after all. Even if Roger were disinherited, as his father threatened, some provision must be made for him, and no doubt there would be time for many changes of sentiment before any disinheritance could be operative, the Squire being a man full of strength and health, more vigorous than any of his sons. What if Roger did make an unsatisfactory marriage? Hundreds of men had done that, and yet been little the worse.

If a woman were pretty and pleasant, who cared to inquire who her father was? Lily would no doubt put on very readily the outside polish of society. After all, there was nothing tragic about it; and yet——

Edmund, as was natural, strayed into the Rectory on his way home, and, what was equally natural, unbosomed himself to Pax, who had seen the brothers pass, and who knew somehow, neither she herself nor any one else knew how, that something was wrong at Melcombe. 'My father speaks very big, but of course he will never do it,' Edmund said.

'I would not be too sure of that. He may sometimes say more than he means to carry out, but when he is set at defiance like this——'

'Pax, you go in too much for the authorities. A man over thirty may surely choose a wife for himself.'

'He should choose for his father too, when he is the eldest son,' said Pax. 'Don't talk to me. It's all an unnatural system, if you like. I don't mind what you say on that subject; but granting the system, it's clear

to me what must follow. If you're to carry on a family, you must carry it on. It's quite a different thing when you live an independent life. The predestined heir can never be an independent man.'

'That is not the opinion of the world,' returned Edmund, with a smile.

'It's my opinion, and I don't think I'm a fool. Now you are free to please yourself. You might marry Lily Ford and welcome. No one has any right to interfere with you.'

'Thank you,' said Edmund; 'my tastes don't lie that way.'

'No,' answered Pax; 'you might, and won't; and Roger ought not, but does. That is the way always. I blame him very much, though I'm sorry for him. She is not worth it. There are some women who are, though. If Lizzie Travers had not a shilling, she would be worth it. She's a fortune in herself.'

'Why bring in her name?' said Edmund; 'though I don't doubt you are right enough.'

'I bring in her name for this, Edmund: that your father is quite right about her, and that if you let her slip through your fingers it

will be wicked as well as foolish. There, that's my opinion. Roger's out of the question. Now, Edmund, *à vous*——'

'You speak as if it didn't much matter which, so long as it was one of us; that is highly disrespectful, I think, to one of whom —to one who——'

'Yes,' said Pax, 'that's right; resent it on her account. That's exactly what I knew you would do. Why bring in her name, as you say? Poor Roger, poor boy! So he thinks the world well lost for Lily Ford. I could hope he would never live to change his mind; but I fear that is not likely to be. Lily Ford! Well, she is neither a bad girl nor a silly one, any more than she can help being. I don't think ill of her at all. She wants to be a lady, naturally, after her ridiculous bringing up, but she has not a bad heart. There's nothing bad about her. If she is fond of him, if she has any sort of love for him, all may come well.'

Though Edmund had himself expressed a doubt on this point, he could not hear it suggested by another. 'If she does not, she must be perverse indeed,' he said. 'Whom

can she have seen equal to Roger? I suppose he is the only gentleman who has ever come in her way.'

'Who knows?' observed Pax oracularly. She had not the slightest intention in what she said, nor did she know anything about the people whom Lily might have met. But she had a rooted objection to assumptions generally. 'Who knows? A girl like that finds men to admire her in the depths of a wood, where other people would see nothing but twisted trees.'

Altogether she did not give much comfort to her visitor; and Edmund did not find any pleasure in that day. He had to meet his father at dinner, who did worse than inquire about Roger; he took no notice of his absence, not even of the empty chair at the other end of the table, which Edmund would not take, and which marked painfully the absence of the eldest son. Mr. Mitford talked a great deal at dinner; he told stories which made Nina laugh, and even produced from the young footman a faint explosion, for which Larkins made him suffer afterwards. Edmund, however, would not laugh; he sat

silent, and let his father's pleasantries pass, the presence of his pale, grave face making a painful contrast with the gaiety of the others. Larkins was as deeply conscious of the strained state of affairs as Edmund was, and went about the shaded background of the room with more solemnity than ever, while the Squire went on with his story-telling, and Nina laughed. Nina, indeed, did not want to laugh; she wanted to know why Roger had gone away, and what was the meaning of it all. But papa was 'so funny,' she could not but yield to the irresistible. The dinner is always a dreadful ordeal at such periods of family history, and most likely it was to hide his own perception of this, and do away with the effect upon himself of that significant vacancy at the other end of the table, that the Squire took refuge in being funny, which was not at all his usual way.

Next day Edmund was called to his father in the library. He found him in close consultation with Mr. Pouncefort, the solicitor who had been charged with the family business almost all his life, having inherited that, with other lifelong occupations of the same

kind, from his father. Mr. Pouncefort sat at Mr. Mitford's own writing-table, with a bag full of papers at his feet, and turned a very rueful countenance upon Edmund as he entered. He accompanied this look with a slight shake of the head, when Edmund came up and shook hands with him. 'Pretty well, pretty well,' he said mournfully; 'as well as can be expected, considering'—in answer to the young man's question. He was a neat little old man, with silver-gray hair carefully brushed, and a way of puckering up his brows which made his face look like a flexible mask.

'Look here, Edmund,' said his father, 'I have been settling my affairs, as I told you.'

'He means destroying his will, a very reasonable will, and making one that oughtn't to stand for a moment,' broke in Mr. Pouncefort, shaking his head and pushing up into his hair the folds of his forehead.

'Nothing of the sort, you old croaker! Pouncefort knows every man's business better than he does himself.'

'It's my business to do so, and I do. I know your affairs all off by heart, which is a

great deal more than you do. And I can see to-day from to-morrow, which you can't in your present state of mind. I don't know my own affairs a hundredth part so well as I know yours. Look here, a bargain: take my advice about *your* business, and you shall say what I'm to do with mine.'

The county gentleman looked at his solicitor with eyes in which familiar friendliness scarcely concealed the underlying contempt. They had known each other all their lives,—had been boys together, and called each other, in those days, by their Christian names. Mr. Pouncefort was as independent and nearly as rich as the Squire, but he was only a solicitor when all was said. 'What!' Mr. Mitford cried, 'if I advise you to let your son marry the housemaid? Come, Pouncefort, no folly. Read the stipulations to Edmund, and if he likes to abide by them it's all right. If not, I think I know another who will.'

'I declare to goodness,' asserted Mr. Pouncefort, 'I'd rather see my son marry anybody than put my hand to this!'

'I didn't send for the pope nor the bishop

to tell me what was right,' said the other old man. 'I sent for my solicitor—I daresay Edmund has a hundred things to do, and you're wasting his valuable time.'

'I have nothing to do, and I wish you would listen, sir, to what——'

'By Jove!' exclaimed the Squire, jumping up from his chair, 'is this my business, or whose business is it? Let him hear it, and let us be done with it. I can't stay here all day.'

Upon which Mr. Pouncefort, occasionally pausing to launch a comment, read the new settlement of the Mitford property, which after all was not so cruel as appeared. Roger was not cut off with a shilling; he was to have ten thousand pounds: but his successor, as Mr. Mitford's heir, was strictly barred from conveying back to him or his heirs, under any pretence, any portion of the property. Roger was excluded formally and for ever from all share in Melcombe. Any attempt at the transgression of this stipulation was to entail at once a forfeiture of the estate, which should then pass to the persons to be hereafter named. The spaces for the

names were all blank. Mr. Pouncefort, shaking his head, interjecting now and then an exclamation, read to the end: and then he opened out the crackling papers on the table, and turned round first to the Squire, who had resumed his seat and listened with a sort of triumphant complacency, then to Edmund, who had stood all the time leaning on the back of a high carved chair. 'There!' cried the lawyer, 'there's your confounded instructions carried out, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it; and now, Edmund, it's for you to speak.'

'My answer is very simple,' said Edmund. 'It can be no disappointment to you, sir, for you must have foreseen it. I refuse——'

'You refuse! You are a great fool for your pains. You had better take time to think it over. A day or two can't make much difference, Pouncefort.'

'A day or two might make all the difference,' replied Mr. Pouncefort. 'Why, you might die — any of us might die — before dinner.'

Once more the Squire jumped out of his chair. 'I think you want to drive me to——'

'Suicide?' said little Mr. Pouncefort. 'Oh no; but I'll tell you one thing, Mitford. If you thought you were going to die before dinner,—ay, or after it, either,—you would not make this will.'

'You think yourself privileged,' cried the Squire, with a puff of hot breath. 'So far as I'm aware, my death is nothing to you, or when it takes place. Edmund——'

'Oh yes,' returned the lawyer, 'it's a great deal to me, for we're the same age; and when you go, I'll have to be looking to my preparations for the voyage. I don't want it to happen a day sooner than can be helped.'

'Edmund,' said Mr. Mitford, 'all this is utterly beyond the question. Take a day or two to think. I don't want to hurry you. I like to deal justly with everybody. You're the next, and I don't want to pass you over; but don't think you can bully me by refusing: for I'll stick to my intention whether you go in with it or not.'

'I want no time to think, sir; there can't be a question about my decision. I am as grieved about Roger as you can be, but I will never step into his place.'

'"Never" is a long word. He might die, as Pouncefort's so fond of suggesting, and then, of course, you would take his place.'

'I never will while he lives; I never will to his detriment. Father, don't do anything about it now. You are as young as the best of us. What does it matter whether it's decided now or in six months' time? For the moment let it alone. We are all excited——'

'Not I,' declared the Squire, 'though Pouncefort thinks I may die before dinner.'

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. 'Edmund's a very sensible fellow,' he said; 'suppose we put it off for six months.'

'What! to leave me time to die, as you say, and balk myself? No, I tell you. I know where to find a man to do what I want, if you refuse. Let it be yes or no, then, on the spot, if that's what you choose.'

'It must be no, then, sir,—no, without a shadow of hesitation,' Edmund replied. His face was very grave and pale,—as different as could be imagined from his father's red and angry physiognomy. Mr. Mitford knew

it was bad for him to be thus excited. Dying before dinner is not such an impossible thing, when a man is stout, of a full habit, and allows himself to get into states of excitement. He had a roar of rage in his throat to deliver upon his son, but was stopped by this thought, which had more effect upon him than a high moral reason. He pulled himself up with another puff of heated breathing, which was half a snort; and then assumed the air of mockery which was, he was aware, his most effectual weapon.

'Very well, then, sir,' he said, with that very detestable mimicry of his son's tone. 'It shall be no, then, sir, and there's an end of it. And I know some one who will not have a shadow of hesitation, not a—— Stephen knows very well on what side his bread's buttered. I'll telegraph for Steve, Pouncefort.'

'Writing will do quite well; I'm in no hurry. One would think it was I that was pushing this matter on.'

'Why, I might die—before dinner,' the Squire retorted. To be mimicked is never

pleasant, but to be mimicked badly is a thing beyond the power of mortal man to support. Mr. Mitford had no imitative powers. Mr. Pouncefort grew an angry red under his gray hair.

It was at this moment that Larkins opened the door, and came in in his dignified way,—a way that put an end to everything in the shape of a scene wherever he appeared. He was in the habit of making a wide circuit round the furniture, with a calm and decorum which made excited persons ashamed of themselves, and which transferred all their attention, in spite of themselves, to this perfectly *digne* and respectable messenger from a world outside which made no account of their excitements.

'Mr. Edmund, sir,' Larkins said, 'there is a person outside who wishes to see you.'

Larkins was far above making telegraphic communications to any man, especially to one of the family; but there was something in his look which startled Edmund.

'A person,' he repeated involuntarily, 'to see me?'

'A very respectable person, sir,' Larkins

said. Then he walked round the furniture again, making the circuit of the room, and stood at the door, holding it open to let his young master pass.

Mr. Mitford had seated himself in his chair at the appearance of Larkins, with the aspect of a judge upon the bench, severe but amiable; and Mr. Pouncefort had smoothed down all the billows of his forehead, as if nothing had ever disturbed him. Calm and self-respect came back with that apparition. Edmund was too glad to take advantage of the interruption. He hurried out, with little thought of the object of the call,—glad to be delivered anyhow.

'I have taken her up to your room, sir. I thought you'd be quieter there,' Larkins said.

'*Her!* Whom? Who is it? Has anything happened?' cried Edmund, scarcely knowing what he said.

'It is a female, Mr. Edmund; very respectable, and in a deal of trouble.'

Edmund rushed upstairs, three steps at a time. He did not know what he feared. His rooms were at the end of a long corridor,

and the mere fact that his visitor should have been taken there was startling. What woman could want him in this way? But imagination could not have helped him to call up that homely figure in the garb of a perfect rustic respectability, such as Larkins knew how to value, which came rushing forward as he opened the door, turning upon him an honest face, red with crying and misery. 'Oh, sir, where's my Lily? Oh, what's been done with my Lily? Oh, for the love of God—if you care for that! Mr. Edmund, Mr. Edmund, where is my girl? Tell me, and I'll go on my knees and bless you. Oh, tell me, tell me, if you don't want to see me die before your eyes!'

'Mrs. Ford!' Edmund cried, with an astonishment beyond words.

'Oh, for God's sake, Mr. Edmund! Yes, I'm her mother, her poor mother, that has trained her, maybe, for her ruin. Oh, where is my girl? Where's my Lily? Tell me, sir, tell me wherever it is, and I'll thank you on my knees.'

And the poor woman flung herself, in her

big shawl and respectable bonnet, her eyes streaming, her face working with wild supplication, heavily at his feet upon the carpet; a figure half ridiculous, wholly tragic, in all the abandonment of despair.

XXV

LILY'S RESOLUTION

LILY FORD had been extraordinarily moved by Roger's declaration. It had an effect upon her imagination which was beyond all reason, and quite out of proportion with the event. She had not been without stirrings of heart as to Roger's visits in the days when her mind was still free, and Stephen was to her only a vague shadow of that hero of romance for whose arrival she was looking daily. Roger's appearance had been, indeed, the first that had roused the expectation in her, and made that general and shadowy sense of something about to happen, which is always dominant in a girl's mind, into a still shadowy but more possible reality. Her heart had beat its first, not for him, but for the excitement of his coming, the prince, the knight, the lover of all the romances. After-

wards Lily had grown a little afraid of Roger. His visits, his looks, his tones, all flattered her, but frightened her at the same time. Perhaps she never could have been at her ease with him as with Stephen. He reverenced her too much, and Lily knew very well that this was not the appropriate sentiment with which to regard her. Admiration she understood perfectly, and love more or less; but that ideal respect bewildered her, and impaired her self-possession in his presence. That she should look up to him as an elder brother and head of the family was a much more possible relation than anything more familiar, and in this light she had begun to regard Roger vaguely before his sudden disappearance. But now that all was changed, now that she was Stephen's betrothed, almost his bride, his brother's sudden return, his sudden appeal to her, the almost certainty there seemed in his mind that he must be the first who had so addressed her, and that only her anxiety for her father prevented her full response, was an overwhelming surprise, and indeed a horror, to Lily. It shocked and paralysed her. Her 'Oh, Mr. Roger!' was

a cry of terror. No other words would come, nor did she know what to do except to fly, to hurry away, to hide her face and stop her ears, that she might not hear nor see those avowals, which not only were almost criminal, but would raise, she felt vaguely, such a wall of separation between herself and the brother of her future husband as nothing hereafter could overcome.

Lily was altogether more painfully affected by this incident than could have been supposed possible. It made her wretched, it filled her with visionary terror. It was wrong, wicked, unnatural. His sister-in-law! and she dared not tell him,—dared not betray the position in which she stood towards Stephen, who by this time had no doubt got the license and prepared everything for their marriage. The situation overwhelmed the girl; no better expedient occurred to her than to shut herself up in her room, from which, scarcely venturing to breathe lest she should be discovered, with feelings of alarm and agitation indescribable, she had listened to the voice of Roger speaking to her mother downstairs. Mrs. Ford, for her part, did not understand Lily's panic, nor why she should hide herself.

It was, no doubt, a very agitating and splendid event; but except for the natural tremor of so enormous a success, and some qualms of alarm as to its immediate effect upon Ford's position as gamekeeper,—qualms calmed by the thought that everything must come right in the end, for Mrs. Ford had no faith in disinheritance,—the mother would have easily made up her mind to boundless joy and triumph. But Lily's condition was not to be accounted for by mere nervousness or excitement. She was so determined that Roger's suit could not be listened to for a moment, so anxious to hide herself and keep out of his way, that Mrs. Ford was compelled to yield with a troubled heart to these tremors. She had long ago discovered that she did not always understand Lily. How should she? The girl was far above her mother in so many things. It was a pride the more to think that so humble a woman as she was could not always tell what her child meant,—her child, who was so much superior to any other woman's child.

But while Lily thus lurked terror-stricken in her room, her mind was full of many

troubled thoughts. The time had come, she felt, when her fate could no longer hang in the balance; when that decision, which she could not but feel to be an awful one, must be made. For nothing in the world would she run the risk of meeting Roger again, or being once more addressed by him in those words which she trembled to think of. Rather anything than that; rather the final step, the plunge which she longed, yet feared to make. She had parted from Stephen with a promise that her decision should not be long delayed, but whether without this new excitement Lily would ever have been able to wind herself up to so bold a step it is impossible to tell. She sat upon the floor in her little chamber, all crouched together, sick with alarm and nervous excitement, while the sound of Roger's masculine voice came up from below. She had consented that Stephen should remain in town awaiting her, and that he should take all the steps about the license; she had even promised to let him know, by a telegram, the time of her arrival, in order that he might meet and take her to the house he had selected, —the house, of course, of a good woman, an

old servant, who would care for her until the hour of the marriage, for which, in the meantime, all should be prepared. Everything had been arranged between them, even to that old church in the city which Lily, aided by her experience of novels, had thought the safest, and which he had yielded to, though avowing his preference for a registrar's office. A registrar's office! Oh no, that would have been no marriage at all! And at last he had consented, and even had discovered that he knew the very place—an old, old church, quite out of the way. All these things began to swim through Lily's head as she sat on the floor, in the panic and humiliation of her thoughts, listening to the far-off sound of Roger's voice; anticipating the horror of perhaps seeing him again, of having to make him some answer, of her mother's wondering questions, and of all the commotion which she did not know how to face.

And on the other side, how much there was! Her lover waiting, longing, hoping that every day would bring her to his arms; a new life, the life she had always known, must one day be hers, and happiness, and

splendour, and her right position, and the society of ladies and gentlemen. All this lay before her, separated from her only by the decision, by the one step out of her present world into the other, which would indeed be something like dying and coming to life again, and yet would be so quick, accompanied by so little pain; a thing, too, that must be done sooner or later. Lily scarcely thought of the pangs she would leave behind her, of the tortures her father and mother would have to suffer. It would be only for a moment, she reflected, for a single night, or perhaps a couple of days; and then what comfort and delight to follow! The pain was scarcely worth thinking of. Mrs. Ford herself would not complain: she would say it was nothing; it was a cheap price to pay for knowing her child to be so happy. Her mother's very humbleness reassured Lily. The parents would care nothing for the anxiety after it was over; they would be so glad, so glad, when the next day a telegram told them that all was well.

But was she herself strong enough to do it? —that was the question,—strong enough to

forget herself, to step out of all that was ordinary, to free herself from every prejudice? They were only prejudices, she said to herself,—how often had Stephen told her so! To meet him at the railway, to drive with him to that good woman's house, was that worse than meeting him in the park? Was it possible for her, was it honourable, was it modest even, to have any doubts of Stephen? No, no, she had none. She would be as safe with him as with her father, she knew. It was nothing but a prejudice, a breach of the ordinary, that was all. She wanted orange-blossoms, and the children to strew flowers, and the church-bells to ring. Oh yes, she allowed it all in her heart. That was what she would have liked best. Oh, how she would have liked it! If she had married Witherspoon even, that was what would have happened at home. Witherspoon! She trembled, and grew red for shame of herself, who, engaged to a gentleman, an officer, should allow herself to think it had ever been possible that she might have married Witherspoon. The gardener! while his master was there, pleading, persuading, with that tone of

entreaty which she could distinguish, with a shiver, downstairs, begging that he might see her; and he was her brother-in-law, if he had only known it! Oh, good heavens, her bridegroom's brother! And how could she face him, or reply to him, or let him speak to her, in that dreadful mistake he was making? No, no, no! it was impossible! There was only one thing to be done, and that was to go away. It must be done one time or another; to-morrow or the day after to-morrow, if not to-day. It must be done. Was not Stephen waiting for her, waiting for her telegram, with everything ready at that good woman's house, and the license in his pocket? It must be done! it must be done! It was the only way of escaping, of seeing Roger no more,—poor Roger, who loved her, yet must not love her, poor fellow!

She did not venture to get up, to run the risk of betraying her presence in the upper room even by the creaking of a board, until she heard his voice die out underneath, and then his lingering step upon the gravel. She felt sure—and her heart beat louder at the thought—that he turned, after he had left the

door, to look back wistfully, if perhaps he might still see her at a window. Poor Mr. Roger! But she dared not meet him; it was kinder, far kinder to him that she should go away.

Presently Lily heard her mother toiling up the narrow stairs. Mrs. Ford came in panting for breath, but not only with the fatigue of the climbing. She had her apron thrown over her arm, handy for wiping her eyes or forehead, which was moist with exhaustion and trouble. She threw herself into a chair with a half groan. 'I'd rather do the hardest day's work as I ever had in my life than do what I have been a-doing now,' she said. 'Oh, Lily, Lily!'

'What is it, mother?' asked Lily, though with a tremor which showed how well aware she was of her mother's meaning.

'What is it, child? It's this, that I never seen a man in more trouble than the young master. To think it should be *us*, as has always been so well treated, that has brought him to this! And he can't believe as you won't have nothing to say to him, Lily; and no more can I, no more can I!'

'Do you think a girl is obliged to—to accept anybody who asks her?' cried Lily, trying to give her excitement a colour of indignation. Her eyes shone feverishly through quick-springing tears, and her colour changed every minute. Her agitation and trouble were indeed very plain to see.

'Do you call Mr. Roger "anybody"?' retorted the mother angrily. 'Who have you ever seen like him? You told me you would never marry if it wasn't a gentleman, and where will you find a gentleman like Mr. Roger? And one that respects you, like you were a queen. And says the Squire will never meddle with us, seeing as he's put it all out on him. Oh, Lily, the Squire's cut him off with a shilling, all because of you. And now you won't have him! Oh, poor young gentleman! and to think this is all come to him through coming in so kind to say a pleasant word to your father and me!'

'Cut him off with a—— Mother, do you mean to say the Squire knows?' Lily's voice sank into a half-frightened whisper. Her eyes grew large with terror. If this were the consequence to Roger, what would

happen to Stephen? But then she reflected, quick as a lightning flash, that Roger was the eldest son: that no such penalty would be likely to attach to the youngest; that Stephen was an officer, and, as she thought in her foolishness, independent. This quick train of thought reassured her almost before the words were said.

'Knows!' echoed Mrs. Ford, with a tone almost of contempt. 'What is there as the Squire 'don't 'know?' She did not set herself up as equal to her daughter in any other kind of information; but for this potentate, of whom her experience was so much greater than Lily's, she could take upon herself to answer. Of course he knew! Had he not discovered for himself what Lily was, and must he not have divined from that moment all that was happening? 'I knew,' she added, 'as it wasn't for naught that he came here,—I saw it in his eyes. He was struck when you came in; he lost his senses like. Oh, Lily, Lily!' cried Mrs. Ford. 'You I've been that proud of! Maybe, after all, it would ha' been better for all of us if you'd been more like other poor folks' children.

Oh, my pretty, that I should live to wish you different,—me that have always been that proud!'

'You don't wish me different, mother, whatever happens,' said the girl, with a sudden melting of the heart, throwing her arms for a moment round the homely woman, and kissing fervently her bowed head. But Lily had disengaged herself from this rapid embrace before her mother, surprised by the sudden warmth, could return it; and when Mrs. Ford turned round to give back the kiss, Lily had already begun to arrange some small articles, collars and cuffs, which were laid out on her drawers, and was saying over her shoulder, in a voice which had a strained tone of levity, 'It's far better for Mr. Roger that I should have nothing to say to him, in that case, mother,—better for both him and me. For the Squire will have him back when he hears it has all come to nothing. And what could we do with a shilling? We couldn't live upon that.'

'Oh, Lily, you have always the best of sense,' replied Mrs. Ford. 'I never took that view. But, dear, you'll have to see him

when he comes again. I've done my best for you, but I can't take it upon me no more.'

'When he comes again! Is he coming again? Oh, mother!'

'How could I help it, Lily? He wouldn't take his answer, was it likely, from me.'

'Then, mother,' cried Lily,—she spoke with her head bent over her little collars, counting them, Mrs. Ford thought, to see that they were all right after the wash,—'then, mother——' Her breath came quick, but that was very natural, disturbed as she had been; and she made a pause before saying any more. 'I think I must go out and stay—about the park—till night. I cannot, oh, I cannot see Mr. Roger! It would make me ill to see him; and what would be the use? I will take a piece of cake for my dinner, and go up into the wood, and come home with father. And then you can tell him you don't know where I am,—and it will be quite true.'

'Oh, Lily, I have said that already,—that I didn't know where you were. It was true enough, for I didn't know if you were here, or in my room, or in the loft, or where you

were. But if I say it again—and him looking that anxious in my face——'

'It will be truer than ever, mother,' said Lily. She turned again to Mrs. Ford, and put her arms, which trembled, round her, and leaned her head upon her mother's breast. 'Oh, mother,' she cried, 'I know it's hard upon you, I know it is; but only have patience just a very little, and everything will come right. I know it will all come right. Only have patience a little, and don't be vexed with me, mother dear.'

'Vexed with you, my pretty!' cried Mrs. Ford, hugging her child. 'Since ever you were born, Lily, you've been the pride of my heart; and I wouldn't have you different, not a bit different, whatever was to happen to me. There, bless you, child, don't cry: and I'll go and cut you a nice bit of cake, and put some apples in the basket, and you'll come home with your father; and I'll never say another word about Mr. Roger, poor young gentleman, though it do go to my heart.'

She went quickly away downstairs, not trusting herself to say another word, lest she

should enter again upon the forbidden subject. Lily, with hands that trembled, lifted her hat from its box. She selected her best hat, and a pretty little cloth jacket which had been purchased for Sundays; but such extravagance was not unusual with Lily, who took very good care of her clothes, though she did not always keep them for best. Perhaps this was one reason why she ran out so quickly, taking the little basket hurriedly from Mrs. Ford's hand, that her mother might not remark upon her dress. And she left her collars lying about, not put neatly into the drawer, as was her wont. Mrs. Ford put them away very carefully afterwards, wondering a little at Lily's carelessness; but indeed it was no wonder, poor child, in the circumstances, that she should be put out of her usual tidy way.

XXVI

AT THE RAILWAY STATION

ROGER arrived in London in the evening, before it was dark. He had not had a cheerful journey. The fact that he had not been able to see Lily, and that her mother had a second time defended her doors against him, and with flushed cheeks and troubled eyes had repeated once more that Lily was out, that she could not tell where she was, had disturbed him in his convictions. It had seemed so certain, so self-evident, that his suit must be acceptable to the gamekeeper's daughter; was it possible that Lily was not of that opinion, that she loved some one else, that after all somebody in her own class had secured her affections? The idea made Roger's blood boil; but when he thought again he said to himself, No, no. She could never give herself to a man of her father's

class; it was impossible, it could not be; and who could she have seen whom it was possible to reckon with as rivalling himself? Roger was not vain, especially now when his heart was so profoundly touched. At the best, he had scarcely expected her to love him as he loved her. But that she should shrink and fly from him was incredible. It could be only what her mother said: that to find herself the cause of so much disturbance had overwhelmed her delicate spirit. Sweet Lily, pure flower of nature, moved by all the most generous emotions! A girl who had been brought up in the world would have liked the commotion. She would have thought of nobody but herself in the matter. But Lily held her own happiness at arm's-length, trembling for it lest it should hurt some one else. This conception of her sweetened his thoughts, which were not bright, as he went away. He told her mother that he would write, explaining everything, and that Lily must reply to him sincerely, truly, without thought of any secondary matter. 'You shall not be disturbed; I will take care of you,' he repeated,

though he did not know how he was to do so. And thus unsatisfied, unhappy, he had gone away.

It seemed to Roger that at the junction, where there was a change of carriages for some of the humbler travellers, he saw for a moment among the changing groups a figure which reminded him of Lily; and he started from his corner to follow it with his eyes. But he knew the idea was absurd even as it flashed through his mind. It was only that he had Lily on his heart, on his brain, in his every thought, and discovered resemblances to her, visions of her, wherever he turned; he knew that nothing could be more ridiculous than the thought that Lily was travelling to London or anywhere else, alone. It was only a delusion of his preoccupied heart.

The yellow flame of the lamps, newly lighted, was shining against the dim blue of the evening, when he reached the big railway station, crowded and echoing with voices and commotion. He had just got his bags and coats out of the carriage he had occupied, and flung them into the arms of the waiting porter, when he was suddenly startled

by the appearance of another very familiar image, almost as unlikely in such a place as that of Lily. The sight of his brother Stephen was not habitually a pleasure to Roger; but there was something in his own forlornness, in his sense of severance from all his former life, which disposed him towards his own flesh and blood; and a wild idea that Stephen might have heard what had happened, and might have come to meet him, to show him a little sympathy, though they were not usually great friends, suggested itself in the heat of the moment. He turned round abruptly, straight in his brother's way, and held out his hand. 'You've come to meet me, Steve? How kind of you!' he cried.

Stephen had been going slowly along looking into the carriages, as if searching for some one. He stopped and stared, not with the air of a man who had found the person he was seeking, but astonished at the sudden grasp of his hand and claim upon him. 'You here!' he cried, with a look of wonder and discomfiture; and then he laughed, getting free of Roger's hand. 'No, indeed,' he said,

I didn't come to meet you. How should I? I didn't know you were coming. I thought you were at home.'

'I have left home. Steve, I have a great deal to tell you. There are things you ought to know. It may affect you, too,' added Roger, pausing, with a new thought. 'Jump into the cab with me; don't leave me now we've met. I have a great deal to say.'

'My dear fellow,' answered Stephen, 'I'm very sorry; but I've got half a dozen engagements. I've come here to meet—one of our fellows, don't you know. I can't possibly spare you a moment to-night. You're at the old place, I suppose? Well, good-bye. I'll soon look you up.'

'Stay a moment; none of your fellows can be so important as this,' said Roger, with his hand upon his brother's arm.

A smile of conscious triumph came over Stephen's face; he shook off Roger's hand and turned away, kissing the tips of his fingers. 'Ta-ta. I'll look you up very soon,' he cried, disappearing in the crowd. Roger divined the meaning of that triumphant smile. He looked after his brother for a moment,

with a sense that Stephen's rendezvous, whatever it was, was an offence to his own trouble and to the cause of that trouble,—a sin against love. The train was long and the platform crowded. Stephen and the person, whoever it was whom Stephen had come to meet, were lost in the groups of moving figures, indistinguishable, a continually shifting and re-forming crowd, under the mingled light of the yellow lamps and the waning day. Roger saw the pale sky at the end of a long vista, the lights, more perplexing than illuminating, in a row above, the dim, long, crowded line of moving figures below. And then, with a sigh, half of disappointment, half of a vague and troubled foreboding, he turned to get into the cab, which was already laden with his travelling-gear. A curious fancy to wait and see who it was whom Stephen had come to meet crossed his mind, one of those sudden, vague fancies which blow about through a man's consciousness without any will of his own. He pulled himself up with an indignant return upon himself. What, wait and spy upon his brother! Of all things, that was the last.

The little self-argument passed in a second, scarcely so long as it took to transfer to the porter, who stood waiting to know what address he was to give the cabman, the sixpence in Roger's hand,—and it never really was a question at all. That he should watch Stephen and find out who it was he met was as impossible as to catch the first passer-by by the throat and rob him. And yet, if that impossible thought had been carried out,—if he had but done it, this impossible thing!

Roger went off to his chambers, the rooms which had scarcely yet begun to show the emptiness of rooms uninhabited. The invitation cards which he had taken down from the glass still lay together in a little bundle on the mantel-shelf. How few hours it was since he had left them, still all uncertain, not knowing what turn his fate was to take! Now it was all settled, beyond the reach of further change. The state of mind in which he was when he left this place, not much more than twenty-four hours before, was now almost incredible to him. He scarcely understood how it could have been. From the beginning of time it must have been clear

that only in one way, only in this way, could he have acted. Doubt on the subject was an offence to him as he now saw it, and all the efforts that had been made to turn him from his purpose were as wrong as they were vain. He thought of Edmund's action, his persuasions, the journey they had made together, in which his brother had been his slave,—a slave to all his caprices, while believing that he was the guide, weaning Roger from those plans which never could have been doubtful for a moment, which now were fixed beyond all recall. Poor Edmund, always so well-intentioned, so well-meaning!

Roger sat gazing at the light of his solitary lamp, and wondered within himself what Edmund would do. Would he accept, after all, the reversion of the heirship, and become in time the proprietor of Melcombe? Why should he not accept it? Since it was no longer Roger's, how much better it should be Edmund's, so good a fellow as he was,—the best of them, much the best! He paused here for a moment to wonder over again, or rather to be conscious of an impulse of wonder floating across his mind, as to who it was

Stephen was going to meet—but dismissed this absurd, insignificant question, and returned to Edmund. It would be by far the best thing that Edmund should accept, and marry Elizabeth Travers, and bring her home to Melcombe. A smile came over Roger's face as he sat thinking,—a smile altogether sweet and tender, with perhaps a touch of melancholy, as there always is in such tender thoughts. Where could there be a better pair? They would make the house delightful; not like anything Roger had ever known in it, but far better, purer, more elevated, a home of love and kindness. Yes, that was how it must be: Edmund and Elizabeth must marry, and live happily ever after, like the lovers in a fairy-tale; 'While I and Lily,' he said to himself, 'Lily and I'—with his smile softening more and more into a melancholy profounder, sweeter, than any sentiment he had ever been conscious of in his life. Lily and he would not make a home like that at Melcombe. He did not anticipate any centre of life, any new world beginning, in that fated union, which was like one of the old tragic expedients of destiny in

the Greek plays, he thought,—a thing that had to be, that no human effort could disturb. He smiled over it with a pathetic consciousness that it might not be what people call happy,—not like that other marriage, like Edmund and Elizabeth; not happy in that way,—no, nor of that kind.

He returned with pleasure from the too penetrating thought of his own fate to think of these two, largely administering an ample household, a shelter from the storms outside, an ever noble, tranquil centre of life. His smile grew with his consciousness into a half laugh, in which amusement mingled. Ned would fight against it, he would not see his way, he would think it was robbing his brother,—old Ned! the best fellow that ever was; in love with Lizzy Travers all this time, but never owning it, never letting himself think of it, in case he might come in Roger's way. But in the end Edmund must hear reason,—he must see that this was the most desirable thing that could happen. Roger drew his writing things towards him, and began at once to write to his brother, setting all these argu-

ments before him. There must be no mistake upon the subject; Ned must do it, if it were but for Roger's sake.

After writing this letter he sat motionless for some time, staring vacantly at the flame of his lamp. Then he took up the pen again, and began another letter, his great letter, his explanation to Lily. He wrote to her as to one whom he regarded with a kind of worship, reverent of all her ignorances and innocences, yet as one who belonged to him, between whom and himself there could be no obstacles that were not imaginary, to be surmounted at their pleasure. She had to understand this at the outset, — that she was his, that he would hear of no objections. He had encountered for her everything a man can encounter for the woman he loves. It was done, and there could be no further question. Family and fortune he had put away for her; it only remained that she should put away her hesitations, her anxieties for her father (who should not suffer, he promised her), her fears and diffidences for him, — a matter so easy, and yet all that was wanted to make everything clear.

It was very late when he concluded the letter, or rather early in the May morning, the solemn hour which is at once the dead of night and the approach of day. As he sealed the envelope there came over him again that insistent yet altogether irrelevant question,—Who was it whom Stephen was hurrying to meet, with that smile of triumph on his face? He shook it from him indignantly, not knowing by what mechanical freak of fancy it should come back thus, again and again. What did it matter who it was? Some of Stephen's *banal* loves, a vulgar adventure, perhaps some one of whom it was a shame to think, while the air was still softly echoing with Lily's name. If he had but known!

XXVII

IN THE TOILS

LILY'S heart was in her mouth, as people say, — it was fluttering like a bird. She stepped out, stumbled out, of the railway carriage among the crowd, looking wildly about her, feeling herself for the moment lost. She had never encountered such a crowd before. She felt herself disappear in it, among the people who were running about after their luggage, and those who were calling cabs, and the porters pushing through the throng with big boxes on their shoulders. Lily felt herself lost, as if, whoever might be looking for her, she should never be found any more. It had not occurred to her to prepare for the risk of not meeting her lover. She was quite unaware where to go, what to do. She had never been in London before, nor in a crowd, nor left to herself to push

her way. She was as much disconcerted at finding herself alone as if she had been a duke's daughter instead of a gamekeeper's; and the noise and the bustle frightened her. She looked round helplessly, wistfully, putting up the veil which she had kept over her face during the whole journey. No one was likely to recognise her here,—no one except him for whom she was looking, who had not come. Had he not come? Was it possible that some accident could have happened, and that he was not here?

Lily had some ten minutes of this panic and misery. It was the first thing that had gone wrong with her; all the previous part of the journey had seemed so easy. She had walked to the junction, from whence, as had been arranged between them, the telegram was to be sent, and thus avoided all curious eyes at the little Melcombe station; and she had been lucky enough to find a second-class carriage empty, where she was left undisturbed all the way. She had not the least idea that Roger was in the same train: nobody had come near her except the guard, and she had seen no familiar face;

all had gone perfectly well till now. Her heart beat, indeed, with a wildly quickened movement whenever she allowed herself to think. But Lily had enough perception of the necessity of self-command to avoid thinking as much as was possible, and to concentrate her mind upon the happy meeting at the end of this exciting journey. She figured to herself Stephen appearing at the carriage window almost before the train stopped, and how in a moment all anxiety of hers, all need to act or decide for herself, would be over. She had nothing in the shape of luggage except the little basket in which her mother had put the luncheon, the slice of cake and apples, which she had been glad enough to have before the long afternoon was over. Lily had slipped into this basket a very small bundle of necessaries, which were all she had brought with her. She held it tightly in her hand as she got out, bewildered by the arrival, by the jar of the stopping, by the dreadful sensation of finding herself there alone among the crowd. She did not know how long she stood, pushed about by the other travellers, who knew where they were

going, who had nothing to wait for; but it was long enough to feel herself forsaken, lost, and to realise what it would be to have nowhere to go to, to be thrown upon her own resources in this horrible great, strange, noisy place. Then in a moment Lily's heart gave a wild leap, and she knew it was not to be so.

But the first sensation of the meeting was not altogether sweet. Instead of Stephen's face at the window, ready, waiting to receive her according to her dream, what really did happen was that Lily felt herself suddenly surrounded by an arm which drew her close, and felt a hot breath upon her cheek, and a 'Here you are at last, little one!' which jarred upon her almost as much as it relieved her. In the railway station, among all these crowds! She started out of his embrace, freed herself, and threw a hurried glance upon the by-standers with instinctive terror almost before she looked at him. 'Oh, Stephen!' she exclaimed, with a little cry of reproach.

'Don't be frightened,' he replied; 'nobody knows us here, you little goose. I might take you up in my arms and carry you

off,—nobody would mind. And so here you are, Lil, my pet; really here at last.'

She put her arm timidly through his. 'Oh, Stephen, I thought I should never find you! And what should I have done!'

'It was not my fault,' he declared. 'Where is your luggage? Oh, to be sure, you haven't got any luggage!' He stopped to laugh at this, as if it amused him very much, but pressed her arm close to his side all the time with a sort of hug, which consoled though it half frightened Lily. 'Why, how are you to get on for to-night?' he went on, still with that laugh. 'Must we stop at a shop somewhere and buy you things for to-night?'

'Oh, Stephen, don't!' said Lily, with a pang of wounded pride.

'Don't? What? Talk of your things, or about what you'll want? Well, well, we'll leave all that till to-morrow.' His laugh, why should it have offended Lily? It had never done so before. 'Here's our cab,' he said, leading her out of the noise of the station. Lily's heart beat so that it made her faint, as he put her into the hansom, and took his place beside her, so close, with again

that sweep of his arm round her, which seemed to offend her too, though she could not tell why,—she had no right to be offended by that clasp. He had held her in his arms in the park, when they met there, with not a creature near, and she had not been offended: why should she be so now, or find fault with the man who was to be her husband to-morrow, for his fondness? She drew herself away a little, as much as was possible; but she restrained the protest that rose to her lips, though her heart fluttered and beat, and all her pulses seemed to clang in her ears, with an excitement which had pain in it and trouble, not the sensation of safety and protection and shelter for which she had hoped.

'Fancy what made me late,' Stephen said; 'it was not my fault. As I came hurrying along, looking out for my little Lil, whom do you suppose I saw jumping out of a carriage?—and he saw me too, worse luck, and thought, the fool, I had come to meet him. You couldn't guess if you were to try till Christmas. Why, Lily, my pet, my brother Roger! Think what a fright I was in for a moment: for though you never would own

to it, *I* know he was always hanging about the place; and if you could have had the eldest son, my little Lil, I daresay you'd never have thought twice of me.'

'Oh, Stephen!' she cried, with a choking sensation in her throat. 'Oh, don't, don't.' He held her close as in a vice, and laughed, and delivered these remarks with his lips close to her cheek. He was excited, too, but the banter which had appeared to her so sprightly and delightful at Melcombe seemed at this tremendous moment so out of place, so dreadful to listen to. And then Roger!—if he but knew!

'Yes,—you didn't know he was in the same train, did you? Had he turned up a little sooner, you'd have thrown me off at the last moment, wouldn't you, Lil? But Roger is one of the prudent ones, my dear. No chance for you there. Catch him offending the Pater and losing his chances for all the girls in the world! He is not that sort. He is not a fool in love, like me!'

'Please, Stephen! Oh, please, Stephen!' Oh, to hear all that of Mr. Roger, who had said such beautiful things to her, who had

suffered she knew not what for her, who had come boldly and told her mother that he wanted Lily for his wife! All at once there sprang up in Lily's frightened soul a consciousness that she dared not say this to Stephen, as things now were. She had been very bold with him, and said what she pleased, while she had her home within reach and had still full power over herself. But now everything seemed changed: now that she was at the height of all her dreams had pointed to, on the eve of her wedding-day, about to marry a gentleman,—and not a gentleman only, but a splendid officer, the flower of the world; now that she was about to step into another sphere, to leave her own humbleness and obscurity behind for ever—— Confusedly Lily was conscious of all this grandeur shining before her,—only one other step to be taken, only a few hours to pass: but still more certainly she became aware that her lover terrified her beyond description, and that in a moment there had rolled up between them a crowd of things which she dared not speak of, nor allude to, and those the very things which she most wished to say.

It was a relief to her when the cab stopped, in a quiet street, with not many lamps and scarcely any one about,—a street of houses with little gardens in front of them, narrow London enclosures, with a tiny tree or bush in the centre of a space no bigger than a table. But it was very quiet, and Lily felt a throb of satisfaction, hoping to see the good woman, the faithful creature who was to protect her and be a mother to her until to-morrow. She longed for the sight of this woman as she had never longed for anything in her life. But no woman appeared; the door was opened by a man, and Stephen led the way up to a room on the first floor, where there were lights and a table was laid. The room looked fine to Lily's inexperienced eyes: there were flowers about, plants in pots, and huge bouquets in vases; and the table was pretty, with its dazzling white cover, and the glass and silver that shone under the candles with their pink shades. All these details caught her eye even in this moment of troubled emotion, and gave her a thrill of pleasure, as signs and tokens of the new world into which she was taking her first

step. The man, whether servant or master of the house, who had followed them upstairs, opened a door into a room beyond, which Lily saw was a bedroom. She took refuge hastily in this room, half because she seemed to be expected to do so, half that she might be alone for the moment and able to think.

There were candles lighted upon the toilet-table, and an air of preparation, something of the ordinary and natural in the midst of all the horrible strangeness of her circumstances, which consoled her a little. She sank down upon a chair, to recover her breath and her composure, saying to herself that it was very foolish, even wicked, to be so full of nervousness and doubts and fears; that having come so far, and having done it deliberately of her own free will, she could not, must not, give way to any imaginary terrors. She might have known it would be terrible, this interval,—she might have known! and where was the good woman, the kind woman, whom Stephen had assured her she should find waiting? Then she recalled herself with a pang at her heart. How could she even ask for this woman, as if she had

no confidence in the man who would be her husband to-morrow? To-morrow,—only to-morrow,—it was not very long to wait. This panic was due, no doubt, to the excitement of her nerves, a weakness such as women were so apt to have in novels. Lily had never known before what unreasonable nerves were. She took off her hat, which relieved her throbbing head for a moment. But when she caught sight of herself in the glass, her pale, scared face frightened her as if it had been a head of Medusa. She turned away from that revelation of her own instinctive alarms with a fresh access of terror; her hands trembled as she put them up to smooth her hair. The table was arranged with pretty brushes, ivory-backed, and every kind of pretty thing, such as Lily had heard of, but never seen before. They had all been put there for her, she tried to say to herself, all arranged for her gratification, and she so ungrateful! But she could not use them. She smoothed her hair tremulously with her hands. Oh, where was the woman, the kind woman, whose presence would give her a little courage? Where was she?

'I say, Lil, look here,' cried Stephen, rattling loudly at the door. 'Don't be long about your toilet; dinner's just coming.' Then he opened the door and half came in. 'You want a lady's-maid,—that's what you want. Not used, eh, to managing for yourself, my dear?' His laugh seemed to fill the house with horrible echoes. 'Can't I fasten something or undo something? Here, Lil, you'll find me very handy,' he said, advancing to her, his large masculine presence filling the room, exhausting the atmosphere, affecting the frightened girl with a passion of terror which was almost more than she could contain.

'Oh, please!' she said, her breath coming quick, 'I shall be ready—in a moment—in —in five minutes; oh, go away, please. If you would send the woman, the woman——'

'What woman?' he asked, with a stare; then laughing, 'Oh yes, I remember! The woman, eh? A faithful old servant, wasn't she? Yes; well, she's looking after the dinner, I suppose; but no doubt there's a drudge of some kind, if you must have her. You mustn't be silly, my pretty Lil. You

must make the best of your bargain, you know. Come, can't I do?'

'Oh, if I may have the woman—only for a moment—only for five minutes!'

'Well, don't work yourself into a fever,' he said. 'And mind you don't keep the dinner waiting, for I'm as hungry as a hunter,' he added, looking back from the door.

Lily stood trembling in the middle of the room, with her hat in her hand, and that wild pain gradually rising, swelling, in her heart. It was all she could do to keep still, not to fly she knew not where. But yet she made an effort to control herself. He ought to have been more delicate, more respectful than ever, now that she was so entirely at his mercy. He ought to have treated her like something sacred. Ah! but then, she said to herself, he had never been respectful, reverent of her, like Mr. Roger. She had preferred it so,—it was Stephen's way; he was only a little rough, thinking there was no need for so many ceremonies, when to-morrow—to-morrow! She stood with one foot advanced, ready in her panic to fly,

though she did not know where she could fly to. And then she heard his voice shouting downstairs for some one to come up,—for the maid, for Mary. 'Here, you Stimpson, send up the girl, send Mary—whatever her name is.' Lily hastily locked the door which was between the rooms, while his voice was audible; feeling that even the girl, even Mary, or whatever her name was, would be some protection. Wild thoughts traversed her mind as she stood there panting for breath, like clouds driven over the sky by a stormy wind,—thoughts over which she had no control. For the first time the other conclusion burst upon her, the end of the story which was in all the books: the unhappy girl betrayed, wandering home, a shameful thing, to die. O God! O God! would that ever happen to Lily? Not to return in pride, a gentleman's wife on her husband's arm, to make her parents glad, but perhaps in shame, flinging herself down before the door, dying there, never raising her head! Oh, what folly! what folly! Oh, how horrible—horrible! But it could not be,—how could it be? It was only Stephen's

way,—a little rough, not respectful; he had never been respectful. She would have laughed at the idea before to-night,—Stephen respectful, delicate, thinking of her silly feelings! Oh, was it likely, when they were to be married to-morrow, and ceremony would be needed no more?

Presently there came a heavy, dragging step mounting the stairs, a hard breathing as of a fatigued creature; the other door of the room was pushed open, and some one came in with a steaming jug of hot water, a London maid-of-all-work, of a kind quite unknown to Lily, with a scrap of something white pinned upon her rough hair, and an apron hurriedly tied on. 'I'm sorry as I forgot the 'ot water, ma'am,' she said, and put it down with much noise and commotion, shaking the room with her tread, and making everything in it ring.

She was not pretty, nor neat, nor anything that was pleasant to see, but when she turned to go away, after putting down her jug, Lily caught her arm with both hands. 'Oh,' she cried, 'don't go away! don't go away!' holding her fast. The young woman,

half frightened, looked up in the face of this lady who must certainly be mad to seize upon her so.

'Laws!' she cried; and then, 'If it's for lady's-maidin', ma'am, I ain't no good; and Missis wants me downstairs.'

'Oh, wait a moment! wait a moment!' cried Lily under her breath. A hundred questions rushed to her lips, but she did not know how to put them into words. 'Didn't your mistress—expect me?' she managed to say.

'Missis? Expect you? Oh yes, ma'am; the Captain said as you were coming.'

A little relief came to Lily's mind. 'She did expect me! But why does she not come then? Why doesn't she come?'

'Missis!' said the drudge, astonished. 'Why, she's a-cookin' of the dinner. She ain't a lady's-maid, ma'am, no more than me.'

'But you said she expected me!'

'Oh, bless you! It was the Captain as expected you. He said, "Mrs. Stimpson, I'm expecting of my good lady. She's been a-visiting of her friends, and I expects her back Tuesday or Wednesday," he says. We

was all ready for you yesterday, ma'am, and the dinner ordered; but the Captain, he says, "It'll be to-morrow, Mrs. Stimpson." He said as how you was very fond of your own folks, and it was always uncertain to a day when you'd come back.'

'When I'd come back?'

'Yes, ma'am: I hear him sayin' of it. "Mrs. Stevens," he says, "is very fond of her own folks."'

'Is that—is that—what he said? And where does he—live, then?' said Lily, in a whisper which she could scarcely make audible.

'Captain Stevens—when he's at home? Laws! how can I tell you? But for the last week he has been living here, a-waitin' for his good lady,—just as Missis is waiting for me to help dish up the dinner downstairs.'

Lily did not say another word. She fixed her wild eyes upon the maid's face, and signed to her to go impatiently. The drudge was surprised at this rapid dismissal, but she was too much occupied with her own dreary life to trouble herself what happened, and her mistress, she knew, would scold her

for her delay. She went downstairs, not looking behind, not hearing the steps that followed her. Lily followed like a ghost; her foot was light, not like the heavy steps of the maid. She went behind her step by step, not thinking of anything but of how to get away, incapable of thought. She had her little basket still in one hand, her gloves in the other, which she held mechanically. When the woman turned the corner of the stairs to pursue her way to the kitchen, Lily found herself in the narrow hall, lit with one dull flame of gas, alone. She flew noiseless as a bird to the door which was before her, the only way of salvation. In another moment she was outside in the fresh cool air of the spring night.

Outside,—outside of everything; alone in London, without a soul to turn to,—alone in the unknown streets, on the verge of the awful night!

XXVIII

A NIGHT IN THE STREETS

It was a long time before Lily could think at all of what had happened, of what might have happened, of what might be going to become of her now, all forlorn and alone in the London streets. She had no time for thought; the first necessity was to go away, to go as far as her trembling yet nervously strong and energetic limbs could carry her,—away, away from that dreadful place. She flew rather than ran close by the garden walls and railings, scarcely feeling her feet touch the ground, to the end of the street, and out of that into a little square, which she crossed obliquely, following the street that led out of it at the other corner in a contrary direction. Until her breath was exhausted, and the first impulse of horror and panic had to some degree worn out, she never paused,

going always straight before her, out of one street into another; sometimes crossing one which was full of bustle and lights, plunging into the darkness again on the other side. The district to which she had been taken was one of those which flank great London on every side, like a series of dull towns with interminable endless little streets, leading out of each other; all alike, monotonous, featureless, overpowering in their blank nonentity. Lily had no leisure of mind to understand this, or think how it was that she found nothing but solitude round her, though it helped to oppress her soul; but now and then a chilly anguish ran through her, a feeling that she had got into some terrible circle which might bring her back to the spot she had fled from, and throw her once more into the power of him from whom she had escaped; for the streets were all so like, so horribly like, with the same dull lamps at the corners, the same line of little gardens, the same rows of windows. The light had altogether faded out of the evening sky, but it was still faintly blue overhead, showing a glittering and twinkling of innumerable stars;

not bright, but mildly present in the sky, making a sort of twilight in the heavens. The sight of this pale, ineffable clearness appearing where there was a larger opening gave Lily heart to go on; it was something known in the midst of this strange wilderness through which she was wandering, something familiar where all was so dark and strange.

When the first impulse of flight and panic began to wane, and she felt her breath fail her and her limbs trembling under her, Lily slackened her pace unconsciously; and then she began to think. This was more dreadful than the other state, the wild instinct which had obliterated everything except the necessity of getting away. She began to remember, to realise what it was that had happened to her. Heaven help her, a forlorn and solitary creature, not knowing where to go nor what to do in this awful desert of houses, where there was no door open to her, but only one which led to—hell. That was where it led to. She caught her breath with an effort to repress the long, broken, convulsive sob that shook her from head to foot, and came back and back, like the sob of a

child which has wept all its tears away. Yet it was not of the immediate danger she had escaped that she thought most. She did not, in fact, realise that, having an imagination free from all visions of corruption. What Lily realised with vivid horror was the picture so common in books, so continually repeated, which forms the burden of so many a rustic tale,—the betrayed girl going home in shame and misery to die, creeping to her father's door, not daring to knock, not venturing even to look, hiding her ruined head upon the threshold. That it should have come within the most distant possibility that this could happen to her! This was the first conscious thought that took possession of her when she became able to think at all. It had flashed across her mind as she stood in the dimly-lighted room, hearing from the dingy little maid what fate was preparing for her. It returned now, and filled her whole being with such a pervading force as is possible only to the simple soul. It did not seem to be a thought only, but a vision. She, Lily, the first of all belonging to her, the one exceptional creature, unlike all

others; knowing and feeling to the very tips of her fingers that she was not like any one else, that she belonged to another sphere,—she whose intention and dream it had been to go in at that humble door, leaning upon the arm of the finest gentleman she knew, and justify her mother's pride and fulfil all prognostications of splendour and happiness! That to her, to Lily, that other fate might have come, the common fate of the rustic fool, the village girl betrayed! Perhaps it was a proof that no stronger passion, no self-abandonment, had ever been in Lily's thoughts. This terrible picture took possession of her; she could almost feel herself sinking before the door, covering her face, and in her heart the humiliation, the shame beyond words, the collapse of every hope. If it had not been that silence was the first necessity in her present terrible circumstances, nothing could have restrained the keen cry of imagined anguish that was on her lips,—that this might have happened to *her!*

Then she calmed, or tried to calm, herself with the thought that it never could have happened. Even if she had not ascertained

her danger in time and escaped as she had done, Lily felt, grasping herself tight, as it were, holding herself together, that shame could never have come to her, never, never, never! It was a thing which she could not acknowledge possible, which never could have been. She clenched her hands, which were cold and trembling, until she hurt them with the pressure, and repeated Never, never, never! In all the world there was no power which could have brought that humiliation upon her. Oh no, no, no! There are things which can be, and there are things which cannot be. She hurried on in her passion, flying from that thought which of itself was a degradation; for to be obliged to acknowledge even the possibility of shame approaching, shame almost within touch, was a shameful thing. She went on quicker and quicker to escape from it. It takes a long time to exhaust a thought, especially in such circumstances as those in which the girl now found herself. Was any girl ever in such a plight before? In the streets of London, without a place to go to, without a friend, not knowing where to turn, lost, altogether

lost to everybody who knew her, to everything she knew! Her thoughts swept on like an accompaniment to that soft sound of her light footsteps, sometimes interrupted by a start of rising terror when she heard steps following her, or saw some figure coming into sight under the lamplight, but resuming again, going on and on. It was a long time before she came to the question what she was to do. The night had darkened, deepened, all around; the few little shops at the street corners which she passed from time to time had put up their shutters; the lights were few in the windows. It was no longer evening, but night. What was she to do?

Lily had never in her life gone anywhere or taken any important step by herself. She had gone to school, indeed, without the escort given to girls of a higher class, but even this under limitations: put into the railway carriage at one end, and met at the other, as was thought necessary by her schoolmistress, at least. She knew that what people did, when benighted in a strange place, was to go to a hotel; but this was an idea which made the blood course through her veins more wildly

than before. To go to a hotel, a girl, alone, on foot, without any luggage except the basket, which she clung to as if there might possibly be help in it! The beating of her heart seemed to choke Lily as she thought of that expedient. How could she explain that she was in London without any place to go to? No, no, that was impossible! She could not do it; she had not the courage. Oh, if she could but see some good woman, some one with a kind face, going into one of the little houses, standing at one of the doors! In books it was so certain that a poor girl would meet her at the end, when she was perhaps in despair. But no good woman stood at any door which Lily passed, or looked at her suddenly with compassion going along the pavement. By this time, indeed, there were no women about; nobody was in those quiet streets. The doors were all closed; from time to time some one went by, not distinguishable in the lamplight, who took no notice of Lily,—sometimes a policeman, with his heavy tread sounding all down the street in the quiet of the night. As it grew later and later, these policemen began to look at

her, she observed, as if she were a strange sight; and it occurred to her that perhaps, in her ignorance, not knowing where she was going, she might be passing and repassing through the same street, meeting the same man, who would naturally wonder to see a young woman going along so late. And she began to get so tired,—oh, so tired! feeling as if she could not go farther than the next corner, yet walking on mechanically without any volition of her own; her limbs moving, moving, her feet sometimes stumbling, always going on as if they had some separate impulse of their own. If she only dared to sit down on the steps of a door, rest a little, perhaps go to sleep for a time, leaning her head upon her hand! But Lily felt hazily, in the confusion of her weariness, that if she did this the policeman or some one might speak to her, might take her perhaps to prison, or to the workhouse, or somewhere which would be a disgrace. Everything unknown seemed as if it might be a disgrace, something that would be a shame to think of, to have encountered. To be out all night was shameful, too,—in the streets all

night! What would any one think to whom that was said? In London streets all night! Anybody who heard of that would think of noise and tumult, and crowds of people and blazing lights, and dreadful gaiety and merry-making. But what a mistake that was! Lily said to herself. The streets of London,—what could be more quiet? Quieter than the road through the village or the country high-ways, where the dogs would bark, at least, at a passing footstep, and the people in the houses get up to look out and wonder who it could be. But in these streets no dog barked, no window opened, no one looked out. She remembered to have heard that no woman need fear going anywhere in London, so long as she walked steadily along, minding her own business, giving no occasion to any one to interfere. How true that was, how safe it was, nobody paying any attention! It sounded a terrible thing to be out walking about the streets all night; but it was not so dreadful after all. There was nobody to meddle; the policeman might perhaps look surprised to see a girl alone so late; but no one said a word. It was quite, quite safe; it was the

best way, so that nobody should ever know. For who could believe it possible that Lily, *Lily!* had spent a night like that, roaming restlessly about the silent, dark streets? If she were not so tired, and so faint, and so ready to cry, and so like to drop down with utter fatigue and blinding, chilling weariness! But here was the policeman coming again, and he might think he had a right to speak to her if she faltered, or made any sound of crying, or showed that she was tired while he was passing. So she went on and on.

What she would have done had she not happened upon this quiet district, these innumerable little silent streets, who can tell? Had she drifted into a great thoroughfare, or the places where people live who go home late, poor Lily's adventures might have been very different. It was fortunate for her that Stephen Mitford had chosen a quarter far removed from those which he knew best,—a place out of reach of any prying eyes, in the midst of the respectability of the Westbourne Park district, in the endless labyrinths of Roads and Gardens and Places, where midnight commotion never enters. More than once she

passed the very corner of the street to which he had taken her, in the ignorance of her aimless wandering in the dark hours of the night; sometimes, indeed, was within the length of a street from him searching for her. But it would not have mattered had they met face to face. Lily was for ever emancipated from that dream. He could as soon have moved the church in the deep shadows of which the poor girl ventured to pause a little, leaning against the railings, as have persuaded or forced her back to the false shelter he had provided. However, he never came within sight of that shadowy little figure, which passed like a ghost, going close to the houses, brushing past the garden walls.

She was still going on in her circuit, her head more and more confused, her thoughts more broken, all lucidity gone from her mind, nothing left but the mechanical power of movement and sense that she must go on, when suddenly a miracle was worked about and around the poor little wanderer. The day broke. She was so dazed with fatigue that she had not observed the preliminary phenomena of dawn. Things had got clearer

round her, but she had taken no notice. She had been vaguely aware of the houses, with their windows all veiled with white blinds, like closed eyes, which somehow became more visible, as if looking coldly at her, wondering what she was doing there, when abruptly there came upon her through an opening, like a hand reaching out of heaven, the warmth and glory of a ray of sunshine. Lily, who all that awful night through had not uttered a sound, started as if some one had touched her, and gave a faint cry. The sun, the day! It was over, then, this horrible darkness and silence. She put her hand to her heart to which the ray, the dart, had gone. All at once the danger seemed over. It seemed to her that she now could sit down anywhere, which was the one sole, overpowering wish that remained in her—rest anywhere without being remarked. The policeman was no longer a thing to fear, nor any one, any one! Not that she had been afraid, but now that it was over she felt with reawakening faculties all the horror that had been in it,—now that it was day. She did not sit down, however, though the friendly

steps at all those closed doors appeared to spread out like delightful places of refuge to receive her. One on which that ray of sunshine slanted was almost too tempting to be resisted. But courage came back to her with the light, and freedom and deliverance. It might be possible to ask for shelter somewhere, to look out wistfully again for that good woman, now the day had come. But though she felt this sudden relief in her soul, utter exhaustion made Lily like a creature in a dream, moving she could not tell how, drifting onward with little conscious impulse of her own. She remarked things round her, and felt the sensation of freedom, but always as in a dream. Presently she came to the edge of a large thoroughfare, and stood and gazed at it with a wonder that was half reverence and half fear. Lily knew enough to understand that this was not like the streets in which she had been wandering. The great shops all barricaded and barred, the wide pavements, the many lamps, some of them still burning ineffectually, with curious unnecessary light, in the full eye of day, showed her that this was one of the centres

of life of which she had heard. She thought it was perhaps Regent Street or Piccadilly. To see it bereft of all life, silent, filled with light and the freshness of the morning, produced in her mind some faint shadow of that emotion with which the poet saw the 'mighty heart' of the great city lying still, and the river flowing at its will. But that impression was faint, and the aspect of the deserted street chilled once more the innocent vagrant, half restored to life by the awakening touch of day. There was no one to help her, no one looking out to see what unhappy lost creature was in want of succour, no good woman. Oh, where was she, that good woman, who would take her by the hand, who would stand between her distracted youth and the terrible world?

She was too much worn out, however, to feel even this with any warmth. Standing still had rested her a little: she went on again, automatically, scarcely knowing why, because there was nothing else for her to do, along the whole vacant length of the empty street. An early workman or two, pipe in mouth, went past her, taking no notice. No

one took any notice. The earliest houses began to wake, as she passed, a few blinds were drawn up, a housemaid appeared here and there at a door,—a girl who had slept all night, and risen to her work cheerful and rosy, whereas she! One or two of these looked curiously at her, she thought, as she went along. Was her walk unsteady? Was her hair untidy? she wondered vaguely. What would they think? And what was she to do? What was she to do? Though she could neither feel nor think save by moments, something would rise in the morning air, and breathe across her with this question. What, what was she to do? As she went on, she suddenly became aware that the people whom she had begun mechanically to observe, appearing one by one from various sides, were all tending in one direction; and then a carriage or two came noisily along, disturbing the quiet, turning the same way. She looked up, and her heart gave a wild spring, then fell down again, down, down, into her bosom. It was the railway to which the people were all tending, and she with them,—the way home.

How could she go home? Oh, home, home, to which she had meant to return triumphant on her husband's arm! Her husband—but who was he? She had no husband; and how could she go home? She must think, she must think; the time had come at last when she must think, and find out what she was to do. She went on with the little stream, following instinctively, as if the current had caught her. One lady went into the waiting-room, where Lily followed, still mechanically. She did not know why she should choose to follow that individual more than another; they were all blind leaders of the blind to the confused intelligence, now sinking into a sort of waking sleep. But when she found herself sheltered by four walls and with a roof over her head, the long wretchedness of the night overwhelmed Lily. It seemed to have waited for her there to close around her, to stupefy all her faculties. She sank down upon a sofa, unconscious of the public place it was, knowing nothing except that here at last was shelter, and a place where she could lay her weary head.

XXIX

THE KNIGHT-ERRANT AND THE DETECTIVE

'YOUR Lily?' exclaimed Edmund, with an amazement so evident that the poor woman, who stood subduing herself, in a state of passionate excitement, yet keeping down her voice and her tears, half in eagerness to hear his reply, half in terror lest she should betray her distress to other ears than his, clasped her hands together in dismay, and burst into one momentary strangled cry. She had not doubted that he would know,—and he knew nothing. Her feverish hope, the hope which had seemed almost a certainty, fell in a moment and perished.

'Oh, sir,' she said, 'oh, Mr. Edmund, don't say that you don't know, for it's been all my hope!'

He took her by the hand gently, and led her to a chair. The interruption had made

him angry at first; but the real and terrible suffering in her homely face, which was blanched out of all its usual ruddiness, the mouth trembling, the brows all puckered with trouble, touched Edmund's heart. 'Sit down,' he said, 'and compose yourself, and tell me what has happened. I know nothing about your daughter: what is it? If I can do anything to help you, I will.'

'Oh, Mr. Edmund!' cried the poor woman again; then she clasped her hands in her lap, and, leaning forward, her eyelids swollen and large with tears, said with impressive tragical simplicity, 'I have not seen my Lily since yesterday middle day,—not since yesterday middle day.'

'You have not seen her? I don't understand,' said Edmund. 'Do you mean that you have had a quarrel—that she has—— No, no, I know that can't be. She must have gone—to see some of your friends.'

'We have no friends, Mr. Edmund, as she'd wish to go and see. Oh, if I've been a foolish woman bringing her up as I have done, out of her own kind, oh, God forgive me, and that it may all lie upon me! Mr.

Edmund, she's got no friends for that reason, because she's a lady, is my Lily, and the rest are all just girls in the village. It never was no amusement to her, nor no pleasure, to go with them. No, no, she's not gone to no friends. There's only one thing I can think of to keep me from despair. Oh, Mr. Edmund, have pity upon me! Tell me as she has gone off with your brother, and I'll never say a word. I'll not suspect nor think no harm. Mr. Edmund, I have confidence in my Lily, and Mr. Roger, he's always acted proper and like a gentleman. Oh, Mr. Edmund, say as he's taken her away!'

'Why should he take her away? He has asked her to marry him, and he has told you of it, and my father knows; everybody is now prepared for the marriage. You may be sure it would never occur to my brother to do anything clandestine, anything secret. Why should he? He has suffered enough for her; there can be no need for any secret now.'

Edmund could scarcely restrain the indignation which rose in his mind as he spoke. Yes, Roger had suffered enough for her.

To run away, after all, with this cottage girl was a supposition impossible, unworthy of him, ridiculous. Why had he borne all that he had done, if the matter was to come to such a solution at the end?

'I've said that to myself,' said poor Mrs. Ford. 'I've said it over and over: all as ever Mr. Roger has done or said, he's been the perfect gentleman all through. But,' she added, crushing her hands together, and raising to him her tearful face, 'if my Lily is not with him, where is she? for I have not seen her—I have not seen her'—her voice broke, choked with tears and unquenchable sobs—'me, that never let her out of my sight,—not since yesterday middle day. And there's her bed that no one's slept in, and her things all lying, and supper and breakfast never touched. And oh, where is she, *where* is she, Mr. Edmund, where's my Lily?' cried the poor mother, her painful self-control breaking down. She held up her hands to him in an agony of appeal. Her poor homely face was transfigured with love and anguish, with that aching and awful void in which every wretchedness is concentrated,

It was scarcely to be wondered at if in Edmund's mind there had sprung up at first a sort of impatient hope that here was a possibility of being rid of Lily, that troubler of everybody's peace. But he could not resist the misery in the poor woman's face. He sat down by her and soothed her as best he could, inquiring when and how the girl had disappeared, and what the circumstances were, if perhaps they might throw any light upon it. It was a curious and bewildering coincidence that she should have disappeared on the afternoon on which Roger had gone to town. Was it possible, his brother asked himself, that, weary of all that had taken place, scarcely happy even in the prospect of what was to come, Roger had snatched at the possibility of concluding the whole business without further fuss or fret, and persuaded her to trust herself to him? He thought it strange, very strange, that his brother should have dreamed of such an expedient; stranger still that Lily, no doubt elated by such a change in her fortunes, should have consented to it, and foregone her triumph. But still it was extraordinary that both these

events should happen in one day, both in one afternoon, Roger's departure and Lily's disappearance. He could not refuse to see the probability of some connection between them. While he listened to Mrs. Ford's story, his mind went off into endeavours to reason it out, to convince himself that the possibility of such a rapid conclusion might have struck Roger as desirable. He interrupted her to ask if she had inquired at the station if any one had seen Lily there. 'It must be known, some one must have seen her, if she went by that train. But of course you have inquired there.'

Mrs. Ford replied with a little scream of alarm.

'Ask, ask at the station!—as if I didn't know about my own child, as if she had gone away unbeknownst to me! I'd rather die! Oh, Mr. Edmund, don't go and do that; don't, for God's sake! Ask—about Lily!—as if she was lost, as if we didn't know where she was——' She seized him by the arm, in her terror, as if she feared he would begin his inquiries at once. 'Oh, Mr. Edmund, don't, don't, for the love of God!'

'If you do not inquire, how are you ever to know?' he asked, with impatience.

'I'd rather never know,' she replied. 'I'd rather spend my life in misery than expose my Lily. Whatever she's done, she's done it with a right heart: whatever happens, I know that. And rather than ask strangers about her, or let on as I don't know, I'd rather die. Don't you go and expose us, and make my girl the talk of the parish that doesn't know her—oh, that doesn't know what she is! Ford would have done it, never thinking; but he saw when I told him. Mr. Edmund,' she said, rising, with a kind of dignity in her despair, 'I came to you putting faith in you because of your brother. You haven't got no right to betray me, nor my Lily. If you go and expose my Lily——' She stopped with a gasp,—words would do no more,—but confronted the young master, the gentleman to whom she had looked up as a superior being, with all the indignant grandeur of an angry queen.

'You need not fear for me,—I will betray no one,' said Edmund. 'And I think I understand you,' he added more quietly,

'but it is very unreasonable,—you must see it is unreasonable. How are we to find out if we make no inquiries? However, I understand you, and I will say no more. I don't know what to think about my brother. It was to avoid him that she left the house, and that she told you she was going to spend the day in the park; and she said you could tell him truly that she was far, far away? And yet you think—— I don't know what to think.'

'It's all true,—it's all true! Nor I don't know what to think—— But oh, my Lily, my Lily, where is she?' the mother cried, wringing her hands.

After a time Edmund succeeded in calming the poor woman, and persuaded her to go home, promising to follow her there, to meet her husband, and discuss with them both what was to be done. Appearances were so strongly against Roger that it was impossible for Edmund to stand aside and let the poor little rural tragedy go on to its appropriate, its conventional end. If Roger had anything to do with it, it would not have that conventional end. But it became harder

and harder, as he thought all the circumstances over, to persuade himself that Roger could have taken such a strange step. He conducted Mrs. Ford downstairs through the billiard-room, which was the way in which she was least likely to be seen by the servants, and flattered himself that nobody save Larkins was any the wiser. Larkins was a person of discretion,—of too much discretion, indeed, for he had looked every inch the possessor of a family secret when he called Edmund out of his father's room to see Mrs. Ford, and there was a suspicious vacancy about the hall and corridors, as if the prudent butler had thought it necessary to clear every possible spectator away. The consciousness of something to conceal makes the apprehension unusually lively. In ordinary circumstances Edmund would have remarked neither Larkins's looks nor the vacancy of the house and passages. He was not, however, to be allowed long to congratulate himself upon this quiet. When he came out of the billiard-room, after Mrs. Ford's departure, he met Nina, her eyes dancing with curiosity and the keen delight of an

inquirer who has got upon the scent of a new mystery.

'Oh, Edmund!' she said, breathless, too eager even to dissimulate the heat of her pursuit.

'What are you doing here?'

'Oh, nothing, Edmund, only looking. Was that Mrs. Ford, that woman going out this way?'

'What does it matter to you who it was, Nina? You had better go back to your own part of the house.'

'Oh, Edmund, I do so want to know. I want to ask you something. What is the matter? You and papa were shut up so long in the library, and then you and Mrs. Ford. Are you fond of Lily, *too?* Are you like all the rest?'

Edmund put his hand upon her arm, and led her to the drawing-room. It was only there, in the shelter of that wide and quiet space, that he trusted himself to turn round upon her. 'Nina,' he said severely, 'will you never be cured of this prying and listening?' And then, drawing his breath hard, 'Why do you put such a question to me?

Do you know it is a great piece of impertinence? And what do you mean by "all the rest"?'

'Oh, Edmund, don't look so angry. I haven't done anything wrong; indeed, indeed, I wasn't listening! How could I,' said Nina, with indignation, 'when you know there are those horrid *portières* at the library door?'

Edmund, with a groan, threw himself into a chair; this little creature, with her odious insight and information, had him in her power.

'And, Edmund,' she went on, 'do you think it is possible not to want to know, when the whole house is turned upside down? Roger coming home on Monday, going away on Tuesday again, you in a great worry all the time, papa so angry and shut up in the library with Mr. Pouncefort,—there is always something wrong when Mr. Pouncefort is sent for, Simmons says,—and then Mrs. Ford taken to your sitting-room upstairs. If you think all that can happen, and only me not want to know!'

There was a certain reason in what she said which her brother could not dispute;

and her words were full of mysterious suggestions. 'What do you mean,' he said again, 'by "all the rest"?'

'I would tell you if you would not be angry; but how can I tell you, Edmund, when you find fault with everything I say?'

He waved his hand in mingled impatience and apology. All the rest!—was it only the instinct of a gossip, or was there any light to come upon this dark problem from what Nina, with her servants'-hall information, really knew.

'Well, Roger is in love with her,' said Nina calmly; 'every one, both upstairs and downstairs, knows that. I did,' the little girl added, with a certain triumph, 'long ago.'

'Nina, you don't know how you vex me. You ought to be sent away, my poor little girl; you ought not to be left here——'

'To Geraldine's or Amy's! Oh yes, do ask papa to send me?' cried Nina, clapping her hands.

'But allowing that about Roger, which is no business of yours, Roger is only one, after all; what do you mean by "all the rest"?'

'Oh, I only said that when I thought that you, *too*—because of Mrs. Ford going up to your room, Edmund.'

'You have nothing to do with Mrs. Ford, nor with me either. What did you mean by "all the rest"?'

Nina hung her head a little. 'It isn't grammatical to say *all* when there are only two, is it?' she said; 'but supposing there *were* only two, Edmund, why, then they would be "all the rest"!'

'Who are the two? Who was the second, Nina?'

'Oh, Edmund, don't tell upon me! I don't mind for Roger. He might be angry, but he wouldn't scold me. And then they say he has told papa and everybody that he is going to marry Lily, so it would be no secret. But, Edmund, if you were to tell Steve——'

'Steve!'

'Well, of course,' said Nina, 'he is "all the rest"; who could it be else? I said you *too*, and there are only the three of you. I found out Steve all by myself. He used to go out every evening after dinner. I won-

dered very much,—how could I help it?—and then I found out what it meant.'

'Nina, this is too dreadful; you are no better than a little spy. You found it out, you went after him, you followed him—where? To the lodge?'

Nina had been nodding vigorously during the course of these interrogations; but when he came to the last she changed the movement, and shook her head with all its innocent curls, instead of nodding it. 'Oh no, no!' she said, 'he never went near the lodge; she met him in the park. They had a post-office, a place where they put their letters, in a hollow tree; I could show it to you, Edmund. And I will tell you another thing,' cried the girl, forgetting all possibility of reproof in the delight of having such a wonderful tale to tell. 'Some one saw Lily Ford at Molton Junction yesterday. She went to the office and sent off a telegraph,—oh, I know that's not the right word, but you know what I mean,—she sent off a telegraph from Molton Junction. It is a long walk to Molton Junction. If it had been right to do it, she would have sent it

from our own station. I don't know what it was,' said Nina regretfully, 'but I am sure she must have intended that nobody should know.'

'At Molton Junction!' Edmund forgot to chide the little collector of news, whose eyes were dancing with satisfaction and triumph, as she brought out one detail after another. She enjoyed her own narrative thoroughly, without observing its effect upon him. He had grown very grave, his face was overcast, his brows were knitted over his eyes, which looked away into vacancy as if seeing something there that appalled him. 'And what then? What did she do then?' he asked sharply, turning round. Nina was taken by surprise at this sudden change of tone.

'I don't know; I did not hear any more. I suppose she must have walked home again. And fancy going all that way only to send a telegraph, when you have a station so near your own door!'

'Then she went only to send the telegram; and came back again?'

'I suppose so,' said Nina, with a sudden

sense that her evidence, though so full of interest that at last it had silenced Edmund, was on this point defective. She had all the instincts of a detective, and perceived her failure, and saw in a moment that her brother had expected more. But Edmund asked no further questions. His mind was indeed so distracted by this new light as for the moment to be almost paralysed. And yet there was nothing impossible nor even unlikely in it. But if the solution of the problem was to be found in Nina's story, what was he to say to the miserable father and mother? The new character thus introduced was very different from him whom they suspected; and Stephen's actions could not be calculated on, like Roger's. If Lily had fallen into his hands, Heaven help her! for she was very little likely to escape. It was not, however, of Lily that he thought; if he considered her at all, it was with an impatient feeling that, whatever happened, she would have but herself to thank for it, which was not just. Even Ford and his wife, though Edmund's heart ached to think of them, held a secondary place in his thoughts.

But Roger! This was what struck him dumb with dismay. How was he to tell Roger that the girl he had loved had fled from her father's house, and in all probability with his brother? And the Squire, who for this unhappy girl's sake had disinherited Roger, and was putting Stephen's name in the place of that of his eldest son! What could be more terrible than that irony of fate?

XXX

CARRYING EVIL TIDINGS

EDMUND found Ford the gamekeeper, with red eyes, strained by watching and misery, waiting for him as he approached the lodge; and Mrs. Ford came out from her door to meet them as they neared the house. The sight of these two unhappy people gazing at him with a wistful hope, as if he could do something, went to Edmund's heart. Their house loomed vacant and miserable, with all the doors open, an empty place behind them, while they stood on either side of their visitor, and with appealing faces mutely implored him to help them. For neither of them could say much. 'Oh, Mr. Edmund!' Mrs. Ford cried from time to time, while her husband stood crushing his hat in his hands, starting at every little sound, with his bloodshot eyes fixed upon the young master.

Ford's misery was more pitiful to see than his wife's was. He had less command of words, and could not calm himself either by renewed statements of the case or tears, as she could; and perhaps the grosser dangers were more present to his mind, and he had less confidence in Lily's power of controlling circumstances. All that he could do to relieve the anguish of his soul was to turn and twist his hat out of all shape in those strong moist hands, with which he would have wrung the neck, if he could, of the man who had beguiled away his Lily: but Ford was not capable of uttering her name.

Edmund's attempt to question the anxious pair as to whether Lily had known any one who could have tempted her away, whether there was any lover, even any acquaintance whom she could have made without their knowledge, produced nothing but eager contradictions from Mrs. Ford, and a look of fury in her husband's face which warned Edmund that the man was nearly beyond his own control, and might almost be tempted to spring upon him, Edmund, in lieu of any other victim. 'Who could she ever see?

Who entered our doors but Mr. Roger? And not him with my will,' said Mrs. Ford, —'oh, not with my will! I would have shut the door upon him, if I could. But never another came near the place, — never another! And she wasn't one to talk or to bandy words: oh, never anything of that sort! She was as retired, as quiet, never putting herself forward, never letting any man think as she was to be spoken to different from a lady——'

Ford made a wild movement, as if he would have struck his wife. 'Will you stop that?' he said hoarsely, the blood mounting into his brown, weather-beaten countenance: and then she began to cry, poor soul, while he kneaded his hat with restless hands, and looked straight before him into the vacancy of the park, his eyes red and lowering with excess of wretchedness and sleeplessness and misery. He could not speak nor hear her speak: he was impatient of any touch upon his wounds; and yet, in the helplessness of his ignorance, incapable of doing anything in his own person, he turned his piteous gaze again, with dumb expectation,

on Edmund, who assuredly could do something, he knew not what, to help to clear up this misery, to find Lily if found she could be.

'Mrs. Ford,' said Edmund, 'if you are right, she is as safe as if she were here in your own care. My brother Roger asked her from you as his wife.'

'Oh, Mr. Edmund!' cried Mrs. Ford, wringing her hands.

'She is as safe as in your own house,' said Edmund, stopping with a gesture the story on her lips. 'If she is with him, all is well. Ford, you know him; you know that what I say is true.'

The man looked at him wildly, crushing his hat into a pulp in his fierce grasp. 'I don't know nothing,' he suddenly burst forth, with a kind of roar of anguish,—'nothing but that I'll wring his damned neck with these hands!'

'Ford, oh, Ford!'

'I'll wring his damned neck, master or no master, if he's harmed my girl!' said the man, with his hoarse roar, pushing his wife away with his elbow. Then he turned to Edmund with the pathetic eyes of a dog, a

helpless dumb creature asking for help. 'Do something for us, Mr. Edmund,' he said.

'I will, I will, if I can,' Edmund cried. They stood on each side of him, their eyes, appealing, going to his very heart. What was he to do? He knew, though they did not, how vain it was. If she were with Roger, then no harm could come to her. But Stephen!—how could he suggest to them that horrible danger, that misery in which there was no hope?

Edmund went to London by the night train. He arrived very early in the gray of the morning, before it was possible to see any one, even his brother. He went to the hotel near the station, and loitered through those slow, still morning hours, when nothing can be done, which are perhaps more dreadful in their monotony than any others. He was too much excited to sleep, and the brightness of the morning was appalling and merciless; softening nothing, showing everything terribly distinct and clear. To go to Roger and seek Lily there appeared to him more futile than even he had felt it to be at first. Lily there!

Could anything be more impossible? That Roger should expose his wife that was to be to the faintest remark, that he should subject her to any misconstruction, that he could even have supposed it within the bounds of possibility that Lily would consent to go with him, Edmund now knew was preposterous. He had known it all along, but from pure pity of the misery of the family he had allowed himself to think that perhaps for once the impossible might have happened. He now felt that it could not be so. But on the other side, if Nina was right! The Mitfords had no delusions in respect to each other; at least there was none so far as regarded Stephen. Stephen was the member of the household whose course of action had always been most certain to the others. He would do what was for his own pleasure and his own interest. He professed no other creed. What he liked, what suited him, was what he did: and if he chose to gather that humble flower, what was it to any one? He would do it without any after-thought. Was it not only too possible that he had corrupted Lily even before she left her father's house?

Edmund set his teeth, with something of the feeling, though the culprit was his brother, which had made poor Ford in his passion crush the hat which was in his hands. 'I would wring his damned neck!' Edmund, with a passion of indignation and righteous wrath in his heart, felt that he too could do the same. And how could he hold back the miserable father, whatever he did in his anguish? If Stephen had not corrupted her, then he had betrayed her. Poor Lily! Poor flower of folly, trained to her destruction! He thought with a kind of rage of all concerned, from his own mother, who had begun that fatal career, to the fond, deluded parents, who had put their pride in their daughter and brought her up a lady. A lady, and the gamekeeper's daughter,—too good for her own people, not good enough for the others, destined to trouble from her cradle, devoted to misery and shame! Poor Lily, it was no fault of hers. It was not by her will that she had been separated from the honest rustic lover who would have made her father's daughter a good husband, had it been left to nature. The gardener, with his little learn-

ing, his superior pretensions, his pleasant house and work,—how happy Ford's daughter might have been in such a simple possible promotion! Whereas now, the ruin of one brother or the prey of another,—was this all her harmless vanity, her foolish training, her fatal beauty, had brought her? To bloom like a flower, and to be thrown away like one, and perish, trodden underfoot. Edmund's heart was sore with these thoughts. He had come to help, but how could he help? Could he take her back to these poor people, stained and shamed, her glory and her sweetness gone? Would she go with him, even, abandoning the delight of a life of gaiety and noise and so-called pleasure, to return to the wretchedness of the home she had left and the name she had covered with shame? Poor Lily, poor Lily! His heart bled for her, the victim of the folly of so many others more than of her own.

As soon as it was possible to do so, he went to Roger's chambers, which he had always shared, and in which, now that the day was fully astir and awake, he had his own room to retire to, to prepare himself for an interview

which he dreaded more and more as it approached. Though half a day seemed to have passed since Edmund's arrival, it was still early, and Roger was not yet visible. His letters were on the breakfast-table ready for him, one in Mr. Mitford's well-known hand, which Edmund perceived with a sensation of impatience almost insupportable; thinking of Stephen promoted to Roger's place, of Stephen guilty and cruel in the place of his honourable and innocent brother, and of the unhappy girl who stood between them, for whom Roger was suffering without blame, and upon whose ruin Stephen would stand triumphant. Could such things be? It was all he could do to restrain himself, not to seize upon his father's letter and tear it into a thousand pieces; but what would it matter? His father, Edmund knew in his heart, would forgive Stephen's fault, but not Roger's. It made no difference. Lily destroyed would not stand in the younger brother's way, while Lily honoured and beloved would ruin Roger. It was horrible, but it was true.

When Roger appeared, he came up to Edmund almost with enthusiasm, with a

sparkle of pleasure in his eyes. 'I thought, somehow, I should see you soon,' he said; 'it seemed natural you should come after the one who was down on his luck,' and he grasped his brother's hand with an unusual effusion. Though this was all that was said, they were both a little moved,—Edmund, as he felt, with better reason, for how he was to make known his trouble now he could not tell. The moment he saw Roger, all doubt of him disappeared from his mind. To have asked him where Lily was, or if he knew anything of her, would have been an insult. He had felt this with waverings from the first, but he had no waverings on the subject now. Roger, too, had a great deal of excitement about him, which took the form of elation, and even gaiety: smiles danced in his eyes; he laughed, as he spoke, for nothing, for mere pleasure. 'I hope you got my letter,' he said; 'but you could not, I fear, since you must have started last night.'

'I got no letter. I was—anxious to see you—to know—— I suppose you have been arranging things.'

'So well that I don't understand how I can have been so successful the first try. I had made up my mind to everything that was discouraging. You know, people say that when you want anything very much, that is precisely the time when you don't get it. But I've had a different experience. I went to see Hampton yesterday. I thought he was the man, if there was anything to be had: but you'll never believe what he's going to do. They're coming into office, you know. The excellent fellow offered me the post of his private secretary. What do you think, Ned,—private secretary to a cabinet minister, the very first try one makes!'

'I am very glad, Roger; but it will be hard work, and you're not used to that.'

'Work! what does that matter? I shall delight in it, and there is no telling what it may lead to. I never thought I should fall into public life in this way; but I have always had a fancy for it, one time or other, don't you know?'

Edmund did not know; indeed, he thought he knew the reverse, and that his brother had aimed at a life untrammelled by any

such confinement. But he did not say so. 'It is a capital beginning,' he said.

'I should think it was! I never hoped for anything of the kind: but I have a feeling,' said Roger, with again a little joyous laugh, 'that my luck is going to turn, Ned. I've had a good long spell of bad; I have some good owing me, and I feel that it's coming. Why don't you say something, you sulky fellow? I believe you're not half pleased.'

'I am pleased, as long as it pleases you. It is not the life I should have planned for you, but if you think you will like it——'

'Think! I don't think, I know: it will give me occupation and something serious to think of. A man wants that when he settles down. I wrote to Lily, too,' he said, his voice softening, 'putting everything before her.'

And then there was a blank silence for a moment, one of those pauses full of meaning, upon which the most unsuspecting can scarcely deceive themselves. Edmund did not so much as look at his brother, whom he was about to strike with so cruel a blow.

'Well,' Roger said, after a moment, 'speak out; what have you got to say? I know there is something. Let me have it without more ado.'

'It is not so easy to speak out,' returned Edmund.

'Why, Ned! You forget that I know it already. My father has done what he threatened. He has put me out of the succession. Do you think I did not know he would keep his word? And you have got it, old fellow,' said Roger, putting out his hand, 'and I am quite satisfied. I wish you had got my letter. What England expects of you now is that you should marry Elizabeth, and live happy ever after. Did you think I should grudge it to you, Ned?"

Edmund listened to all this with a perfectly blank face. It sounded in his ears like something flat and fictitious, without interest, without meaning. He grasped the hand which his brother held out to him across the corner of the table, and held it fast. It seemed as if that little speech which Roger made him would never be done. Edmund held the hand after Roger's voice ceased, and again

there was another pause. Then Edmund heard his own voice say, as if it were some one else speaking, 'When did you last see Lily Ford?'

'See Lily?' Roger looked at him with wondering eyes. Then he said, with a little impatience, 'I have not seen her since the night before I left home. You know that. She would not see me for some reason or other, a panic about her father; but I have written, I have set everything before her—— Ned, what is it? What do you mean?'

'She did not—come with you to London?'

'Ned! What do you mean? Have you taken leave of your senses? Come with me to London, the girl who is to be my wife?'

'I told them so,' said Edmund. He could not lift his eyes and look Roger in the face.

'You told them so? Edmund,' said Roger, laying his hand upon his brother's arm, 'you have something to tell me, something you are afraid to say. For Heaven's sake, out with it! What is it? Something that I do not expect?'

'Roger,' said his brother, faltering, 'Roger, Lily Ford disappeared from her home the

day you left. They do not know where she is, nor what has become of her. They thought she might have come to London with you. I told them that was impossible. They are heart-broken; they don't know where she is.'

Roger received this blow full in his breast. He had not feared anything, he had no preparation for it. It came upon him like the fire of a shooting-party, when a man is condemned to die. The solid earth swam round him. He heard the hesitating words come one by one, singing through the air like bullets; and yet he did not know even now what it meant.

XXXI

THREE BROTHERS

In the end, however, this dreadful news, which Edmund had thought would kill his brother, had little or no effect upon him. The idea that Lily had in any way compromised herself, that anything disgraceful could be involved, or that there was wrong in it, was one which Roger was incapable of receiving. He was stunned for the moment by the mere wonder, but recovered himself almost immediately. 'And she left no letter, gave them no clue?' he said gravely enough, yet with a smile breaking through beneath the seriousness of his lips.

'None whatever,' replied Edmund, watching his brother keenly, with the strangest new suspicions and doubts springing up in his mind.

Roger said nothing for a minute or two;

and then, shaking his head, 'What unreasoning creatures women are, the best of them! Do you think she could suppose it possible that I would be shaken off like that?'

'Shaken off—like what?'

'I don't know what is the matter with you, Ned: you look as if you were in great trouble about something. Not about this, I hope. Don't you see it is as clear as daylight? She is frightened of me, poor darling. She thinks her father will lose his place, and his home, and all his comforts. It is just like a girl's inconsequent way. If she removes herself out of the question, she thinks all will be well. No doubt she is hiding somewhere, with her poor little heart beating, wondering if we will really let her get lost and sacrifice herself. My poor, little, silly, sweet Lily! She has read too many novels, no doubt: she thinks that's the best way,—to make a sacrifice of herself.'

Edmund looked with a certain awe at his brother's face, lit up with the tenderest smile. Roger was not thinking of any danger to her, nor of how other people were affected, nor of anything but the romantic, generous

girl, following, perhaps, some example in a novel, as little reasonable as any heroine of romance. And was not she a heroine of romance, the true romance which never fails or is out of fashion,—and was not this unreason the most exquisite thing in the world? He did not observe that his brother made no answer: that Edmund gave him one wondering glance only, and then averted his eyes. Roger required no answer; his mind was altogether absorbed in this intelligence, which he received in so different a way from that which his brother feared.

'We mustn't leave her too long in that thought,' said Roger cheerfully. 'It's curious how sweet that want of reason is,—don't you think so? No, you're too matter of fact, Ned; and besides, you have not fallen under the spell. What do they think? Or rather, where do they think she can have taken refuge,—with some old aunt, or old friend, or something? They must have made some guess.'

'I don't think so. They thought, and they almost persuaded me to think, that you had brought her here with you.'

'I bring her here with me!'

'I knew, of course, it was absurd,' said Edmund, averting his eyes.

'There is a kind of unreason that is not sweet,' said Roger quickly. 'What did they suppose I could have done that for? And it was so likely she would have come with me, her only half-accepted—when it is evident it's to escape me, to sacrifice herself, that she's gone away.' He got up, and began to pace about the room. 'This becomes a little disagreeable,' he said. 'With me! What a strange idea! The most sensitive, delicate—why, you might almost say prudish—— And why, in the name of all that's ridiculous, could I have wished her to come with me?'

'That is what I felt,' Edmund said, but still with averted eyes.

'Ah, Ned,' said Roger, 'that's the worst of it. These good, honest people! things that would horrify us seem natural to them. They would see nothing out of the question in such an impossible proceeding,—to show her London, perhaps, or consult her about our future arrangements?' He laughed, with a faint awakening of uneasiness. 'And all

the time she is in some nook in the country, some old woman's cottage, thinking how clever she has been to hide herself from everybody, but yet perhaps wondering—— I wonder if she is wondering whether I am no more good than that, whether I will let her go——' He paused a little, his voice melting into the softness of a mother with her child; then he said quickly, 'We must get at once the directions of all the old aunts.'

'They have no directions to give,' observed Edmund, in a low tone; 'there seems to be no one they can think of. And the strange thing is that she appears to have come to London the day before yesterday, in the same train with you, Roger,—from Molton Junction, so far as I can make out, where it seems she sent off a telegram, having walked there.'

'This is more mysterious than ever,' said Roger, growing red under his eyes, 'but also more natural than ever. Of course she must have telegraphed to the house she was going to. Of course London is the way to everywhere; or she might even have a friend in town. Of course they must know of some

one. You don't mean to say that they have no relations, no friends, out of Melcombe? Come, Edmund,' he said, giving his brother a sudden sharp pat on the shoulder, 'wake yourself up! We must find our way out of this; we are not going to be outgeneraled by a simple girl. How strange,' he continued, after a moment, 'that I didn't see her! Now I think of it, I did see some one in the crowd at Molton who reminded me—— To be sure—— I said to myself, If I did not know she was safe at home—— And, after all, I never thought of looking when we got to Paddington. By the way——'

'What, Roger?'

'It has just occurred to me. I saw Stephen at the station; he was going to meet one of the men of his regiment. He may have seen her. I suppose he knows her,—by sight, at least?'

'Most probably,' answered Edmund, scarcely knowing how to command his voice.

'And no one could see her without remarking her. Steve may have noticed, Ned; he may have seen whether any one met her, or what way she went. The moment I have

swallowed my coffee' (which had in the meantime grown cold on the table, and which was the only part of an ample breakfast which Roger seemed inclined to touch), 'I'll go and look him up.'

'Let me go,' Edmund suggested. 'I am ready now; and it will be easier for me, who have no special interest, to make inquiries than for you.'

'No special interest,' said Roger, with an unsteady laugh. 'If it didn't happen to be my brother Ned's way to think of everybody's interests before his own——'

'Because I have none in particular, you see,' returned Edmund, waving his hand as he hurried away. He was too glad to find himself outside Roger's door, and under no further necessity to veil the changes of his countenance. It had gone to his heart like a sudden arrow to hear that Stephen had been seen at the station going to meet some one. Whom was he going to meet, and what would he say, and how reply to the questions that must be forced upon him? Edmund had no faith in Stephen's reply. He had no faith in him in any way, nor any

hope of satisfaction from him. If only he could keep Roger from suspecting, and prevent any meeting from which enlightenment could come!

Stephen was not to be found at his club, though it was known there that he was in town. He was not to be found at the rooms where he generally lived when in London. The people there knew nothing of Captain Mitford's whereabouts; they did not believe he was in town; they had seen nothing of him: from which Edmund drew the conclusion, which was far from reassuring, that Stephen had established himself somewhere else. He went back to the club a second time, after seeking his brother in every other quarter he could think of, and was again disappointed. But as he turned away from the door, sadly cast down, and feeling himself baffled at every turn, he met Stephen coming along Piccadilly, in all the splendour of his town clothes, with that additional exquisite neatness of detail which the military element gives. Stephen was very triumphant to behold, in his strength and fulness of life: his hair exuberant in a hundred curls, his step

spurning the pavement, his whole appearance the perfection of health and cleanness and superlative polish and care. Another man, equally splendid, brushed, and shaven, and smoothed into perfection, walked with him, and Edmund, in his country habiliments and with his anxious mind, felt himself a shabby shadow beside those dazzling specimens of their kind. His brother was passing him, with two fingers extended to be shaken, and a 'Hallo, Ned!' when Edmund came to a stand before him, and compelled him to pause. Stephen's companion paused, too, with momentary suspicion, then passed along, saying something under his moustache of seeing him again at the club. They were quite near the club, and Edmund read in Stephen's face the contrariety of being so near shelter and yet caught. For he saw in a moment that the splendour of his brother's appearance was but outside, and that his face was not as radiant as his clothes.

'Well,' cried Stephen, 'I thought you had gone home, Ned. It seems to me you are getting as bad as the worst of us, always about town.'

'I have come up on special business,' said Edmund, and he thought the splendid Stephen winced a little, as if he might have a suspicion what that business was.

'Really! So have I,—with that fellow that left us just now; he's gone to wait for me at the club. I owe him a trifle. I'll see you another time.'

'My business is very much with you,' replied Edmund, 'but I'll walk with you. I need not detain you.'

'Oh, about the will,' said his brother, with a laugh. 'I heard from the governor to-day. It's all right, old fellow. I'll take it like a shot; I've no delicacy. If Roger and you choose to be a couple of fools, what does that matter to me?'

'There is something else which matters, though,' answered Edmund sternly. 'You know why Roger is out of it. So far as I can hear, the same reason stands against you.'

'What!' said Stephen, 'that I am going to marry? Not a bit of it. Not such a fool, thank you. I've no more thought of marrying than you have, and little inclination that way.' His colour heightened, however,

and his breath quickened, and he did not meet Edmund's eye.

'It is not marriage; it is—Lily Ford.'

'Well,' cried his brother, turning upon him sharply, 'what of her? The little damned jilt; the——' He paused, with an evident sense of having committed himself, and added angrily, 'What the devil has she got to do with me?'

'Much; for she belongs to our immediate surroundings, and my father will never put up with an injury to a person who is really one of his household. She must be restored to her family at once.'

'Restored!' exclaimed Stephen, with a harsh laugh. 'You speak at your ease, my friend Ned. You must have a thing before you can restore it. I've had nothing to say to the lady, and therefore I can't give her back.'

'We had better go somewhere where we can talk with more safety. These are not subjects for the club or Piccadilly.'

'Piccadilly has heard as much as most places, and so has the club; and I don't know what there is to talk about.'

'Stephen, where is Lily Ford?'

Stephen swore a big oath under his breath. 'What have I to do with Lily Ford? If you are trying to put blame upon me, mind what you are about, Ned; I'm not a safe man to meddle with. If you mean to spoil my luck with got-up stories——'

'She came to London on Tuesday night,' interrupted Edmund abstractedly, as if he were summing up evidence, 'and you met her at the station. Where is she now? If you will tell me that, I will ask you no further questions.'

'Who told you I met her at the station? You are making up fables against me.'

'Stephen, where is Lily Ford?'

It was in Piccadilly, with all the people passing; impossible to make any scene there, had life and death been in it. Edmund's voice was low, but Stephen had no habit of subduing his tones or controlling himself, and he was already excited. The fury of a man baffled, disappointed, tricked,—for so he thought it,—whose victim had turned the tables on him, and placed him in the position of a fool instead of that of a scoundrel, raged

within him, and it was a relief to vent it upon some one. He griped his brother's arm with a sudden force which took Edmund by surprise and made him stagger, and he swore again by the highest name. 'By ——! I don't know. And if I did I shouldn't tell you. I'll break the head of any man who asks me such a question again. Stand out of the way!'

Edmund's arm was raised instinctively to resist the push aside which his brother gave him, as Stephen released him from his grasp. But already the altercation had caught the eyes of two or three passers-by, and Edmund had an Englishman's dread of exposure and horror of making an exhibition of himself. He stepped back, answering only with a look the insolent gaze which Stephen fixed upon him, and in which there was an uneasy inquiry, an alarm which neutralised the defiance. It was not a light matter to submit to such rough treatment, but a quarrel in the open street, and above all in Piccadilly, was the last thing in the world to be thought of, as Stephen, cowardly in his audacious selfishness, well knew. Edmund let his brother

brush past, and after a moment turned back in the other direction, silent while his heart burned. Stephen was fully aware that Edmund would make no public quarrel, and took advantage of it, as bullies do.

Edmund had said more than he was sure of, without premeditation, in the haste and heat of his first address to his brother. 'You met her at the station.' He had not been aware that he meant to say this until he heard himself saying it. But he had no doubt now that Stephen was guilty; the very absence of all hesitation in his response, his instant comprehension of the question, made it apparent that Stephen had nothing to learn in respect to Lily's flight. And God help the unfortunate girl if she were in his ruthless hands! God help the miserable parents, to whom Edmund could not have a word of comfort to say!

His heart was very heavy as he went along amid the stream of people flowing towards the park. It was afternoon by this time, and the carriages had begun to follow each other in a long line. Everything looked bright and gay, with that impression of end-

less prosperity, wealth, ease, and luxury which few other scenes convey to a similar degree. No doubt, among that luxurious crowd there was no lack of sad histories, aching hearts, unhappy parents, and ruined children ; but the glitter and splendour seemed to carry the misery of his thoughts deeper into his heart.

Until all at once he woke to a terror near to himself, a danger which touched him more than anything that had happened, or could happen, to Lily Ford.

XXXII

STEPHEN'S ANSWER

THIS terror which seized Edmund did not come upon him for the first time: he had already perceived the supreme danger of making known his suspicions of Stephen to Roger; but there had been enough in the inquisition which was forced into his hands, and the question whether or not Stephen were really guilty, to distract his thoughts. Now, however, that he must carry back to Roger, Stephen's disavowal, a disavowal which could, he said to himself, convince nobody, and which was of something quite different from the simple question which Roger had intended to put, a real panic seized upon him. Lily's disappearance was not an event which could be forgotten. It was not a thing of the moment, which could pass out of recollection, with all its attendant circumstances,

when its novelty was exhausted. Had it been the father and mother alone, poor, helpless, miserable people, they might have been silenced somehow, and the cause of this misfortune concealed. But Roger would leave no stone unturned; he would resolutely clear up the mystery, and seek the girl whom he had loved, so bitterly to his own cost, until at least he had found that the Lily of his dreams was lost for ever. Edmund shuddered to think what would befall his brother when he made this discovery: but more terrible still was the thought of what would happen when, in that search, Roger was brought face to face with the man who bore his own name, his father's son, his own flesh and blood.

In a state of distraction, the third of the sons of Melcombe, he who must stand between the two thus made deadly enemies, divided by a wrong which could never be forgotten or forgiven, dwelt upon this inevitable discovery, and hurrying through the streets, unconscious of the crowd, turned over and over in his confused mind every expedient by which it could be averted. A thousand

schemes passed wildly before him, only to be rejected. He laughed within himself at the futile suggestion that Roger might be persuaded to go away, to withdraw from the scene of his loss, that first thought which occurs to every Englishman in trouble. It was not so long since he had himself hurried his brother over the *banal* road into the commonplace resorts of weariness and wretchedness. That was not to be done again; and on what pretence, till Lily was proved unworthy, could Roger be driven from the new life he had planned? And how was Lily to be accounted for without the unveiling of that most horrible complication of all, and the revelation of the destroyer of Roger's hopes and dreams in his brother?

Edmund felt himself paralysed by this terror, which he saw no way of escaping. He was as helpless as he was panic-stricken, and wandered about for the rest of the day, with no aim but to keep out of Roger's way, and no power to originate any expedient by which he might stave off the danger.

At last the moment came which could not have been long avoided. He met Roger at

the end of the street in which their rooms were, about the hour of dinner, and for a moment hoped that he was going out to fill some engagement, and that there might still be a breathing time.

Roger had just come out, dressed for dinner, with a light overcoat over his evening clothes; and it seemed to Edmund, who was still in his country suit, not fit for London, and sadly worn out and wretched, that the mere fact of his careful dress showed that his brother had shaken off the impression of the bad news. But when he saw more distinctly, by the uncertain evening light, Roger's face, white and rigid, with the upper lip closed down upon the lower, as if made of iron, he was quickly undeceived. As soon as they met, Roger put his arm within Edmund's, and turned him round in the direction in which he was himself going, with that ignoring of his brother's inclinations, even of his weariness and bodily needs, which is in some cases the highest compliment one man can pay to another.

'Ned,' he began, without any preface, 'the more I think of it, the more wretched it

makes me. Was she a girl to disappear like that, leaving her people in anxiety? Besides, what motive was there for any such mystery? She might have let them know somehow,—she must have done so. Ned, my Lily has been spirited away!'

Edmund was taken by surprise. 'No, no—who would do that?' he asked, bewildered by the suggestion.

'Who? Any one. Some madman who had seen her. We think we have outlived such things, but we haven't, Ned. Passion is as mad as ever it was. Or even to get her out of my way, my father——'

'Impossible! Such a thing would never enter his mind!'

'There is nothing impossible!' returned Roger, with nervous heat, 'except that my Lily should go—should consent——' The deep murmur of his voice ceased in something inarticulate, a note of such immeasurable pain, of horrible doubt hidden under words of certainty, that Edmund felt all his fears realised. Then Roger gave himself a shake, as if to get rid of some nightmare, and asked, with an air of sudden awakening, 'Did Stephen see her?

Did he notice anything—which way she went?'

'No, he noticed nothing.'

Something in Edmund's tone made Roger look at him keenly. 'He must have seen her. I could bring it to his recollection,—the night we met and the circumstances, which of course you did not know.'

'Don't, Roger, for Heaven's sake! Why should you ask him again? Don't you believe me? He knows nothing. Don't let us bring in any one more.'

'There is something in that,' said Roger, with momentary acquiescence; then, after a pause, he asked, 'Did he know her—at all?'

'I can't tell you,' replied Edmund hastily, feeling that the intolerableness of the situation began to affect his nerves and temper. 'I suppose he must have known her by sight: I don't know. What is the use of bringing him into it? He can tell us nothing.'

Roger looked at his brother with a dawning suspicion in his eyes. 'I don't think you are just to Stephen,' he remarked. 'I am going to see for myself.'

'Roger,' said Edmund, making use, like a

woman, of the weariness and exhaustion which he felt,—though, like a woman, he could have disguised and suppressed them, had not the other way afforded a possibility of deliverance,—'I wish you could come with me first, and get me some dinner. I am fairly worn out. It has not been a good time for me, these last few days, and I have been wandering about from one place to another——'

'How selfish I am!' interrupted Roger, 'forgetting all you have been doing, and even to ask you—— Come along, Ned; we'll get something at the club.'

The penalty of this expedient was, that Edmund had to eat a prolonged dinner, which he needed, indeed, but for which he had no appetite, and which he allowed to linger on, through course after course, while Roger sat opposite to him, eating nervously a piece of bread, drinking the wine that was poured out for him without even observing what it was, sending away dish after dish with a half shudder of disgust, and with the wonder of a preoccupied mind that his brother should be capable of dining in so

prolonged a way at such a moment. Edmund had to pay this penalty, and accepted it with what fortitude he could. He calculated, while he sat having everything handed to him, that by this time, probably, Stephen was disposed of for the evening; dining out, perhaps; or, which was more likely,—the horrible thought obtruded itself, even though it was so essential that he should give Roger no clue to the nature of his thoughts,—that Stephen might be at this moment by the side of the deceived and lost creature to whom Roger, with his white face of anxiety, was still holding loyally as his bride.

'Now,' said Roger, with a faint smile, 'if you are satisfied, Ned, don't you think we might go?'

If he were satisfied! He tried to laugh, too, and answered, 'I had eaten nothing all day. Don't you think it is a little too late now?'

'I think—— You shall go home and go to bed, Ned. You're worn out: and it cannot have the same overwhelming interest for you as for me,—though you're very good,' said Roger. It was Edmund's *rôle* to have

good intentions attributed to him. He took care not even to smile, not to groan, as he got up from the table at which he had been working so hard to make the meeting he dreaded impossible.

'No,' he answered, 'I'm not going to bed. I'm going with you, Roger, wherever you go, —provided it is not among any of your fine friends, in this garb.'

'My fine friends!' exclaimed Roger, with indignant astonishment. 'Can you suppose me capable of going anywhere—anywhere? I thought you knew better what this is to me. Do you know what it is? It is life or death! If anything has happened to *her*—— My God!'

The most tragic scenes, the most tragic words, are often mixed up in our strange life with the most petty and common, and desperate appeals to the last Arbiter of all things rise out of the depths of wretched hearts over the broken meats of a disordered table. There is something more heart-rending in them, under such circumstances, than when there is no jar of the ignoble matters of every day in the despair and

passion. Roger standing over the table at which his brother had dined, in his correct evening dress, with his miserable face; the brown bread which he had been crumbling to pieces before him; his overcoat, which he had not cared to take off, hanging open; the background of cheerful parties dining; the murmur of cheerful talk around, made such a combination as would have smitten the hardest heart. He had come to that, that he had begun to acknowledge the possibility of something having happened to Lily: something which could not but be disastrous, horrible; something which might make an end of that which no other power on earth could have ended, for which he had been prepared to sacrifice everything that could be called life. There was a tremor in him which was visible, even though he was nervously erect and steady, in the outline of his figure,—a faint, nervous trick of movement which he could not restrain, and of which, indeed, he was unconscious. He put his hand hastily upon Edmund's arm, as they went out together. It was dry and burning, and he did not see the step at the

door, and stumbled as they went out into the noise and bustle of the street.

Provided only that Stephen might not be found when they sought him at his club!—for happily they could not seek him elsewhere. Edmund estimated the chances hurriedly, as they went along, and felt them to be all in his favour. If Lily were somewhere in London awaiting her lover, it was not possible that Stephen should spend the evening at his club. But Edmund was too anxious and too unhappy to take the comfort out of this which he felt to be justified; for every one knows how perverse circumstances are, and how a chance which would have no importance on another occasion will often detain a man, when his detention for that uncalculated moment means a catastrophe. So inscrutable, so little to be reckoned upon, is this strange life, which seems the sport of accidents, which is at least so little in our hands to arrange or settle! These thoughts went through Edmund's mind in a confused torrent, as he walked with Roger to Stephen's club, once more along that crowded pavement of Piccadilly, where so many men like them-

selves were hurrying on to all manner of engagements, and close to which so many carriages, coming and going, conveyed the fairest and the brightest and the most distinguished from one scene of pleasure to another,—of pleasure woven with so many threads of suffering, of festivity, and of tragedy. When the mind is full of distress and anxiety, such ideas come naturally. It is perhaps a little aid in bearing our own burdens to think how others are weighed down, and how little any one can know from the exterior.

It would have been, however, but a poor observer who could not have perceived that the two brothers walking along from one club to another were bound on no common errand. The faint yet almost palsied thrill of nervous movement about Roger, and Edmund's fever of anxiety, were not sufficiently veiled to be imperceptible to any keen eye. Neither of them seemed to breathe as they approached the place. Edmund, who knew how well his own excitement was justified, could not quite understand how it should have so communicated itself to Roger, who, so far as he knew,

was unaware of any foundation for it. He pressed his brother's arm as they went up to the open door. 'Roger, you'll take care not to let him pick a quarrel! He was very impatient of my question; he may be still more so to have it repeated. A row in the family, between brothers——'

'Why should we quarrel? What reason is there for any row?' Roger said sternly; and Edmund had no answer to give.

Stephen was there,—upstairs. They went in together, Roger first, Edmund scarcely able to breathe. A group of men were descending as they went up, and on the landing the two brothers perceived Stephen, the last of the band. His companions were talking and laughing, but he was coming down silently, with an angry cloud on his face. The two young men waited for him on the landing, which gave them full time to note his aspect and the unusual gravity of his looks; but he did not observe them, so occupied was he with his own thoughts, till he was close upon them. Then Roger put out his hand and touched him on the arm. Stephen started, and raised his eyes with a sudden gleam of

impatience: evidently he was not in a temper to be disturbed. But when he saw who it was, a look of fury came into his eyes,—they were very light eyes, which looked sinister in excitement. 'Hallo!' he cried, 'you there again!' He passed over Roger with intention, and fixed his look upon Edmund, who stood behind.

'Stephen,' said Roger, 'I have a question to ask you.' He was drawing his breath quickly and with difficulty.

'I presume,' said Stephen slowly, scowling, drawing back a little, 'it's the same question as that fellow put to me to-day. What the —— is it your business whether I know or whether I don't know? I told him I'd break any man's head that asked me that again!'

'Nevertheless, you must give me an answer,' returned Roger, making a step forward. The question had not been put into words; there seemed no need between them for any such details. Neither of his brothers was in the least aware what it was which brought such fury into Stephen's eyes and tone. Roger, who accused him of nothing, whose question was in reality of the most

simple character, was irritated by an opposition which appeared so uncalled for. He advanced a little as Stephen drew back. 'If you have any light to throw upon the matter, for Heaven's sake answer me,' he said, putting up his hand, as Stephen thought, to seize him by the coat.

There was in the younger brother a fury which had no means of utterance, which caught at the first possibility of getting vent. He pushed Roger back with a violence of which he was himself totally unaware. 'I warned him—the first man that asked me that question again!' he cried savagely, thrusting his brother from him with all his force. They were all three on the edge of the heavy stone stairs, none of them conscious or thinking of any danger. Perhaps there would have been no danger if Roger had been in his ordinary condition of health. As it was, before a word could be said or a breath drawn, before Stephen was aware of the violence of the thrust backward which he had given, Roger went down like a stone. There was a breathless, horrible moment, while the two who were left looked involuntarily into each other's

faces: then Edmund, with a spring, reached the bottom of the stairs, where, all huddled upon himself, like a fallen house, his brother lay. In a moment—it was no more: as if a flash of lightning had come out of the sky and struck him down there.

END OF VOL. II

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