THE SECOND SON

BY

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CONTENTS

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XXXIII

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

THERE is something in the atmosphere of a sickroom in which a man lies under the shadow of death, especially when that awful shadow has come upon the sky in a moment, which changes the entire aspect of the world to those who stand at the bedside. There had been a moment of horror and dismay, in which Stephen's bewilderment and terror-stricken compunction had obliterated all feeling of guilt on his part from his brother's mind. Indeed, the catastrophe was so unlooked for, and seemed so entirely beyond any cause that could have brought it about, that the two brothers bent over Roger with equal anxiety, equal alarm and astonishment, forgetting everything but the sudden shock as of a thunderbolt falling, striking him down at their feet. Edmund had no time or power

to think, during the turmoil and horrible pause which ensued, which might have lasted, so far as he knew, a day or ten minutes, in which Roger was examined by a grave doctor, who said little, and was then painfully transported to his own rooms and laid on his own bed. He had not recovered consciousness for a moment, nor did he during the long, terrible night which followed, in the course of which Edmund sat like a man paralysed, within sight of the motionless figure, for which there was nothing to be done, none of those cares which keep the watcher from despair. The doctor had sent in a nurse, who, after vainly endeavouring to induce Edmund to withdraw ('For he doesn't know you, or any one, nor won't, perhaps, ever again, poor gentleman! And what's the good of wearing yourself out, when you can do nothing for him?' she had said, with that appalling reasonableness which kills), had herself retired to the next room, provident, as her class always are, of the rest which would be so needful to her, in face of whatever might occur to demand her watchfulness afterwards. Her words, her look, made

Edmund's heart sick, and the realisation of the fact that there was nothing to be done, and that, whether for always or only for a time, Roger was beyond all possibility of succour, came over him with a sudden blankness of desolation. He knew nothing of illness, especially of illness so extraordinary and terrible. He felt that he could not tell from moment to moment what might be accomplishing itself on the curtainless bed, where Roger's profile, stern in the silence, showed itself against the faintly-coloured wall. He sat there himself in a sort of trance of despair and anguish and deadly fear. His brother might die at any instant, for anything Edmund knew; the life which was already hidden and veiled might depart altogether, without a hand being held out to save. The horror of doing nothing, of sitting still, and perhaps seeing the precious life ebb away without putting out a finger, without an effort, as Edmund felt, was almost beyond bearing. He himself could do nothing,—he knew nothing that could be done. If the doctor had but remained, who knew! but the doctor had said that to watch the patient was all that

was possible. And Edmund was watching, Heaven knew how anxiously! yet in his ignorance feeling that some change might occur which he would not observe, would not understand, and on which might hang the issues of life and death. Half a dozen times he had risen to call the nurse, that there might be some one who would know; then had restrained himself and noiselessly sat down again, remembering what she had said, and half afraid of crossing or irritating the attendant on whose services, for aught he knew, Roger's life might depend. He felt like a fool, or a child, so ignorant, so helpless, so ready to be seized with unreasonable panic, —surely unreasonable, since both doctor and nurse had felt themselves at liberty to go away. It was about nine o'clock when the catastrophe had occurred, and by midnight it seemed to Edmund as if years had passed over him in that awful stillness, and as if everything in life had receded far away. By the bed where Roger lay unconscious there was no longer anything worth thinking of, except whether he would open his eyes, whether the hardness of his breathing would

soften, whether any sign of life would break through that blank. Lily Ford?—who was she, what was she? If her name swept, in the current of his thoughts, over Edmund's mind at all, he was impatient of it, and flung it from him like something intrusive and impertinent. All the associations that had occupied his thoughts for days past went from him like vanities. He remembered them no more, or, if they recurred, brushed them from his mind with indignant astonishment that such nothings could ever have occupied it. What was there to think of in all the world but that Roger lay there, an image of death in life, wrapped in darkness, and perhaps—perhaps—a horror that made his heart stand still—might never come out of it again?

At midnight Stephen came in, trying, no doubt, to walk softly and speak softly; opening the door with a creak, and stepping upon some loose plank in the flooring, which shivered and jarred under his foot. 'How is he now?' he asked in a rough whisper, which seemed to Edmund's strained faculties more penetrating, more disagreeable, than any ordinary noise. Stephen made a step for-

ward elaborately and looked at the face upon the pillow. 'Don't look much better, does he?' he said. In reality Stephen was very uncomfortable, — more than uncomfortable. He had not meant to do his brother any harm,—he had repeated that assurance to himself a hundred times within the last hour. He never meant to harm him,—why should he? He had no motive for injuring his brother: they had always been good friends. What had happened about their father's will was nothing. There was no possible reason in that for quarrelling with Roger, for he was quite out of it, and had nothing to say in the matter. Nobody would do Stephen the wrong to say that he had any bad meaning. How could he know that a man, a man as big as himself, would go down like that at a touch? It was no fault of his: there must have been something the matter with the poor old fellow, or he must have been standing unsteadily, or—but certainly it was not Stephen who was to blame. He had repeated this to himself all the way as he went along the streets. How could he be to blame?

'For God's sake, be quiet,—don't disturb him!' said Edmund, with an impatience that was uncontrollable. Disturb him! He would have given everything he had in the world to be able to disturb Roger,—to draw him out of that fatal lethargy; but the sound of Stephen's jarring step, and the whisper which whistled through this sacred place, roused Edmund to a fever of suppressed passion.

'Oh, nothing disturbs a man in that state. I've seen 'em,' Stephen said, taking less precautions as he became familiar with the darkened room, the aspect of everything, 'when you might have fired a cannon-ball close to their ears, and they would have taken no notice. When is the doctor to come back? Are you going to sit up all night? I thought he had sent in a nurse. Then what's the use of you sitting up? You can't do him any good.'

'I can't talk,' Edmund answered; 'don't ask me any questions. We can only wait and see what the morning brings.'

Stephen nodded in assent. He stooped over the bed, looked at the motionless figure, and shook his head. 'Poor chap!' he said,

'he looks very bad.' Stephen was very uncomfortable, but he did not know how to express it. He stood swaying from one foot to the other, looking blankly about him. 'I don't suppose I can be of any use,' he said.

'None, none!' replied Edmund. 'Nobody can be of any use.'

'You'd rather I should go?' asked Stephen, glad to escape, yet reluctant to show it. 'I shouldn't if I could be of any use; but if I can't—— Look here, Ned, call the woman, and go to bed yourself; you can't do him any good, either.'

'Oh go, go!' Edmund said.

'And, Ned—as for what he asked me, poor chap! You may think it isn't true, but it is true. I declare to you——'

'Oh, for Heaven's sake,' cried Edmund, under his breath, 'go away, go home, go to bed! What does it matter? What does anything matter? Do I care whether it is true or not? Go, go!'

'You speak as if I hadn't as good a right —as if you thought I meant to—to do him harm. I never meant to do him harm, so help me——'

'Go now, Stephen, go home and go to bed. He may be better in the morning.'

'Poor chap!' Stephen said once more, shaking his head; and then creaking more than ever, like his father, making the boards jar and the room shake, he went away.

And again that awful silence came over the place,—a silence which thrilled and vibrated with dreadful meaning, till even the interruption of Stephen's presence seemed to have been a gain. Edmund sat still and motionless, his heart within him in a fever of suspense, and fear and agitation indescribable rioting his bosom with an independent, mad life of unendurable pain. How he kept still, how he did not cry out, spring up from his watch, drag back by any violent means the dead, dumb, marble image which was his brother, to life, to life, to any kind of conscious being, even if it were agony, he could not tell. But something, whether it was reason, whether it was the mere solidity of flesh and blood, which bound the raging anxiety of the soul, kept him almost as still as Roger; watching, wondering what was to come, and how he was to live through this awful night.

The morning brought little hope; and then ensued days upon days of which Edmund knew nothing except that they came and passed and brought no change. Stephen appeared from time to time, stealing in with elaborate precautions, making every board creak,—as if it mattered! And presently the Squire arrived, like a larger Stephen, looking at the patient in the same helpless way, shaking his head. The father's sanction was necessary before the dangerous operation, which was the only thing in which there was a glimmer of hope, could be attempted. Mr. Mitford was far from being without feeling. To see his son, his first-born, of whom he had been proud, lying on that bed, which was too evidently a bed of death, affected him deeply. He had asked a great many questions at first, and had been inclined to blame everybody. 'Why did you let him question Steve? Steve never would stand questioning, from a child. Why didn't you warn Steve that he was ill? He must have been ill, or a mere push could not have harmed him. Was it only a push? It must have been more than a push. They had a scuffle, I suppose, on the stairs! By

——! how could you be such a fool as to let two men in the heat of a quarrel meet on the stairs?' Thus he talked, in his large voice, with an angry cloud upon his face, as he came upstairs. But when he entered Roger's room the Squire was silenced. He stood and looked at his son with angry, helpless wretchedness, making a little sound of half-remonstrant trouble with his tongue against his palate. What could he do? What could be done? To know that it was all over would have been nothing compared to the misery of seeing him there, and not knowing what might happen at any moment. Mr. Mitford was glad to go away, making his progress audible by that faint sound of inarticulate perplexity and remonstrance, and by the unsubduable tread which shook the house. He had no objection to try the desperate expedient of the operation, though he did not in the least believe in it. 'He's a dead man! he's a dead man! I don't believe they can do anything,' he said, in the hurried family council which was held in an adjoining room. And Stephen also shook his head. He was very like his father. He had the same ex-

pression of perplexed and irritated seriousness. He had taken up almost eagerly the same note of remonstrance. If Ned had only kept him quiet, kept him indoors that night, when anybody might have seen he was out of sorts, and not fit to give and take, like other men. His discomfort as to his own share in the matter was wearing off, and he began to feel that he was an injured person, and had a right to complain.

Ah! if Edmund had but been able to keep his brother indoors that night! He said it to himself with a far more tragic sense of the impossibility than the others were capable of. If only—if!—how lightly, it now seemed, all the miseries that existed before could have been borne. It gave him a pang indescribable to think, as he immediately did, of how simple it might have been,—how life might have flowed on quite smoothly: Roger miserable, perhaps, himself weighed down by the pressure of a secret never to be revealed; but what of that, what trifles, what nothings, in comparison with this!

He was the only one who had any hope in the operation, though he was the last to

consent to it. The others, no doubt, would have been glad if Roger had recovered, but they were almost as anxious to be freed from the dreadful pressure of the situation as to save his life: his life, if possible; but if not, that these paralysing circumstances might come to an end. It was with the hope that one way or other this release might be accomplished that Mr. Mitford and Stephen awaited the result. They would not remain in the room,—it was too much for them: they remained close by, in Roger's sitting-room, with all its scattered traces of his presence. Geraldine and Amy were there, too, with a little feminine rustle, crying from time to time, yet not unconscious of a curiosity about the photographs on the tables, which were not all family photographs, and about such other revelations as might be gleaned of the young man's independent life; but ready to cry again, to give back all their attention to the one absorbing subject, whenever a door opened or a sound was heard. The Squire walked about the room with his heavy tread, taking up and throwing down again such articles as caught his eye,—a whip,

a cane, a cigar-case, little luxuries such as in some cases he despised. Stephen stood with his back to the others, looking out, with a curious mingling of compunction and resentment and self-defence in his mind. Nobody could say he was to blame,—how could he be to blame? Was he to know that a man might be as weak as a cat, not fit to stand against a push? Nobody could be expected to think of that.

Edmund alone stood by his unconscious brother, while the doctors were doing their work. He alone received the dazed, bewildered look which Roger cast round him in the first moment of relief, like a man awakening, yet with something awful in it, as if the awakening were from the dead. When that vague gaze fell upon Edmund, the sufferer recognised him for a moment, smiled, made a motion as if to put out his hand, and said something which was audible only as a murmur in his throat. He was not allowed to do any more. The doctors interfered to ordain perfect quiet, perfect rest, the closest watch, and no excitement or movement. The operation was successful, quite success-

ful. Twenty-four hours, perfect quiet, and then—— The great operator, whose every minute was worth gold, looked into the adjoining room himself, to relieve the anxiety of the family. 'As an operation, entirely satisfactory; everything now depends on the strength of the patient,' he said. The relief of the strain which had been upon their nerves was great. The girls got up from their corner with that pleasant rustle of their skirts, and uttered little cries of pleasure and thankfulness. Geraldine stood up before the glass over Roger's chimney-piece to put her bonnet straight, which had been a little disarranged, she thought, by her crying. Amy made a little dart to a table where there was a photograph of a woman which she had never seen before, and turned it over to see if there were any name or inscription. The Squire threw down a cane with a curious silver handle which he had been examining, and breathed forth a great sigh of relief. 'That's all right!' he said. It seemed to all of them that the incident was over, and that perhaps they had been unduly excited, and it had not been so important after all.

But Edmund did not move from his brother's room. His heart was sick with that deferred hope which it is so hard to bear. He, too, for the first minute had thought the incident was over. He took his brother's hand and pressed it in his own, and thought he felt a faint response. But when he was dismissed again to his watch, and forbidden to speak or touch the patient still hanging between life and death, his heart sank. The room relapsed once more, after all the silent strain and excitement, into absolute quiet. Presently the nurse came to Edmund's side and whispered, 'He's going to sleep, sir,—the very best thing; and you should go and take a bit of rest. Nobody in this world can do without a bit of natural rest.'

Edmund scarcely understood what the woman said. He did not move; he could not have risen had his life depended upon it, nor withdrawn his eyes from the sleeper. Was it sleep? Was it death? How could he tell? No more than if he had been dying himself could he have moved from his brother's side.

And in that sleep Roger died.

XXXIV

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

It is needless to say that this event, so unlooked for, coming with such a shock upon them all (though the two brothers-in-law, the husbands of Geraldine and Amy, declared that they had never for a moment looked for any other termination), produced a great effect upon the family. A death in a family always does so. There was a jar and startling stop of all the machinery of life. The two gay young houses in London, and the great house at Melcombe, were shut up. Geraldine and Amy, retired from all their pleasures, and with a good deal of sorrow for themselves, thus withdrawn from existence, as it were, so early in the season, crossed by a real transitory pang, more perhaps for the horror of the catastrophe than for the brother lost, made an occupation and distraction for

themselves in the ordering of their mourning, which gave them a great deal to do, and a little much-desired novelty. They had never been in mourning before; it was a new sensation; they did not know whether it would be becoming or the reverse. Roger had not been much to them at any time, and if they cried a little now and then, when they remembered, and felt a sharp little sting of that almost remorseful pain with which simple minds contemplate the sweeping away of another life, while they still continue to enjoy the sunshine, it was all that could have been expected from these two untrained and uncherished girls. It is to be doubted even whether Roger would have felt so much for them. Women are more capable of having the feelings they ought to have, and responding to the exigencies of their position, than men

At Melcombe the household lived, for the days which elapsed between the death and burial, in a pause of suspended excitement, with a great deal to talk about and think about, and a solemnity which was not unpleasant. Some of the old servants were

truly grieved for Mr. Roger, but the subdued bustle in the funereal house, the continual succession of events, the comparison of facts and reports, the making out so far as they could of an extremely exciting story, and even the new mourning into which they were all put, men and women, with a fulness of provision which they felt showed the most real respect for the dead, occupied their minds and aroused their interest,—quickened, in short, their entire mental being. They all knew—though how, nobody could have told—that Stephen was somehow connected with his brother's death; they all speculated as to what Lily Ford had to do with it. Was it jealousy? What was it? It was known by this time that Lily Ford was no longer in her father's house. Indeed, Mrs. Ford proclaimed the fact to everybody, saying that her daughter was staying with some of her grand friends, and that she was glad of it, for Lily was very tender-hearted, and would have felt Mr. Roger's death dreadful. The Fords, indeed, entirely confounded the ingenuity of the servants' hall. Larkins, who was aware of that distracted visit to Edmund,

had put on his most sympathetic face the next time he had met the gamekeeper's wife. 'I hope, ma'am, that you've better news,' he had said in a most mournful and confidential tone. 'Oh, thank you, sir, I've had the best of news, and am just as happy as can be,' she had responded cheerfully, taking him much by surprise. There was a mystery, but no one had even a guess what the mystery was.

The family, as was natural, assembled at Melcombe for the funeral, filling the house with guests and a kind of gloomy entertainment for three or four days. Poor Roger was laid, with 'every respect,' with all honour, in the family vault, a black-robed group of mourners, with respectfully bowed heads, standing round the coffin, which was concealed from sight, it need not be said, by wreaths of the most beautiful flowers, sent, according to the fashion of the time, from far and near. Father, brothers, brothers-in-law, cousins, old neighbours of all degrees, followed the melancholy train. More respect could not have been shown to a prince; and some went away saddened by thoughts of the promising life

cut short, and some with relief to think that at last all was over, which was scarcely a less human sentiment. In Melcombe perhaps the feeling of relief predominated. To be able to have the blinds drawn up, to look at the papers, to enter without self-reproach into ordinary subjects, after such a long and distressing break in all usual habits, was a welcome change. Poor Roger! it could not do him any good, poor fellow, that anybody should be ill at ease. All the crying in the world would not bring him back. Everything had been done that could be done,—more, far more than people in general were able to do; and now that it was all over, it was a relief to return to ordinary themes and ordinary habits once more.

The Squire was a man who did not feel very much except when he was put out and his habits were interfered with; but yet, as much as was possible, he had felt this. A man does not lose his eldest son by a sudden and almost violent death without feeling it; especially when he has just made a family revolution in consequence of that son's proceedings, and altered the succession in a

way that becomes ridiculous the moment the culprit disappears. He had put Roger out of his natural place, and he had put Stephen in it. And now that he had time to think, the arrangement struck him not only as very ridiculous, a thing that naturally everybody would think they had a right to demand explanations of, but also as unjust and unjustifiable. The wrong to Edmund had not troubled him, so long as Edmund's refusal to carry out his wishes had stood between them. But now that these wishes had dropped, now that fate had ended all Roger's chances, there was no doubt that to cut off Edmund for no reason at all was an injustice. He was now the eldest son,—there was no doubt on that point,—the natural heir, the head of the family after his father; whereas Stephen must bear the mark of cadency, however completely endowed he might be with the family honours. This troubled the Squire greatly, and prolonged the existence of the cloud which had arisen with Roger's death. That event put everything out. It stultified him; it made him do what he had never intended to do. There was nothing,

indeed, nothing in the world against Edmund. He had given his father no offence. He would, all things considered, probably make a better Squire of Melcombe than a man who had got a great deal too much of the mess-room in him. The Squire was certainly uncomfortable, and yet he did not like to make again an exhibition of himself by another change. Pouncefort would say, 'I told you that you would regret it;' he would say with his eyebrows, if not in words, that the Mitfords were hot-headed fools. He would perhaps talk of the risk, of which he had warned the Squire, of dying before dinner. Mr. Mitford was afraid of Stephen, too, who would not willingly part with the inheritance which he had accepted so readily. It requires a strong inducement to make a man expose himself to all these disagreeables, and in face of this paraphernalia of death and burial the Squire felt with a recoil the force of his own life and strength. Why should he hurry himself, expose himself to the remonstrances of Stephen and the jeers of Pouncefort? But he was very uncomfortable, and troubled with an angry sense that his eldest son, whom

he had so remorselessly cut out, had repaid him very summarily, almost shabbily, for this ill turn, and that Roger might have helped it if he would.

Stephen too was very uncomfortable, so uncomfortable that in one respect it did him good. It put Lily, and the rage and the humiliation which her escape from his hands had caused him, out of his mind. He forgot that he had been made a fool of, cheated, deceived, *planté-là*, which was how he represented it to himself. There are different standards of pride and honour. Stephen had felt himself wronged, insulted, put to shame, by Lily. He would have thrown up his commission, abandoned all his occupations and pleasures, left England, disappeared he did not care where, had the story ever reached the ears of his set. It would have covered him with ridicule and shame; it made him ridiculous to himself, even, while he brooded furiously over it during the first day. He had spent half the night in the streets, like Lily, but not in the same streets, as it happened, and had not given up the search for twenty-four hours after; not,

indeed, until the morning on which Edmund found him, coming back, suspicious and on the watch for any look or hint that might show a consciousness of his secret. It was this rage of shame and terror of ridicule which had made him repulse his brothers, one after the other, in the latter case with such fatal effects. But the catastrophe delivered Stephen: he thought of Lily no more; he forgot that disgusting episode, as he called it in his thoughts; the shock of this new and dreadful event drove her and the fury with which he had been regarding her out of his mind altogether. He was not very sensitive nor tender-hearted, but the sight of Roger's fall would not go out of his eyes or his mind. When he was by himself it came back to him, —the sudden disappearance, the sound, so heavy, so horrible, so unlike any other sound. He could not forget it. Presently something of the same feeling with which he had regarded Lily when she escaped came into his thoughts of Roger, a sense of anger, as if he had been taken at a disadvantage, put into a position in which he could not but show badly, although he was not really to

blame. Certainly he was not to blame. He had done nothing that the gentlest-tempered man might not have done. He did not strike nor knock down his assailant, as a hot-headed fellow would have done. He only pushed him back a bit; anybody would have done that. He meant no harm. How could he tell that Roger was weak, or unsteady, or excited? He had done nothing wrong, but somehow he was put in the wrong, and he knew people would look at him askance. Edmund did, for one. They had walked together after the coffin, but Edmund had not said a word to him, had greeted him only with a hurried nod, had turned his eyes away, as if he could not bear the sight of him, which was unjust,—by Jove! abominably unjust. For he had done nothing—nothing that any man would not have done in the circumstances. He was not to blame. He had not meant to hurt Roger. Why should he? Roger was not in his way. Still, it is a disagreeable thing to have anything to do with the killing of your brother: no one likes to be mixed up in such a catastrophe,—and again Stephen would seem to see the face of Roger

disappear from before him, and the mass all huddled up at the bottom of the stairs.

And this funeral party was very disagreeable to him. To act company with Statham and Markham, whose spirits were only temporarily subdued, and who seemed to think they should be taken over the stables (a duty which Edmund, retiring to his own rooms as soon as the funeral was over, would take no part in), and to show the civility of a son of the house, almost of a host, to the departing guests, who, he felt sure, must be commenting upon everything that had happened,—all that was wearisome. A man who has been so unfortunate as to shoot his father or his brother, as they push through the covert together, is pitied, though probably it is all due to his carelessness; but a man who pushes his brother downstairs, his brother whose rightful place he has just usurped! Stephen felt that circumstances were very hard upon him; for it was no fault of his,—he was not to blame.

He would have liked above all things to leave Melcombe with the Stathams and the Markhams, next day; they were un-

feignedly glad to go, and so was Nina, who had persuaded Geraldine to take her 'for a change.' 'Everybody goes for a change when there has been a death,' Nina said, and the sisters acknowledged the justice of the statement. They all went away with serious looks, giving little pinches and pats to each other's crape, which, being so stiff and new, would not 'sit'; but by the time they got to the station they had all cheered up wonderfully, and begun to talk about what they had better do. The season was lost to them, but still the world was not without delights. 'It would be just the time to go for a little run abroad,' Geraldine had said, laying to heart that suggestion of Nina's about a change after a death. Lady Statham had so far recovered her spirits as to suggest this, as they reached Molton Junction, whither they had driven to catch the express train.

Stephen turned back, with a sigh of angry pain. He could not go away, nor go abroad, nor even return to his regiment. His father had angrily insisted that he should remain. 'If you're going to be the head of this house,

you'd better give up the regiment,' he said. *If*, again!—that *if* did Stephen a little good. It showed him that he might have to fight for his rights, which was exhilarating, and gave him something to think of. *If!* It was the governor's own doing to put him in that place, but he was not going to give it up,—it would be the greatest folly to give it up. He was not one of those who could chop and change with every wind, he said to himself; and if the governor meant to go back from his word he should not find it so easy as he had done with Roger. When a thing was settled, it was settled. The chance of a fight again did Stephen good. It kept him up after all the others had gone away. To be left alone in the house with his father and Edmund was not a cheerful prospect; but if there were going to be a fight!

He had need of this little spark of pugnacity to sustain him, for it would be difficult to imagine anything more miserable than the dinner-table at Melcombe, on the first evening after the Stathams and Markhams had gone. Roger's empty chair stood at the foot of the table, but no one took it; neither

Edmund, who had the natural right as the eldest surviving son, nor Stephen, who had the acquired right as the heir. They took their places on either side of their father, with a sense of desolation. Presently Edmund started up, and pushing against the astonished Larkins, put away the chair against the wall. No one said a word; the father and Stephen looked on, with a feeling that something of reproach to them was in this rapid movement, but they were too much cowed to protest or remonstrate. Larkins, following Edmund, cleared away very solemnly the knives and forks and glasses from the table, which had been laid as usual for that fourth who would never take his place there again. Larkins felt the reproach also, though in a different way; but he had the support of feeling that he had done it for the best, not knowing which Mr. Edmund would prefer: to assume the place which was now his; or, for convenience, as there was so small a party, to keep his former position at the side. The butler put all the silver and crystal upon the tray which John Thomas held behind him, very slowly, and

with great solemnity and just but suppressed indignation; and they all looked on in silence, not saying a word. And so the last traces of Roger's presence were swept away.

They were all glad when the meal was over, and they were at liberty to separate. Even Nina's presence would have been a little relief. The three, each other's nearest relations in the world, felt among them a *sourd* antagonism. To Stephen and his father Edmund's silence was as a disapproval of both; Mr. Mitford was angry with his youngest son for having gained a promotion to which he had no right, and Stephen was all in arms against any possible repentance of his father. How glad they were to rise, a few moments after Larkins, who was a sort of protection to them, left the room! Each was afraid of what the other might say. Another night of repose, of postponement, before any explanation could be made, was the greatest gain which was possible. Mr. Mitford and Edmund retired quickly, taking different directions, the moment they rose from the table, to their own apartments.

Stephen strolled out into the park with his cigar. He had no den within doors, no occupation to which he could withdraw. He did not read; he could not play billiards or anything else without a companion; and the billiard-room, to which he would have gone on an ordinary occasion, was full of the memory of Roger, so that Stephen felt with a shudder that he might see his dead brother, or imagine he saw him (for he was well aware that ghosts were but optical illusions), in the present disturbed state of his nerves, if he went there. But he had forgotten, when he stepped outside into the soft air of the summer night, that here were other associations not much more salutary for his nerves than a fancied apparition. How often had he gone forth, complacent, expanding his broad chest, pulling down his cuffs, with all the pleasure of a conqueror, to meet the little beauty, the admiring girl, who was ready to burn incense to him as much as he would, ready to drop into his arms as soon as he should hold up a finger! (Stephen took no pains to keep his metaphors clear.) But now the very thought of Lily filled him with

rage. He could not put her out of his mind, now that he had come back. He seemed to see her advancing towards him under the trees, hurrying to meet him. By George! she wished she could now, he did not doubt. She would give her ears that she had not been such a fool. She ran to be chased, to be sure; the last thing in her mind was to be lost, to be allowed to get away. He caught eagerly at this idea, which occurred to him for the first time. Women always run away that men may run after them, but she had succeeded better than she wanted, this time. By Jove! if she had ever supposed he would not have caught her up, she would not have been in such a hurry to run away: and then he began to compliment himself on his skill in missing Lily. What a life she would be leading him now, if he had found her, if he had seized her round some corner and brought her back, as no doubt she intended!

This was the way in which Stephen tried to subdue the furious recollections of that failure, when he brought the whole business back to his mind by strolling out into the park; but the attempt was not very success-

ful. He did not finish his cigar, but whirled it away into the twilight, as if it were a missile thrown at Lily, and went in again, discontented, sulky, miserable, to fall into his father's hands.

XXXV

PATERNAL ADVICE

MR. MITFORD, also, was sulky, miserable, and discontented. Perhaps in him it was grief taking another aspect, different from that of common grief. He was out of heart with himself and everything round. Roger was in his grave,—all his own fault, his obstinacy and folly, setting himself against his father and everything that was sensible! But, however it came about,—and it was a faint satisfaction to think that it was Roger's own fault,—the boy was in his grave. There was nothing more to discuss about him or to find fault with,—he was in his grave. The Squire had a dull sort of consciousness in his mind that Roger might meet his mother thereabouts, and that it would be a little triumph to her to find out that he had not succeeded with the boy,—for he had never

agreed with his wife about education, and never would let her have her own way. She would say, 'This would not have happened if he had taken my advice.' Mr. Mitford had not thought of his wife for a long time, and he wondered how it was that this recollection should seize him now. It was not cheerful in the library, where he suddenly remembered that all the boys had been in the habit of meeting, the drawing-room being so little used after their mother's death. All the boys!—and now one of them was in his grave; and another keeping apart, tacitly blaming his father (though how any man in his senses could think him to blame!); and the third, whom he had himself set above the others, made the master! Stephen had never been very kind, always a selfish fellow, taking his own way. Well, well! The Squire said to himself, with a sigh, that this was how children treated one, after all the trouble they were to bring up: went against you; contradicted you; died if they could not have their own way otherwise, and thought that was the thing that would annoy you most; or sulked, making you believe that you were

to blame. He found the silence of his room intolerable, that lingering, slow evening: the house was so quiet. He could remember when it had made him very angry to hear steps and voices about, and he had said that the servants were altogether forgetting themselves, and that Larkins and Mrs. Simmons must have lost their heads; but he would have been glad to hear something moving to-night.

By and by he saw a red speck in the distance, in the evening gray, coming towards the house, and made out that it was Stephen chiefly by that hasty motion of flinging his cigar from him, which Stephen, on his side, had been driven to do by the hurry and stinging of his thoughts. Mr. Mitford was glad to see some one to whom he could talk, some one who had no right to be sulky; who, if there were any blame, was worse than he was, far more deeply involved, and to whom he could furnish matter for thought such as perhaps Stephen would not like.

Short of getting rid of our own discomfort, there are few things so soothing as

making other people uncomfortable, and the Squire felt that to plant Stephen's pillow with thorns would restore a certain zest to life. He opened his door accordingly, as his son came in, and said, 'If you've nothing better to do, you may as well come in here for half an hour. I want to talk to you.'

'I have nothing whatever to do,' returned Stephen resentfully, 'except to write some letters,' he added as an after-thought, perceiving the snare into which he had fallen.

'You can write your letters any time; but me you mayn't have—you mayn't have—so very long'—Mr. Mitford had not at all intended to say anything of this lugubrious description, but it came to his lips unawares.

'Why, you are as hale and hearty as any man could wish to be!' said Stephen, surprised.

'Perhaps so,—perhaps not,' remarked the Squire oracularly. 'Don't vapour about, but sit down, for Heaven's sake! Don't stand and swing about. It's a thing I cannot bear, as I always told——' He would have said 'Roger,' with one of those curious returns upon a dead name which so con-

stantly occurs when the void is fresh; and though his feelings were not deep, he was touched by it in spite of himself. 'I'll never say that or anything else to him again, poor fellow! Sit down. I have a great many things to say.' But though Stephen sat down with more than usual docility, perhaps moved in a similar way, it was some time before his father spoke. When he did, it was in the tone of a man who has been awaiting a tardy response. 'Well! you know what I said about sending in your papers?'

'There can't be any such dreadful hurry about it, I suppose?'

'There is a hurry. You've stepped into the place, and you must fill it. I am not going to have a fellow here who is at home only when he pleases, or never at home at all. There's no objection to that on the part of a younger son, who is of no particular account. But when you come to be the eldest, or at least to stand in the place of the eldest——'

'There's many an eldest son who is as much away from home as I am. When the

man of the house is as well and lively as you are——'

'Lively,—with my poor boy in his grave!' said the Squire; and then he abandoned this subject curtly. 'There's a great deal more for you to do,' he added. 'I'll take nothing off your hands. You'll have to give your attention to Pouncefort and the rest. I've come to a time of life when I don't choose to be troubled. I say when I don't *choose*,—I don't mean that I'm not able enough to do whatever's wanted: but I don't choose to bind myself. You'll have to stay at home and look after things.'

'You know very well that you wouldn't let me look after things, if I were to try.'

'I know nothing of the sort,' returned Mr. Mitford angrily. 'And more than that, you must marry and settle. It's not decent to go on as we've been doing, without a woman in the house.'

'Marry!' said Stephen, with a low whistle of ridicule and surprise.

'Yes, marry. You may laugh,—that's part of your libertine messroom ways; but in my day, as soon as a young man knew how

he was going to live he married,—it was the first thing that was thought of. If you are to have Melcombe, you must arrange your life accordingly.

'If I laughed,—and I did not laugh,—it was to think of such a piece of advice from you, when we're all in the deepest of mourning.'

'Well! getting married isn't fun, is it?' said the Squire. 'It's not a frolic; and besides, it's not a thing that can be done in a moment. You can't be introduced to a girl now, and propose to her in a week, and marry her,—in your mourning, as you say. Mourning doesn't last long nowadays. If you wear a hatband for six months, I suppose it's about as much as you'll do. Dead people are soon shovelled out of the way.' Mr. Mitford was not thinking now of Roger, but the summary way in which he himself would be disposed of, supposing such an unlikely thing to happen as that he should die. The thought recurred to him against his will.

'You talk,' remarked Stephen, taking his cigar-case from his pocket, choosing a cigar, looking at it all round, and then returning

the case to his pocket, in order to show by this expressive pantomime how hard a thing it was to sit and talk or be talked to without the help of smoke,—'you speak,' he said, poising the cigar in his fingers, 'as if you had settled it all; not only the marrying, but whom I'm to marry. Oh, I'm not going to smoke. It's absurd in a man's room, but I know there's no smoking allowed here.'

'In my day a man could listen to what his father had to say to him with a little respect, without tobacco; or else he ran the risk of being turned out of the house.'

'Ah! there's been about enough of that, you must think,' Stephen said, with cool impatience. He began to examine his nails as he spoke, and took out a penknife to scrape off a sharp corner, with the air of finding this much more interesting than anything his father could have to say. And his words rendered Mr. Mitford speechless, partly with rage, which was an effect Stephen frequently produced upon him, and also because what he said was true. Turning out of doors was not an experiment to try again. The Squire had not found it a successful method. He could

make no reply, though the taunt was hard to bear. There was a moment of silence, which Stephen was the first to break. 'Well, sir,' he said, after he had finished the little operation on his nail, holding it up to the lamp to see that it was even, 'and who may the damsel be?'

The Squire sat up in his chair, red, with the pulses throbbing in his temples. It was very bad for him. The doctors had told him so a dozen times,—that to let himself get angry and excited was the worst thing he could do, and put his life in danger. So easy it is for doctors to speak, who probably have no sons, or only little ones, not old enough to drive them frantic with constant contradictions. He sat still, getting the better of himself; and this not only on the consideration of health, but because he knew that his anger would have no effect upon Stephen.

A man who has an unrestrainable temper can find the means to restrain his temper when his motive is strong enough; and though it was always on the cards that the indulgence of it might bring on a fit of apoplexy, yet Mr. Mitford could hold him-

self in check when it was his only policy to do so. Besides, there was always that recollection of Roger coming in to stop him. Things might have succeeded better if he had fallen on some other way with Roger. When you have tried *les grands moyens* and failed, needs must that you should return to influences of a more practicable kind. But it was not for a considerable time that Mr. Mitford could prevail upon himself to reply.

'The damsel!' he said. 'You'll have to mend your manners, if you're to do anything there. Ladies in the country are not hail-fellow-well-met, like some, I fear, of your fast young women in London.'

'No?' queried Stephen. 'I've always found them very much alike. If it's a duchess in her own right——'

'The lady I mean is a great deal too good for you, my fine fellow, whatever she is.'

'I was going to say that in that case there was no difficulty at all, for they like it when a fellow shows that he forgets what swells they are.'

'She's no duchess,' said the father. He

was a little nervous about the announcement he was going to make. 'She's a very fine woman, as handsome a creature as ever I saw, and she has money enough to buy us all out twice over, though we're not so badly off at Melcombe; and, by George! I've set my heart on one of you having her, Steve! You're a man of the world; you know sentiment isn't everything,—though I give you my word she's a fine woman apart from her money, and would be a credit to the house.'

'You're very warm, governor,' observed Stephen, with a laugh. 'Why don't you go in for her—whoever she is—yourself?'

'Pooh!' said the Squire; but the suggestion mollified him. He began to give his son a sketch of the circumstances; the great fortune all in her own hands; the old woman dependent upon her, who considered herself the mistress of the house; all the little imbroglio of facts which a husband would have to clear up. He told the story as if he were talking of a stranger, and it was not till he had gone on with rising enthusiasm to set forth the advantages of old Travers's London property and all his profitable investments

that Stephen suddenly interrupted him with a little shout—

'Why, you're talking of Lizzy Travers, the only woman I ever loved!'

'None of your slang, sir. I'm talking, it's true, of Miss Travers. What do you know of Miss Travers? I didn't know you had ever met.'

'Governor,' said Stephen, 'all this has been too much for you; you want rest; you'll be forgetting your own name next. Why, I've danced with her, ridden with her, flirted with her. Don't you recollect the last Christmas I spent at home? By the way, though,' said Stephen, pausing, 'that's three years ago, and the fair Lizzy wasn't a baby then.'

'She is five and twenty,—I know her age, and an admirable age, too: old enough to know a thing or two; to be aware what her money's worth, for instance, and to like to see something solid in exchange. Now, Melcombe is all she could look for in that way, and if you see your true interest, and can show her what we might call a manly devotion——'

Stephen laughed. 'Oh, I'll show her a manly devotion,' he answered, 'or any other sort she likes. I'll be a troubadour or anything. I'm not such a fool as not to see the use of a match like that. I'll ride over and see her to-morrow, if you like, sir. I'll tell her I've come for sympathy, and that will make a very good opening. Women are fond of giving consolation. I'll tell her——'

'Don't go quite so fast!' interrupted the Squire. He was greatly relieved to find that Stephen made no objection, — that he received the idea 'in a right spirit,' which was what neither Roger nor Edmund had done; but at the same time he was disgusted with his son's readiness, and with the laugh which accompanied his idea of going to seek consolation. Mr. Mitford felt at once that it was a very good idea, and that to kick Stephen for having it was the duty of every man. He could not do this himself, having found out, as already said, that *les grands moyens* were not always successful, but he felt that it ought to be done. And yet he was much satisfied with the easy conversion

of Stephen, and he saw that his idea was a good one,—women *are* fond of consoling. It might be that Elizabeth (for the Squire believed women to be wholly unaccountable creatures) would at once answer to this rule; but not to-morrow, not so fast. In his mingled satisfaction and indignation he could not say any more.

'If that's all,' said Stephen presently, rising and yawning broadly on the other side of the lamp, 'I think I'll go off to bed. It can't be said, sir, that Melcombe is particularly amusing at this time of the year.'

'Few houses are very amusing,' remarked the Squire with dignity, 'two days after the funeral of the eldest son.'

'To be sure there's something in that. Good-night, then,' said Stephen, again yawning, 'if that's all you've got to say.'

All he had got to say! It meant only two lives, with the background of another life sacrificed; the one scarcely cold in his grave, the others with long years before them in which very possibly to be miserable. Mr. Mitford sat and thought it all over after Stephen was gone. He thought it highly

desirable that Elizabeth should listen to this dashing soldier, this tall, well-set-up, well-looking Mitford, the handsomest of all the sons. Why shouldn't she? The fellow was a very good-looking fellow, well born, with a good estate behind him and a good position. There was nothing so likely as that she would be charmed with him. But whether it would be quite a good thing for her, whether she would live happy ever after, was a thing the Squire would not have taken upon him to prophesy. Quite probably the pair would not be what is commonly called happy, as Stephen did not even pretend to care anything for her, nor to contemplate happiness at all in the matter; and yet he said, if that were all! His father listened to his progress upstairs to bed with various sensations,—glad of his acceptation of the part which had been in vain pressed upon Roger, yet with an angry scorn of Stephen, in comparison with Roger, which words could not express. She would have him,—no doubt she would have him; and the Mitfords of Melcombe would increase and flourish. And yet how much better for poor Lizzy had it been

Roger who had been persuaded to go a-wooing,—Roger newly laid in his grave!

Stephen paused on his way upstairs to look out of the long staircase window. He was tickled by the turn which affairs had taken, and that he was to be the man to marry Lizzy Travers and get all that wealth. It would be a prodigious bore, but such a lot of money made almost anything supportable. He stopped to look out upon the long stretch of the park, all indistinct and blurred in the dim summer night. There lay the glade where he had gone to meet Lily,—damn her! the little jilt, the little fool who had escaped him, who had run away to make him follow, whom he had lost in the London streets. If he could but have found her and killed her, he felt as if he would have liked to do it. He would never have killed her; but to crush her, to humble her, to cover her with scorn and shame, would have been sweet. In the middle of his laugh about Lizzy Travers, thus offered to him, whom apparently he had only to put forth his hand and take, came in this image of the other, the country girl who had outwitted him, balked

him, jilted him,—curse her! the little cheat, the little designing, mercenary flirt. He clenched his hand and set his teeth when he thought of it, still. He might have got over his fancy for her,—indeed, he had got over that; but the mortification, that was not so easy to forget. As he looked out over the dim trees in the direction of Lily's home, Stephen suddenly remembered that the pleasure of revenge was now easy to be had. If he could not reach her, he could reach the father; he could crush the family, he could turn them adrift upon the world. When she found herself without a crust, without a rag, then she would repent bitterly enough, if she had not done it already. Revenge is sweet, everybody says,—at least the anticipation is sweet. It is to be hoped that Stephen would not in any case have carried out all that he intended, but it gave him a fierce satisfaction to think he could bundle Ford out of the lodge to-morrow, take his bread from him and his character, and ruin the bad lot of them! He went up to bed solaced by these thoughts, and presently laughed again when he thought

of Lizzy Travers, the heiress, with all her money. She was not bad-looking, either; he would not mind taking a little trouble. But first he would have that Lily—lily, indeed! common weed that she was—cast out upon a dunghill, to perish there. Let us hope that he could not have been in any circumstances so bad as his thoughts.

XXXVI

AT THE RECTORY

EDMUND had little heart for the company of his father and brother; his own life seemed to have stopped with Roger's. It was not only natural affection and sorrow, but a sudden dropping of all the usual companionship. He seemed suddenly to have been left quite alone. As a matter of fact, Roger and he had been thrown more together in the last month or two than they had been since they were boys; and though they had both gone their own way, and were not what might be called of similar tastes, Edmund was himself surprised to find how much he had been in the habit of talking to Roger about the things that interested him. Already, in the short interval since his death, an incredible number of things had accumulated of which Edmund's first thought had

been to tell them to Roger. And when he remembered that Roger was no longer there, and that there was nobody in the wide world whom he could tell them to, whom he would have cared to tell them to, a sense of great solitude came upon him. He felt himself as if in a desert. He seemed no longer to know anybody, to be able to exchange a word with any one. He was as lonely as if he had been upon a desolate island. Even little Nina, the poor little badly brought-up sister, who troubled his mind with her gossip, —even she was gone. With his father and Stephen he was on good enough terms, with no suspicion of hostility among them, but only a faint aversion in his own mind, a disinclination to have anything to do with them. He could be civil; he could be no more. He did not accuse them of anything,—even Stephen. He did not in his heart allow that Stephen had killed his brother; but he felt a little revulsion, a sort of mental sickening, at the sight of him. He had nothing to say to him; he did not like to be nearer him than he could help: that was the form his feeling took.

He felt a dreary vacancy around him: of the many things which had once interested him, nothing seemed to remain. He cared for nothing, he had nobody to whom he could talk. When he thought of it, he felt that there was exaggeration in the feeling, and that Roger in life had not really been everything to him, as he now seemed to have been. It was perhaps only the form his sorrow took,—a sentiment which was its own reason, and for which no explanation could be made. He scarcely went out at all for some days, feeling a reluctance to look at the face of the world and resume intercourse with ordinary men. When he did go beyond the limits of the park, his feet carried him, almost without any will of his, to the Rectory. And yet it was the place to which he would have gone had he been in full possession of his will, for there was no one, he felt, who could understand him like Pax, who knew them both through and through. To her he could talk. He had scarcely even remembered her existence, in that first dull vacancy; it was a sign of the beginning of restoration when it occurred to him that with Pax he could

talk over everything, without having to explain.

Thus it was almost a disappointment when he found the drawing-room at the Rectory tenanted, not by Pax, but by Elizabeth Travers. He stopped short, in the very act of coming in, when he perceived her. But after that first pause a shock of something like pleasure went through him. Unwittingly to himself, she did him more good by the mere sight of her than Pax could have done. The blood seemed to come back to his heart with a thrill, and personal feelings, wishes, consciousness, seemed to awaken suddenly, with a stinging pain, in his heart. But for the first moment he thought he was disappointed, and that, Pax not being there, his better plan was to go away.

Elizabeth rose up, colouring a little. She coloured still more when she saw his instinctive stop, and said hurriedly, 'Mr. Mitford! Oh, I'll go and find Pax,—she has only gone upstairs for something. I shall find her in a moment!'

He put out his hand to stop her movement. 'Don't go,' he pleaded, 'don't go.' There was a feeling in him as of the bursting out

of wells in the desert. The heavy vacancy quivered into life. Ah, all this still remained, and he had thought that life was emptied out and deprived of all things! He became astonished at himself.

'I know—you must want Pax—and not a stranger,' Elizabeth said, with a quiver, too, of sympathetic feeling.

'You are not a stranger,' he replied, and then for a moment there was nothing more. He sat down near her, and wondered vaguely whether Roger could know that she was the first person he had seen, the first to whom he would talk, after what they had said together that night.

It was she who broke the silence, after an interval which seemed long to her, but not to him.

'We were very sorry,' she said, faltering, 'very sorry,' and paused again, looking at him, telling him more clearly than in words how sorry she was, how changed she found him, and how she would fain have had something to say to comfort him. Then she repeated, as if nothing else would come, 'Very sorry, both my aunt and I——'

'I knew you would be. I think I've been dead, too, these last days.'

'Oh! I have heard—you have had everything to bear—and you look ill. You must care a little for yourself now.'

'That's poor comfort,' he returned, 'to care for one's self, when there's nobody else to care for.'

'But it has to be done, Mr. Mitford. Oh, Pax will know what to say to you much better than I do!'

'Don't go,' he begged again, 'don't go,' putting out his hand with an appeal to her, as she half rose. Elizabeth was more embarrassed than became her character. She wanted to escape, and neither knew how to do so nor what to say.

'In any case,' she said, 'though I am so little qualified to say so, we must not throw away our lives because we are unhappy. We have all our own place to fill—perhaps more—perhaps better than——'

Here she stopped, reddening with some emotion which she could not repress, the tears coming into her eyes.

Edmund apprehended faintly what she

meant. 'You do not know,' he said hastily, —'no one knows—all that he was. He had not time to show what was in him.'

Miss Travers bowed her head, but there was a stiffness as of unconscious opposition in this assent. 'I saw—very little of him,' she said, faltering.

'We talked of you, the last time we ever talked together.'

A sudden blush covered Elizabeth's face, a hot colour that looked like anger. She made another little constrained bow. 'I don't know what there could have been to say of me.'

He did not make any reply, for his mind had gone back to Roger's rooms in town,—to his brother, all unconscious of what was coming, conscious only of the dawn of a new life in himself; full of anticipations which were so different, so different from what had come. It was not till all this had passed before him that he remembered what Roger had said of Elizabeth and these prognostications, which were as little likely to come to pass as those which he had imagined of his own career. And Edmund felt his tongue tied; he made

her no answer, partly because he could not, seeing what it was that had been said, and partly that he would not lift the veil from his dead brother's plans and hopes.

At this moment Pax hurried in, with her arms held out to him and her eyes full of tears. 'Oh, Edmund!' she exclaimed, grasping him, giving him a motherly kiss. 'Oh, Edmund!' Not the worst comforters are those who have nothing to say in the way of consolation. When she loosed her arms, Pax sat down and cried, tears not only of sympathy, but of grief. 'Tell me,' she said, sobbing,—'tell me everything! I want to hear everything. Oh, who would have thought it that my old father should get better at eighty, and Roger die! Oh, my dear Roger! my poor Roger! Tell me everything, Edmund!'

He did what she told him, and it was a relief to him. There had been no occasion to speak of what had passed with those who knew as much as himself, no family comparison of what each individual had seen and heard. It was a change from the dreadful monotony of the home atmosphere, in which Roger's name was no more mentioned, to live

over all the incidents of his concluding days again. He sat beside Pax, and told her everything, as a brother might have done to a sister; she ever throwing in a new question, requiring every detail, her sobs now and then interrupting the narrative.

Elizabeth moved uneasily in her chair, then rose to go away, but was stopped again and again by a word from Pax. 'He doesn't mind you being there, and I want you,' she said, in the midst of her tears. Miss Travers had no resource but to stay. She listened to the story of the deathbed, herself now and then greatly moved, yet contending with her feelings, something like indignation mingling with her involuntary sympathy, a look of reluctance and resistance on her face. She was angry with herself for being so much affected, yet unwilling to shed a tear for Roger. Edmund did not perceive this, in the preoccupation of his own sorrow —not, at least, till he had nearly reached the end.

'And what part did Lily Ford take in all this?' inquired Pax at last.

At this utterance Elizabeth got up hurriedly

and went to the window, where she stood, turning her back upon them, as if she could bear no more.

'Lily Ford!' exclaimed Edmund. 'What part should she have taken? She did not even know that anything had happened, so far as I am aware.'

'And yet the poor boy was going to marry her! She might have gone and nursed him, at the least. Not that I hold with such nursing, but she might have offered—she might——'

'I have no reason to suppose she knew anything about it,' replied Edmund. 'Don't blame her, poor girl!'

Elizabeth turned quickly from the window. 'Blame her!' she cried involuntarily.

Edmund turned half round to look at her, but he had no clue whatever to her meaning. He turned again to Pax. 'He had made out a draft of a kind of settlement,' he said —'I found it among his papers—to secure to her what money he had to leave. It was not very much.'

'That was like him,' said Pax, 'that was like him! My dear, I can't help being glad

it never happened; but to take care of her future, as if she had been his own equal, as if she had had people to look after her interests,—that was like my Roger! Ah! you may say what you please, all of you, but I knew him best of all. He was in love with me once, bless him!—a woman who might have been his mother! It was nonsense, of course, but it gives me all the more right to him now. You none of you know him as I do! And what will you do about it, Edmund,—a thing that was never binding, of course, and never could be?'

'It shall be binding,' answered Edmund. 'I shall see that his intentions are carried out,—though she did not deserve that he should care for her so.'

'Not deserve!' cried Elizabeth, turning round again, the words bursting from her in spite of herself. Both of them, Pax drying her eyes, Edmund raising his head, looked up at her, wondering what she could mean. Elizabeth was very much moved; her colour came and went. 'Mr. Mitford,' she said, 'if you mean this to be a sort of compensation,—which I suppose was its intention at

first,—I may say to you that Lily would never accept it, never! Oh, how could you think of such a thing! I know that nothing but good should be said of the dead, and I don't want to say a word—not a word. I am sorry, sorry to the bottom of my heart, for you. I know you will wish to think the best, naturally; and so should I. But Lily will never accept it! I—I happen to know——'

It was with difficulty she could restrain her tears. To see Elizabeth, so composed and dignified as she was, in this strange state of excitement, bewildered them both. What did she mean? The thought shot through Edmund's mind painfully, as if some one had thrown an arrow or a missile at him, that she had cared for Roger more than she was aware, that she had resented his love for Lily, that Elizabeth was another victim. If it were so, Roger had never suspected it, and in that case all was waste, Elizabeth's love as well as the rest—though had it but come to him! He looked at her with a pang that seemed to cut his heart in two. Elizabeth's love all wasted, when it might have made

the world bloom again, and brought Eden out of the wilderness! The thought was very bitter, and the thought that she herself resented it, angry, excited, covering a pang which no doubt mortified as well as wounded her with this fierceness about Lily; taking Lily's part, as if Roger had meant her any wrong.

'She knows something we don't know,' observed Pax. 'You would not speak like that, Elizabeth, without thinking you had some reason.'

'I *have* reason; there is no thinking! Oh,' said Elizabeth, wringing her hands, 'it's not a moment to say anything! I am very wrong to have said anything. I am going home. I can't help it if I don't feel as you do. I am very, very sorry, all the same, Mr. Mitford, for you.'

'Let me go away, not you,' said Edmund, rising: 'it is time I did. It has done me a great deal of good to tell Pax. Thank you for your sympathy, Miss Travers. One day I wanted to tell you what Roger said, and perhaps that day may come still, but I see it cannot be now. Perhaps there were things

he did not understand. He may have been absorbed in a foolish thought, and not have perceived what was a great deal more worth thinking of.' Edmund stopped when he had made this strange apology, remembering that if his discovery were a real one, this was not what Elizabeth would wish to have said; but it was too late to draw back.

Whatever she meant, however, it was clear enough that she did not understand what he meant. She looked him in the eyes in a strange way, with a fixed look, as if trying to convict him of something, he had not the least idea what. They looked earnestly at each other: he sorrowfully, grieving for her, for himself, for Roger, for everything thus lost and wasted; she severely, scarce able to contain herself, moved in a more intolerable way by the contradiction of some indignant resentment which contended with all the softer feelings in her heart. To both there came a vague sense that there was something more on either side than either comprehended, which neither could divine. Pax looked at them both with lips apart, with a gaze of wonder. It was seldom that she

had a difficulty before her which quite transcended her power of divination.

'Yes, Edmund, my dear,' she said, 'go; we have had our cry together, and it has done us both good. And Lizzy and you will never understand each other in this way. Leave her with me. Whatever her reason is it can't be a true one against our boy. We know better than that. Good-bye, Edmund, my dear!' Pax took him in her large embrace again, and put her wet cheek against his. 'It's miserable now,' she said, 'but it will not be so for ever. God bless you, my dear!'

He went away almost without looking round. Elizabeth held out her hand to him suddenly, as he passed her, and her hand trembled; but he did not know why, unless it was for the dear sake of Roger, against whom she was angry, he could not tell why. Because he had not loved her,—because he had loved Lily Ford? Would a woman be angry still, when the man was dead, at such a wrong? It seemed more fit that Edmund should be angry against Fate, who had thus let everything run to waste, and taken from

him all hope of a new spring of life. But he had not the heart for any such feeling.

He went to the churchyard on his way home, and lingered long, looking at the outside of the vault in which Roger had been placed. There was not so much comfort in it as there would have been in the sod of a visible grave. It seemed to wrap the dead in a deeper darkness, to misrepresent all life and the meaning of life; as if everything were to fall into subterranean gloom, and all possibilities were to be piled together like so much rubbish in the bowels of the earth.

XXXVII

EDMUND OUT OF HEART

THERE were some subjects which were altogether ignored at Melcombe during the somewhat sombre period which the three gentlemen spent together there. They met scarcely at all, except at meals, and when they talked, which was never much, it was on public and impersonal subjects. Political questions had never been so thoroughly discussed in the house: they were more or less safe subjects. Mr. Mitford and Stephen were naturally Tories of the old school, who followed their party steadily, without any idea of independent judgment. It would have been against Mr. Mitford's principles to think on these matters: his ideas had been defined from before the beginning of time. He thought as his father did, and as he fully expected his son should do. Roger, had he

lived, would have carried out the tradition faithfully enough, though with a more reasonable devotion to the tenets in which he had been trained. And Stephen, whose only virtuous point was a capacity for understanding discipline and the power of authority, followed his father closely, and was staunch as steel to the tradition of that old, stubborn, all-resisting conservatism which is a most respectable sentiment, and has perhaps done England more good than all the new theories in the world. Edmund, also in strict conformity to nature, was of a totally different frame of mind. He was the second son. He was in Her Majesty's opposition. But as he had no special political fervour or impassioned creed, his politics were much more theoretical than practical; he had none of the martyr impulse in him, and he was strong in that slightly contemptuous toleration which the only intellectual member of a family often feels for those who are not in the least given to independent thought. He knew he could not convince them, nor even make his point of view comprehensible to them, so he refrained from controversy. And in the pres-

ent state of affairs it was a relief to let them talk upon subjects of public moment on which they were entirely agreed, and on which he could occasionally say his say without too much offence. But on subjects more familiar there was little said. Roger was not named among them, nor did any one speak of the future or of what he intended to do. There were no confidences of any description in the strange little male group, which was a family party, yet had so little of the character of a family in it. Even little Nina, as Edmund felt more and more, would have been a relief. It would have been possible to say to her, 'What are you going to do this morning? Do you intend to walk, or to ride, or to drive?' Such questions were not put to each other by the three men, who only remarked that it was a fine day; that Lord So-and-So made a very good speech last night; that Tredgold, as chairman of quarter-sessions, was ridiculously out of place; and that, what with competitive examinations and all that, the country was going to wreck and ruin. Edmund, for one, longed, amid all this talk, to be able to say to Nina, 'What are you

going to do to-day?' but to Stephen he did not put that question even when he had a distinct interest in knowing what Stephen meant to do.

His special interest in this question arose from the fact that Stephen and his father had spoken in his hearing of the household at Mount Travers in a manner which vaguely but powerfully excited Edmund. He had himself found his way there soon after his meeting with Miss Travers at the Rectory, and had been puzzled, yet not discouraged, by his reception. Elizabeth had received him with something which looked almost like agitation,—agitation suppressed and only to be divined, yet which betrayed itself to an observer so sympathetic in little changes of colour and momentary tremors, in sudden impulses and self-restraints, which were scarcely comprehensible and very perplexing. When any allusion was made to Roger, she stiffened at once into a marble-like impassiveness, more significant in the studied absence of all expression than the utmost show of feeling, keeping all his questions back. Was it an injured sense of love rejected? Was it

the indignation and wounded delicacy of a woman who felt herself slighted for an object much less worthy? Edmund was unable to solve this mystery.

What made it still more difficult to understand was that Pax also put on to some degree the same manner, checking him in those talks which were almost the only relief his mind had by a hurried 'Poor Roger!' accompanied by a shake of the head and a change of subject, such as Edmund found it still more difficult to understand. 'God forgive him, poor boy, for all his imperfections! Let's say no more,—let's say no more about it. By and by it won't be so hard,' Pax said once. Why should it be hard to speak of him, now or at any time? To protest against the prayer that God might forgive him would have been vain indeed, for the best of men must have need to be forgiven; but when that is said between people who loved him of one who is dead, it means something more than the imperfections which all men have before God! Edmund was greatly perplexed and unhappy, notwithstanding that there were in Elizabeth's manner to himself many signs

which a vainer man might have built much upon : an air of almost tenderness in her look, a softness in her voice, as if sympathy for Edmund were somehow involved in her singular repugnance to any mention of his dead brother. Edmund frequented the roads between Melcombe and Mount Travers with a fascination for which he could scarcely account to himself. He wanted to see her, to speak to her of that last conversation with Roger, to tell her a tale which was all woven in with his brother's memory ; and the more Elizabeth stiffened at all reference to him, the more indispensable it seemed to Edmund that she should know the complications of his story. He had been silent before for Roger's sake, and now she would give him no chance to show her what was in his heart.

He was so intent upon the explanation that he forgot how impossible it ought to be for him, the disinherited, to approach the heiress. Of that secondary subject he never thought at all. Perhaps it showed a dulness of perception in him. His mind was so full of what he had to say to her, of the story he would so fain have poured into her ear, of his

long doubt and uncertainty, and final liberation from all hindrances, that he had no time to be tormented by the thought of her great fortune and his small one. That consideration no more entered into his mind than it would have entered into hers. A woman, in such a case, is better off than a man; but Edmund was as free from painful calculations of this sort as Elizabeth herself could have been. He forgot that what might have seemed to some supersensitive minds a new barrier between them had come into existence. He was so much occupied by other matters, by perplexity about her feelings and desire to disclose his own, that he had no leisure to think of anything else. And yet, though he was so eager to tell her his story, which was in reality the story of several past years, Edmund could not find opportunity nor courage to do so. Day after day he walked to the very gate, and then turned back, his heart having failed him. Once or twice he had gone farther, as far as the drawing-room, with its great plate-glass windows, when the sight of that sudden shutting up of her countenance silenced him in a moment, and took

all strength from him. In this way Elizabeth occupied his mind almost more than had she been his affianced bride. He could not make out the meaning of that look, almost stern in its sudden repression, or of the melting kindness with which she would turn to him after she had thus silenced him. Something stood between them,—he could not tell what; a shadow of Roger, a ghost which came chill between the two whom Roger had wished to see one. There could not be any doubt that it was Roger who was that shadow, but how or why Edmund could not divine. Had she loved him who had not loved her? Did she find herself unable to forgive him who had never divined that love, who had given his less worthily? But why then that softened look, that melting tone, to Edmund? He was bewildered by this question; it paralysed him; the words died from his lips, though he knew that until he said them he could have no rest.

But when he became aware that the same subject was being discussed between Stephen and his father, a singular excitement took possession of Edmund. He remembered the

discussions between the Squire and Roger, the recommendations which were commands on one side and insults on the other,—commands to his son to secure the heiress, insulting enumerations of the advantages to follow. Had this process begun over again? Had Stephen lent an ear more attentive than that of his elder brother to these inducements and recommendations, and was Edmund's brother again, and this time in earnest, to be his rival? The suggestion made his blood boil. Stephen to pretend to Elizabeth Travers! Stephen, who made no secret of his own estimate of women, and whose associates among them were sufficiently well known! He, with his garrison-town associations, his intrigues, his cynical incapacity for deeper emotion,—could it be in the possibilities of the future that Elizabeth had been reserved for him? Edmund's blood boiled at the thought. He said to himself that it was impossible,—that it could not be; but then he remembered how many things that are seemingly impossible come to pass, especially in such concerns. The shadow of Roger stood between himself and the woman he loved,

but no such shadow was upon Stephen. Stephen would never perceive, even if it did exist for him, that indefinable something which closed Edmund's lips and made his heart fail him. Stephen would go forward boldly, whatever were the circumstances. No scare of the imagination would prevent him from pressing his suit. And who would say that amid all these complications Elizabeth herself might not find a certain relief in the addresses of a man who had nothing to do with the past, whose image was not involved with Roger's, and who, though his brother, had so little in common with him, and was so entirely a new departure, a fresh competitor? In the hurrying excitement of his thoughts at sight of this new possibility, Edmund could not but see all that was in its favour. He was well aware of Stephen's advantages,—his good looks, his self-assurance, his boldness, even his position as virtually a stranger, an individuality little known. All this struck him with a horror which was not to be expressed. That which Roger in his folly had not sought, but might perhaps have obtained, that which Edmund himself would give his

life for,—to think that it might come to Stephen at last! He said to himself that it was not possible; that Elizabeth's perceptions were too fine, her taste too delicate, for such a catastrophe,—but who could tell? How many tender women had fallen victims before to men as unworthy of them! How often had all prognostications been defied and all finer divination suspended! for what could a woman really know of a man in such circumstances but the outward impression which he made? and how often was that outward impression a false one!

This was the thought which eventually roused Edmund out of the lethargy into which he had fallen. All the circumstances of his present position had combined to hold him in that suspense of being. Grief and that sense of injury with which such a grief is so often accompanied, the feeling of unworthiness triumphant, and the nobler and more true swept away before the tide of successful wrong—Roger fallen, and Stephen raised in his place—produced of themselves a partial arrest of all Edmund's faculties. The feeling was not a selfish one. He had never antici-

pated, never contemplated, the position of heir and future head of the family; but the extraordinary overturn of all justice or any moral balance in the world, when the good and true were thus thrown down to make way for the false and evil, produced in him that pause of hopelessness, that sense of incapacity to understand or contend with the apparently blind and inexorable fate that seems so often to shape human affairs, which makes action impossible, and sickens the heart. And then the curious attitude of Elizabeth, as incomprehensible as fate, repelling and attracting him at once, added so much more to the paralysing effect. But when he thought of Stephen's possible suit,—the suit that he divined with an angry alarm which was more than jealousy,—Edmund's dormant energy awoke. The man who had taken his inheritance, who had killed his brother, who had ruined Lily Ford, should not, must not, soil the pure name and break the heart of Elizabeth Travers. No! She might not be for Edmund,—he believed she would never be for him,—but she must not be thrown away upon one unworthy.

Lily Ford! Edmund came to himself after the long suspension of his energies: he had not done his duty by his dead brother in this respect, at least, which Roger would have thought the most important of all. He had not sought out Lily, nor tried to save her, nor carried out Roger's wishes in regard to her. Edmund did not believe that it was possible to save Lily; but wherever the poor girl now was, she could not but be in trouble and misery, and to find her might be to save Elizabeth. The notion was, if not selfish, yet not single. It aimed at two objects, and the less direct was the more important in his eyes. But yet, apart from Elizabeth and all her concerns, he had a duty to Lily too. He was the executor of Roger's wishes, and it ought to have been his first business to find her. What matter that the thought of her was odious to him; that she embodied in her slightness and trifling unimportance all the misfortunes that had crushed Roger, —the loss of his tranquillity, his fortune, his career, finally his very life? A creature of so little account, with nothing but her prettiness, her foolish education; a girl whom

Stephen's careless wooing could lead to her destruction,—and she had cost Roger everything, his happiness and his life! The thought roused in Edmund a silent rage against human fate and the helplessness of man, and towards her, the trifling instrument of so much harm, a sick contempt and indignation, a horror of the sight of her and of her ill-omened name. But yet he had a duty to fulfil, and perhaps—perhaps—her story might yet be of some service; it might save Elizabeth. It was this hope, more than any juster sentiment, which turned his steps towards the West Lodge. Mrs. Ford had appealed to him to find her daughter; and though he had not succeeded in doing that, the appeal justified his inquiries. Time had flown heavily but quickly during this interval of inaction; yet, after all, a month had not passed since Roger's death.

XXXVIII

THE WEST LODGE

IT was about noon when Edmund approached the lodge, and everything recalled to him the last time he had been there, which was so short a while ago, and yet seemed to belong to another life. He remembered every incident, even all the appearances, of that day: the anxious mother hurrying out at the sound of his step; the father, all blanched in his rough out-of-door redness and brownness with the horror of a catastrophe which was worse than death; his passion and threats against the man who had betrayed his child, and the woman's pitiful attempts to restrain, to comfort him, while herself in the grip of despair. Poor people! tragic as their unintended influence had been, they themselves were not less to be pitied on that account; and he conjured up before him the miserable little

house with all its happiness blighted, the shame that had taken the place of their foolish, innocent pride, the weight of suspense, or still more terrible knowledge, that must have crushed the unhappy father and mother, so that his heart had become very tender towards the unfortunate couple before he reached their door. After all, they were not to blame; and they had suffered even more bitterly than the family of the other victim.

It seemed to Edmund that he must see tokens of their wretchedness in the very air, as he drew near the little flowery place which had once been their pride; and to see the garden as bright as ever, the tall lilies, from which their child had got her name, standing with all their buds ready to open along the sunny borders, and everything in summer order, full of sweetness and bloom, filled him with involuntary surprise. The morning sun shone upon the red roof and waving trees; the door stood open; a tranquil cat lay sunning herself upon the window ledge; a brood of little yellow chickens flitted about under the charge of an anxious

mother hen. Nothing more peaceful, more full of humble ease and comfort, could be. The whole seemed to breathe a silent contradiction to Edmund's troubled thoughts. Yet the sun will shine, the flowers will bloom, the unconscious creatures thrive and enjoy their little life, whatever misery may reign within the house, he said to himself, with a curious sense of incongruity, almost of disappointment.

To his astonishment, he heard voices in raised and angry tones within the house, and, unconsciously listening, distinguished with consternation indescribable the voice of Stephen addressing some one with loud authority. 'You must clear out of here!' he was saying, in a tone so little subdued that any passer-by must have heard. 'I know nothing about notice. I tell you, you must clear out of here. I want the place. Get out at once: do you hear? You'll be paid in place of your notice, if you've any right to it, which I don't believe you have. You think I'm to be put off with tricks and excuses, to gain time, but you're mistaken. You must get out to-morrow at latest: do

you hear? I want the place for a servant of my own.'

'Sir,' replied the voice of Mrs. Ford, 'my 'usband's not here, and I can't make you no answer; but turn a servant away there's no master can, without warning. I've been in service all my life, and if I didn't know that, who should? It's all the protection poor servants has. I'm not saying nothing again going——'

'You had better not,' said Stephen, 'or I'll have you turned out, which perhaps would be the quickest way.'

'I said as I'm not saying nothing again going,' said Mrs. Ford, raising her voice. 'We've allays meant to go. It's not as if we were badly off or had no friends; and Ford isn't one as can stand new masters and new laws. He's ready to go, but he won't go without his warning, as if he was turned off for something bad. I don't want to say nothing disrespectful, but we has our pride the same as other folks, and Ford, he won't stir without his legal warning. I mightn't stand out myself,' the woman continued, with a sound as of coming tears, 'for the sake of

peace; but Ford, he's not that sort of a man; he'll not be turned out like a thief,—him as has served the Squire man and boy.'

'Don't give me any of your impudence,' said Stephen; 'that is just how he shall be turned out. I give you your choice,—clear out at once, or I'll have the police to-morrow to throw your things out of the window. Hallo! what do *you* want here?'

This was addressed to Edmund, who had come in unnoticed, behind him, to the little trim kitchen, where Mrs. Ford stood on her own hearth as in a citadel, flushed, with a look of resistance on her homely face, but her apron in her hand, ready to wipe off the angry tears which were very near coming, and a huskiness growing in her throat.

'What is the matter?' said Edmund. 'There must be some mistake. I could not help hearing what you were saying. What has Ford done? My father would never bundle them out in this way unless there's a very serious reason: he will listen to what they've got to say.'

Stephen turned round upon his brother with a flushed and furious face. 'You had

better mind your own business, Ned! I've got this to do, and I'll allow no one to interfere.'

'And as for what we've got to say,' cried Mrs. Ford shrilly, turning upon the newcomer,—'we've got nothing to say, sir. I wouldn't stay, not if I was paid to do it. We've got better friends than ever the Mitfords was, that won't see us put upon. And there's no man livin' as can have a better character than my man. But we'll have our warning. Police! Them that dares name such a name to me know well as my man's out o' the way, and I've nobody to stand up for me. Police!' Her voice ran off into a shriek. 'For shame of yourselves as call yourselves gentlefolks, and can come and insult a woman like that.'

'There must be some mistake,' repeated Edmund. 'No one shall insult you while I am here. Stephen,'—he turned and faced his brother, laying his hand on his arm,—'whatever you have against these people, let it be referred to my father. You know he will never turn them out; and it's not for you——'

Stephen threw up the arm which his brother had touched with a fierce gesture, which brought back to both their minds another scene. He was about to reply furiously, but the angry exclamation was stopped on his lips by that recollection. He gave Edmund a look of baffled rage. 'I'll refer it to no man,' he cried, 'and I'll be questioned by no man, and I'll not argue with *you*, either. You know what I've got to say. Clear out of this at once, or, by Jove! I'll——' Stephen, however, was made of flesh and blood, like other people. He could not stand against the thoughts thus evoked. He turned round upon his heel and quitted the house, leaving his threat unsaid. The ghost of Roger came up again, and protected the humble place. He could not stand before that shadow, though he saw nothing, and though he was not in any way turned from his purpose; but for the moment his soul was disturbed, and he could say no more.

Mrs. Ford did not know why he had abandoned the field. She thought it was perhaps Edmund, always her friend, who had driven forth the enemy; but when the angry

visitor had withdrawn, those tears which were so near falling came at once. 'Oh, that any gentleman should have named the police to me!' she cried. 'Oh, that I should have lived to be threatened with that, and my things thrown out o' window! Mr. Edmund, don't say nothing, for I'll never forget it, I'll never forget it; not if the Squire was to come on his bended knees, and ask me himself to stay!'

'I am very sorry,' observed Edmund. 'I don't understand it. I came to——' He paused here, and look round the comfortable room, where there was no sign of neglect or downfall. It was quite true that Mrs. Ford was the sort of woman to keep her house tidy, whatever happened, but he could not associate the trim room with any misfortune. 'I have not seen you,' he said, 'since before —the great trouble we have had.' He felt that it would be easier to inquire into her circumstances after he had made some allusion to his own.

For a moment Mrs. Ford stopped her angry sobs. 'Oh, sir,' she cried, 'we was very sorry! Nobody would ever have

spoken to me like that if Mr. Roger had a' been to the fore! Oh, I don't hold with new masters that can speak like that to a woman, and her husband's back turned. And us that didn't mean to stay,—us as was going to give warning from one day to another! But without he has his just warning, Ford 'll never go. He's a man as stands upon his rights!'

'When I was last here,' said Edmund, 'you were in great trouble.'

Mrs. Ford took scarcely a moment to recover herself. She put down her apron from her eyes, which were still wet, but immediately became watchful and full of strange defiance and light. 'Was we, sir?' she asked, with an appearance of surprise and a sudden smile, as if the affair had been so trifling as to escape her memory.

'You were in great trouble,' repeated Edmund, with some impatience. 'You were almost in despair. Lily had left home, and you didn't know where she was. You thought it might have been my brother Roger'—Edmund spoke the words with an effort—'who had taken her away.'

'Lord bless us!' said the woman, 'what things do get into folks' heads! I remember now. I was just like a mad woman. Ford, he never gave in to it——'

'I beg your pardon; Ford was as bad, or worse, than you. He said he would kill the man who——'

'So he did,—so he did! Them things go out of your mind when you find out as it was all silly fancies and not true. Dear, bless us all! so we did; ravin' like mad folks, as if our Lily—— Mr. Edmund, I don't blame you: you think as poor folks has no feelings; but I wouldn't have put you in mind of the like of that, if I had been you!'

She gave him a look of injured feeling, yet of magnanimous forgiveness, and laughed a little, with her apron still held in her hand.

'It was thoughtless of the child,' she continued, looking down upon the apron, which she twisted in her fingers. 'I don't say nothing else. But one as never thought a wrong thought, nor knew what wickedness was, how was she to suppose as we'd take such fancies into our heads? I was that ashamed I couldn't look her in the face,—

to think as I had ever mistrusted my Lily! But, thank God! she don't know, not to this day; and them as would tell her would be cruel, — oh, it would be cruel! I would sooner die nor do it, though I'm nothing but a poor woman, and no scholard nor a gentleman, like you!'

'You may be sure,' replied Edmund, 'that Lily shall never hear anything of the sort from me. I am very glad your fears have turned out to be vain. Is she here now?'

'She's far better off,' answered Mrs. Ford. 'She's with friends that think a deal of her, —oh, a great deal of her! She's kept like a lady, and never puts her hand to a thing but what she pleases, and books to read and a pianny to play upon, and everything she can set her face to. Oh, she's better off than she could be with Ford and me.'

'Is this the account she gives you? Are you quite sure it is true? Don't you know where she is?' Edmund asked, with again a sickening thrill of horror. 'Do you take all this merely upon her word?'

'I'd take the Bank of England upon her word!' cried the mother, with a confusion of

ideas not difficult to understand. 'Me and the lady—the lady that makes Lily so happy —more happy,—and I do grudge a bit to know it, I'll not deny my mean ways—more happy than she was with me.'

'Mrs. Ford,' said Edmund, 'are you sure you are not being once more deceived?' He was very much in earnest and very serious; confused more than it is possible to say by the mother's evident ignorance, by Stephen's strange appearance here, which was scarcely credible if Lily was still in his power, and by all the bewildering circumstances which seemed to contradict each other. Mrs. Ford, on her side, flung her apron from her, and confronted him with a glowing countenance and eyes aflame.

'I was never deceived!' she cried. 'Me deceived! Oh, if I was weak for a moment, and came and cried out to you in my trouble, it was because I was a silly woman and didn't know no better. Deceived! I could tell you a name as would bring you down on your knees, Mr. Edmund, to ask her pardon, —yes, on your knees, that's the word! Lily's where she has a right to be, and that's

among ladies, like what she is herself; ladies as is her friends and our friends too,' cried Mrs. Ford, 'mine and my 'usband's, all for the sake of Lily, and has offered us a home, and a better home nor here. And Ford, he was to have given the master warning this very day, if it hadn't been as my heart just clung a bit to the flowers. But without his warning he'll not budge a step,—no, not for all the police in the world, neither him nor me; and you may tell the master that, Mr. Edmund! We've served him honest and true for more than twenty year: is that a reason to turn us out like thieves at a day's notice? But we'll not go without our just warning,—no, not a step, neither Ford nor me.'

Mrs. Ford made this long speech with a fervour and passion which had its natural result, and plunged her at the end into a fit of indignant tears.

'I don't understand it,' returned Edmund. 'I am sure my father never meant this. There must be some mistake. And Stephen —what Stephen could mean—— I am bewilderered altogether. I don't understand

your story, and I don't understand his action; but I promise you you shall not be turned out if I can help it; certainly you shall not be turned out.'

'Oh, sir, I can tell you what he means: he's got somebody of his own as he wants to put in, and it's well known that there's little mercy for them as comes in Mr. Stephen's way. I wouldn't be in Mr. Stephen's power, not for anything that could be given me; and that's why I could bite my tongue out that I wouldn't let Ford give warning. Oh, it's easy to understand Mr. Stephen; he don't let no one stand in his way.'

'You are doing my brother injustice,' Edmund said; but he had little spirit in Stephen's cause, and he was too much bewildered to be able to see light one way or another. That Stephen should thus venture to insult the people he had so deeply injured seemed beyond belief, and so was the whole confused mystery of Lily,—the ladies with whom she was supposed to be, the friends, though the unhappy mother had declared at the first stroke of the calamity that she had no friends. Edmund did not know what to

think or say. He went back across the park completely perplexed, feeling that he had lost every landmark, and all was chaos and confusion around him. Was it, after all, the common tale of betrayal and ruin? Was it something entirely different? Was Stephen the cold-blooded destroyer, who, after he had ruined the daughter, could attempt to conceal his crime by driving away the helpless poor people from their home? He could not tell what to think. Was there perhaps some unsuspected third party, who was the criminal or who was the saviour? Edmund felt that he could make nothing of it, one way or another. As for the hope which he had entertained of injuring Stephen in the eyes of Elizabeth by means of Lily's wretched story,—for that was how his project now appeared to him,—he felt ashamed to the bottom of his heart of this unworthy purpose. Stephen was without mercy, without kindness, bent on his own ends, and tolerating no interference; but in this matter, perhaps, after all, he was innocent. He could not have tried to crush Lily's parents if Lily had owed her destruction to him: a man may be

bad, but not so bad as that! Compunction came into Edmund's soul: to do injustice to any man was terrible to him.

A brief conversation which he had with Stephen before dinner did not, however, mend matters. Stephen took the first word. He asked what the devil Edmund meant by interfering with what was no business of his.

'As much of mine as yours,' retorted Edmund; 'more, perhaps, since I know the people better. You could not really think of taking it upon yourself to turn one of my father's old servants away?'

'Old servants be——!' exclaimed Stephen. 'A pair of detestable old hypocrites! What use is an old fellow like that in the covers? I'll have all those vermin of old servants cleared away.'

'Fortunately you are not the master, Steve. No, neither am I; I pretend to no authority.'

'I should hope not,' rejoined Stephen, with an insolent laugh; 'you're out of it, at least. And I can tell you I'll stand no nonsense, Ned,—no protecting of a set of rogues and toadies. They think they can

defy me, and that Mr. Edmund will see them righted, as they call it. I'll have none of that. The estate is to be mine, and I mean to manage it my own way.'

'The estate is not yours while it is my father's, Stephen; and I shall certainly appeal to him not to suffer the Fords to be turned out in this summary way. They are old retainers,—they were favourites of my mother.'

'Oh yes, to be sure; and the pretty daughter! There was perhaps more than one of us hit in that quarter,' cried Stephen, with a rude laugh. 'That explains everything. It is a crime to meddle with *her* father, eh?'

He stood with insolent eyes fixed upon Edmund's, a flush on his face, defiance in his look. Edmund did not know the keen pang of mortification in Stephen's mind which made him seize this opportunity of mischief, and there was something exasperating in the look which tried his patience almost beyond endurance. It was the second time in which all his self-control had been necessary not to strike his brother to the

ground. They stood straight up in front of each other for a moment, looking into each other's faces like deadly foes, not like brothers. Then Edmund turned slowly away.

'We cannot fight,' he said, 'because we are both Mitfords, and I will not dishonour my father's house by a scuffle; but you know what I think better than if I said it, either by words or blows.'

'That for your blows!' cried Stephen, snapping his fingers; but he turned away more quickly than his brother. Even he could not but feel that there had already been enough of that.

XXXIX

THE SQUIRE IN THE WRONG

THEY both watched their father during the hour of dinner, which passed as usual in a suppressed antagonism and careful avoidance of dangerous subjects. But neither Edmund nor Stephen had the advantage for that night. Mr. Mitford fretfully declined to listen to what either had to say. He had no mind for a discussion with the son who was now his eldest son, and to whom he was doing wrong. His conscience was not very tender, but it was vulnerable in this respect. There could be no doubt that he was wronging Edmund. Edmund, perhaps, had not been too complaisant. He had stood by Roger, and deserted his father; but Roger was dead, poor fellow, and except in that point the Squire was aware that Edmund had given him no just cause of offence; and

yet he was cast out of his natural place and disinherited for no reason. Mr. Mitford could not bear to think of it; and to allow himself to be let in, as he said, for a discussion with that fellow at night, when there could be no chance of deliverance, when he probably would bring up everything and go over the whole ground—— No, no; the Squire took refuge in the first excuse which occurred to him, and that was a headache. 'I don't feel at all the thing,' he remarked. 'I've got a very queer feeling here,' tapping his forehead as he spoke. 'It's worry and the hot weather, and things in general. Robson is very decided on the subject. I am never to bother about business, he tells me, when I feel like this. I suppose it will do to-morrow?'

'It will do to-morrow, certainly,' assented Edmund, looking at Stephen, 'so long as I am assured that no further steps will be taken.'

'Steps taken! I should like to see any man taking steps on my property without my knowledge,' the Squire said, still more fretfully. The secret trouble in his conscience

was telling upon him more than the hot weather. The power to do as he liked with his own was very dear to him, but he could not obliterate the sense of justice which was in his imperious and selfish, yet not altogether undisciplined nature. There were things which he could not do with any ease of mind, and Edmund's disinheritance hurt him, even though he was not brave enough to undo it. The safest thing for him, with that queer feeling in his head against which the doctor had warned him, was to cast that thought behind him, though it was not very easy to do, and above all to avoid agitating conferences with his son whom he had wronged, at the dead of night, so to speak.

'I think I'll go to bed early,' said the Squire. 'I'm not up to any more worry to-night. To-morrow you can say what you like, Ned: it's fresher and cooler in the morning. I'll hear then all you've got to say.'

'It is not very much I have got to say: a few minutes would do it.'

'I tell you,' cried the Squire angrily, 'I can't bear any worry to-night!'

'Don't disturb yourself, sir. I'll see to everything—you may leave it to me,' said Stephen. 'You ought to be saved all worry, at your time of life.'

Mr. Mitford turned furiously upon his younger son, though his head, with that leap of the angry blood to his temples, felt more queer than ever. 'What do you know about my time of life?' he asked. 'I'll trouble you to let me and my affairs alone. I'll have no man meddle in my affairs. You think I am in my dotage, I suppose; but you shall find out the difference.' He could not refrain from a threat, though it was vague; not like the threats which had failed to subdue Roger, for the shame of changing his mind a second time was strong upon the Squire. He could not, he felt, do that sort of thing a second time.

But when he had retired to his library, and closed the door, though he could shut out both the son he had wronged and the son he had promoted, he could not shut out the troublesome thoughts that tormented him, nor return to the easy mind which used to be his. That shadow of Roger, dead,

stood by him as it stood by Stephen, as it stood between Edmund and Elizabeth. The birthright with which, in his passion and self-will, he had interfered would not allow itself to be forgotten. His head continued to throb, the pulse kept on beating in his temples. Finally that commotion in his head, which he could not get the better of, drove him to bed, which was the best place for him, and where he slept heavily but soundly, far beyond the reach of the interrupting and disturbing elements round him. Nothing as yet had occurred in his life which had proved capable of keeping the Squire from his sleep.

Edmund was admitted to an audience next day, when Mr. Mitford was quite himself again. To see him seated there, clean-shaved, faultlessly arrayed in his light shooting suit, with a rosebud in his button-hole, and his complexion almost as clear as the flower, no one could have believed in the head that felt queer, the temples that beat, the blood which ran in so strong a tide. He looked perfectly cool and calm, as he sat behind his writing-table, in all that fresh array

of good health and good manners,—but not, perhaps, perfectly good manners; for he was angry with Edmund still, because he felt that he had wronged him.

'Well,' he observed half roughly, 'what is it you have got to say?'

'I feel as if we were boys again, and I was the sneak who was coming to tell. Have you heard anything about it, sir, from Stephen?'

'Stephen takes too much upon him,' answered the Squire. 'Whatever may happen in the end, by George! I'm master of my own concerns in the meantime, and neither Stephen nor any one else shall interfere.'

'I will make no complaint of Stephen. What I want is that you should protect some poor people, who perhaps don't deserve very much at our hands, but it is not any fault of theirs. It seems strange I should come to you about them. I want to speak about the Fords.'

'The Fords!' The Squire muttered something under his breath, which might be forgiven him, though it was not a blessing.

'What, that girl again!' he said, with something hoarse and husky in his voice. 'Don't tell me that it's you this time, Ned. Is she a witch, or what is she, that her name should come up between us again?'

'It is nothing about her,' Edmund cried, with a sense of profounder sympathy with his father than he had yet felt.

But before he could enter into further explanations he was interrupted by Larkins, who came in solemnly with a card. 'The gentleman would like to see you, sir, on business,' he said.

'Gavelkind! Who's Gavelkind? I've heard the name before. What's his business, —did he tell you what was his business? I can't let every stranger in that comes to me on business. It might be an old-clothes man, for anything one can tell, though I think I know the name; it's a queer name.'

'I know both the name and the man, sir; you have met him at Mount Travers. He is the man who manages all their business affairs.'

'Oh, at Mount Travers! Show him in, Larkins,' The Squire looked up with a

half-humorous, puzzled look. He was not humorous by nature, but the occasion moved him. 'It can't be her—herself—sending to propose — for Stephen?' Mr. Mitford said.

'For Stephen!' Edmund did not see any humour in the suggestion. He did not laugh, as his father did; a deep red mounted to his face. 'Why for Stephen?' He forgot the absurdity of the idea altogether in the keen pang of thus being left out of all calculation. His mind had not dwelt upon the loss of what was now his birthright, but to be thus put out of the question was a cutting and insulting injury. He awaited the entrance of Mr. Gavelkind with mingled anxiety and offence; of course what the Squire said was altogether ridiculous in every way, but yet—— He recovered his common sense, happily, and his usual colour before Mr. Gavelkind came in, with his absent look, yet keen, penetrating eyes, his head projecting in a forward stoop from his thin shoulders, a very large hat in his hands.

'I have come from Miss Travers,' he said, when he had seated himself. He had given

one of his quick looks, as he came in, at Mitford and his son, but he did not look at the Squire as he spoke. He raised one leg across the knee of the other and caressed it, slowly smoothing the cloth of his trousers as if it had been a child. 'I've come to make some inquiries.'

Whether he paused to tantalise their curiosity, or to make a little mystery, or to get his breath, or for nothing at all, it would be hard to say; probably the last was the true explanation. He attached no importance to what he had to say, and did not imagine that it would excite any special interest; but half because of the Squire's jest, half from the general excitement which was in the air, both father and son listened as if some special intimation were about to be made.

'Yes?' remarked Mr. Mitford. 'I'll be happy to answer any of Miss Travers's inquiries. I only wish she had come to put them herself.'

'I suppose that's impossible, in the circumstances,' returned the lawyer. 'I'm sure I don't know why. Ladies go to many places a great deal less suitable than the house of a

man that might be their father; but that's neither here nor there.'

'And of one who would have no objection to be her father,' said the Squire, with a laugh. 'You can tell her I said so; she has always been a great favourite of mine.'

'There are many people with whom she is a favourite, especially now when she has all her uncle's money. Perhaps you, like me, Mr. Mitford, liked her before; but, as I was saying, that's not the question. It appears there's a man in your service whom she wishes to take into hers.'

'Several, I shouldn't wonder,' said the Squire, 'and there is one I can recommend. To tell the truth, we were planning to go over to Mount Travers for the purpose.' And at this intended witticism he laughed loudly, which was not, to do him justice, Mr. Mitford's way. But perhaps to have been seized with a humorous idea had demoralised him. He was proud of the unusual good thing, and wanted to keep up the joke.

'Ah,' said Mr. Gavelkind, looking vaguely round with eyes that made a slight pause upon Edmund. The Squire felt that he had

made a mistake, and naturally hastened to make it worse.

'No, not that fellow,' he cried; 'he hasn't spirit enough to teach a pretty girl to know her own mind.'

It was all so entirely out of character, so unbecoming, almost indecent, such a wild and causeless betrayal of his plans to a man who as likely as not might be his adversary, that the Squire lost his head altogether; and the fact that he was more than half conscious of his folly only made it the greater. 'I've got a soldier boy,' he added.

Edmund got up, and walked hastily away. It is difficult to sit still and hear one's own people commit themselves, even when one is not much in sympathy with them. But after the momentary impulse of vexation, he came as hastily back, conscious, as it followed him, though he could not see it, of the sober lawyer's wondering, inquiring glance. 'Mr. Gavelkind can scarcely have come to make inquiries concerning your sons, sir,' he remarked.

'No,' said the lawyer, still smoothing assiduously the cloth of his trousers; 'it was

not that. Ladies don't make the inquiries they ought in that sort of way. It's about a man of quite a different sort,—far less important, no doubt. He's been gamekeeper at Melcombe, I hear, for a number of years, and now I'm told he's going to be turned off summarily. Miss Travers would take him into her service, knowing something of his family; but she would like to know first if there is anything really against him. Dismissal at a moment's notice, after a service of years, looks bad. It seemed to me that, before allowing her to decide, I had better inquire.'

Mr. Mitford looked from Edmund to the speaker, and back again. He had been checked, and almost snubbed, and was aware that he deserved it. The consciousness made him somewhat angry and more than ever severe. 'Who is it?' he asked sharply.

'It's a man of the name of Ford. I suppose I must allow that there's been some kind of negotiation going on before this. For some reason or other,—I suppose because she thought him a trustworthy man,—Miss Travers had offered him——'

'Ford!' said the Squire, interrupting almost rudely. 'Why, that's the second time I've heard of Ford this morning, and it was you, Ned——'

'I came to tell you, sir, just what Mr. Gavelkind has told you: that by some mistake, which I don't understand, Ford had been told that he must leave at once. There could be no reason for it,—it could be nothing but a mistake.'

'Ford!' the Squire repeated. 'Why, he's the—hum—ha—— I don't understand what you mean. Ford! I've not said anything about Ford. I had forgotten the fellow's very existence, with all I've had to think of.'

'I knew that must be the case,' said Edmund eagerly. 'You see my father had no such intention. It was a mistake.'

'The mistake must have gone pretty far,' said Mr. Gavelkind, 'for it appears the man came over this morning to say that he was threatened with the police if he did not turn out to-day.'

'I should like to know by whom!' cried the Squire. 'Ford! Well, yes, I wasn't

over-pleased with him once. I meant to get rid of them, Ned, you know. I don't take it kindly of Miss Travers that she should parley with my servants, Mr. Gavelkind, and the fellow had better go; but I never said a word about him, and I should like to know who's taken upon himself to interfere. It's a confounded piece of impertinence, whoever has done it.'

'I may conclude, then, that there's nothing against the man,' said Mr. Gavelkind, with his mild voice. 'There's some private reason which makes Miss Travers take an interest in him. Ladies are governed greatly by private reasons, which they don't always confide to their man of business. Nothing against him, Mr. Mitford? Trustworthy, and all the rest of it; so that if he does leave your service after all——'

'He's free to leave my service as soon as he likes!' cried the Squire. 'I had very nearly sent him off,—how long is it since, Ned? I'd rather never hear the fellow's name again. But I don't think Miss Travers should meddle with another man's servants,' he said, calming himself down, with his usual

prudential after-thought. 'I've the highest opinion of the lady,—the very highest opinion; but between gentlemen, Mr. Gavelkind—— Ah, I forgot: it's not between gentlemen; it's——'

'Between a lady and a man it's not such plain sailing,' remarked the lawyer. 'Some stand out, all the same, and for my part I think none the worse of them; but a great many give in; and when you're not married to them, nor bound to them,' Mr. Gavelkind added reflectively, 'perhaps it is the best way.'

'She's got no preserves that I know of, and not much forest land nor wood of any kind to speak of: what does she want with Ford? On second thoughts,' said the Squire, with a vague notion that Ford had something to tell which might be supposed to be to the discredit of the family, 'I think I'd rather keep the man. He knows every inch of my covers, and he's useful in his way.'

'But since he's ordered off, on the risk of being turned out by the police if he doesn't go to-day——'

This brought the purple flush again to

Mr. Mitford's brow. 'I've got to find out who's done that!' he cried. 'Who's done it, Ned? It's confounded impertinence, whoever it is. By George! if I find the man who has taken it upon himself to interfere——'

'I think I've accomplished my business,' said Mr. Gavelkind. 'I mustn't stop you from proceeding with yours. The man's honest, I may say, if it should come to anything with Miss Travers? Present employer wishing to retain him always the best testimonial. No, she doesn't do anything in the way of game, and what she wants with a keeper is more than I can say. But ladies go upon private reasons, and nothing more was confided to me. I wish you good-morning, Mr. Mitford.' The old lawyer gave Edmund a look which indicated his desire for further talk. 'I wish you'd come and see them,' he said, in a low tone, as Edmund accompanied him to the door. 'There's something going on I don't understand. There's some mystery among the ladies, I don't know what it is. I wish you'd come and see.'

'I fear I have no eye for mysteries; and I am not sure that they care to see me; why should they? I am not a very cheerful guest.'

'Of course they care to see you,' said the old lawyer. 'Don't lose your chance for nonsense, if you'll allow me to say so. And you know a little about human nature, so you must have an eye for mysteries. Come and see them; and come while I'm still there.'

XL

AN ALTERCATION

'EDMUND!'

Before Edmund could get his hand free from the lingering clasp of Mr. Gavelkind, his father's voice was loudly audible, calling him, which was a very unusual thing to hear in Melcombe. The call was repeated with some vehemence before he could obey. He was absent scarcely five minutes, but the Squire regarded even that little interval with suspicion; and in the meantime the scene had changed. Stephen had come in when the visitor withdrew, and had, it was evident, been hotly received; for though he had thrown himself into a chair with an appearance of indifference, his attempt at ease was belied by the heated colour on his cheeks. Mr. Mitford was fulminating across his writing-table. He turned his wrath upon the newcomer without a pause.

'What did you want of that old rogue, Ned? They're all rogues, the lot of them, and up to something or other now,—that's clear,—trying to embroil me with Lizzy Travers. And you go over to the other side of course, and desert mine! Come in, and shut the door. Now you're both here, perhaps I may get to understand. Who is it that takes upon himself to interfere in the management of my affairs? No one has ever done it till now, and by George! I'll not have it! I'll not have it! Not if you were twice the men you are, both Stephen and you!'

'I don't know what you are in such a rage about,' remarked Stephen. 'It is not much more than a week since you ordered me to send in my papers, that I might be free to take the trouble off your hands.'

'I said nothing of the sort, sir. I never said anything of the sort. I could not have said it, for I certainly never meant it!' cried the Squire.

'If you please to say so,' returned Stephen, with cool impertinence; 'there was no witness present, to be sure. It must go either

by your word or mine. It's a conflict of testimony, that's all.'

'Do you mean to say I am telling a lie, sir?' the Squire demanded furiously.

'Oh, not at all; it is not I who make such accusations. I only say that it is clear one of us has made a great mistake.'

'And that's I, of course, you mean to imply?'

'I never said so, sir,' replied Stephen, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Mr. Mitford was very angry. He got up and walked about the room, with his hands deeply dug into his pockets, saying to himself from time to time, 'By George!' with other exclamations perhaps less innocent. It was as good a way as another of blowing off his wrath. Meanwhile, the culprit sat with an air of coolness and contemptuous indifference which exasperated his father more and more, stretching out his long legs in such a way as to bar the passage and confine the Squire to his own side.

'If I ever said a word that could be twisted into such a meaning, it must have been when I thought you a little serious, impressed by what had happened,—as you might have been, if you had any feeling: but there's no

feeling of that sort left in the world, so far as I can see. Here's one of you trying to get the reins out of my hands, and the other holding secret confabs with a pettifogging lawyer, a fellow that wants to bring me to book,—me!' the Squire cried, with an indignant, almost incredulous sense of undeserved insult and injury. 'Heaven knows I have had trouble enough, one way or another, on account of my sons,' he went on, changing into a tone which was almost tearful; for to think of all he had suffered overcame him with self-pity. 'All the trouble I have known has been connected with one or other of you. The man who has no children has the best of it. But there is one thing you may be quite sure of, and you had better both of you mark what I have to say. I will not have you meddling in my affairs. Thank Heaven, I'm very well capable of minding my own business. Whatever I may be supposed to have said, this is my last word. I'll have none of your meddling,—neither yours, Stephen, nor yours, Ned; neither the one nor the other! The first man who interferes shall go. I'll have none of it—I'll have——'

Stephen got up from his chair with a laugh, shaking himself out of all creases in his well-fitting clothes. 'That's just what I should like, for one,' he remarked. 'Don't restrain your feelings, sir. I am delighted to go.'

Mr. Mitford turned like a bull who is confronted by a new assailant; but a man and a father cannot take a ribald upon his horns, like that well-provided animal. He stared for a moment, with fiery eyes that seemed to be leaping from their sockets, and then he recognised, as the angriest man must, that barrier of the immovable which an altogether unimpressionable human being, however insignificant, can place before the most mighty. Stephen was not to be influenced by any of those causes which make it possible for a domestic despot to have his way. He was not afraid of the penalty involved. He had no reluctance to see his father compromise his own dignity by unbecoming threats or violence. Edmund, moved by that sentiment, had turned away, willing rather to submit or to retire than to be thus compelled to witness a scene which made him ashamed for his father. But Stephen knew none of these

delicacies; he was entirely free from all such restraints. The Squire was like any other old fellow, who threatened a great deal more than he could ever perform. And Mr. Mitford recognised this, as he stared at the heir of his choice, this young man to whom he had given the chief place in the family,—that being, quite invulnerable, untouched by sympathy, natural respect, or human feeling, who is the fit and only opponent of the family tyrant. He stared and gasped with exasperation unspeakable, and the feeling that Jove's thunderbolt would be the only effectual instrument to level the rebel to the ground instantaneously. Perhaps, vulgarly considered, Prometheus was something of this intolerable sort to the father of gods and men. The cool cynicism of Stephen's eyes struck his father like a blow. They said, 'You have done that once too often already. Do it,—I'd like it. Make an old fool of yourself!' But after that astonished, incredulous stare of the Jupiter *manqué*, Mr. Mitford came to himself. Passion itself could not stand before those cynic eyes. Virtue and heroic suffering are alone supposed to possess this restraining power; but perhaps it

will be found that the less elevated defiance has the greater influence, the sneering devil being more potent with the common mind than the serious hero. Mr. Mitford made the discovery that in whatsoever way he might be able to establish his authority, this way would not do. He solaced his personal discomfiture by an attack upon the one remaining, who would not flout nor defy him, and turned upon Edmund with a snort of wrath.

'Perhaps you think you'll curry favour with Lizzy Travers,' he cried, 'by playing into her hands and defying me. You'll find that's not so: she's not the girl to encourage a man to desert his own side.'

Edmund was much surprised by this unexpected attack. 'Mr. Gavelkind is a friend of mine,' he said, 'which was the reason I went out with him. I had no thought of deserting my own side; but since you blame me, I will venture to return to the original subject, sir. Is Ford dismissed with your consent? And if not, may not I go and reassure them, and let them know that they are not to be hurried away?'

The Squire looked at Edmund severely.

It gave him great satisfaction to come upon some one who would not rebel. He took a high tone. 'One would think,' he remarked, 'that the welfare of these people was of more importance to you than the credit of your family. They have not deserved much at my hands.'

It struck Edmund with a sort of dreary amusement that he should be the one to be accused of partiality for the Fords,—he, who was the only one entirely uninfluenced by them. He said with a faint smile, 'I am no partisan of the Fords,—it would be strange if I were; but they have done nothing to deserve this, and it would be cruel to punish them for a fault—for a fault—which was not theirs.'

'Do you mean to tell me that the girl was brought up for any other end? Why, she was trained to inveigle one of my sons, or somebody else,—Ray Tredgold, perhaps, who is not quite such a fool,—into making a lady of her. A child could see that,' said the Squire, with indignation. 'I cannot understand how any man, considering all the circumstances, can speak of the Fords to me.'

'That was my idea,' returned Stephen boldly. 'I felt that they ought to go, but I didn't think that you ought to be bothered with the name of them. If I went a little further than I ought to have done, that was my idea. Their name can't be very agreeable to any of us,' he added, with a deep-drawn breath. 'If I went too far, that's my only excuse.'

'Well, Steve,' said the father, 'I am glad you see it as I do, and that, if you were wrong, it was an error of judgment only. After what you've said, I'll allow that. But Ned is one of the fellows that like to turn the sword round in a wound. He thinks that's the way to make a man forget.'

'I thought solely of the injustice to them,' urged Edmund, 'not of ourselves at all. It cannot be worth your while, sir, on whatever provocation, to wage civil war upon your gamekeeper. Send him away, by all means, —I should be glad, I confess, to get rid of the sound of their name; but let it be fairly, with such warning as is natural, or at least with time enough to provide themselves with another home. Suppose they have been

scheming, artful, whatever you may call it: you can't punish them for that as for a crime.'

'It's a deal worse than many a crime,' asserted Stephen, with a black look which transformed his face. 'It's the sort of thing you smother vermin for. Even poaching I'd look over sooner. I don't pretend to be one of your forgiving people. There are some things I'll never forgive, nor forget.'

Mr. Mitford gave him a grateful look. He was much relieved by the disappearance of Stephen's sneer, and felt as if he had recovered his proper position when his son condescended to explain. 'I am glad to see that you feel as I do, Steve,' he repeated. 'Ned has his own ways of thinking, though I should have supposed he had more feeling for his brother than to stand up for the Fords. I don't want them to make out a case for Lizzy Travers's charity, though. I'll speak to Brown, and he shall buy them off and get them out of the country; and you and I will go over to Mount Travers and explain. You may do some business for yourself at the same time,' he said, with a laugh, to which Stephen responded. The two were once

more in full intelligence, understanding each other's thoughts and wishes.

To Edmund's sensitive ears the laugh was intolerable. It was full of that rude and primitive meaning which lurks so often in the private sympathetic chuckle with which two men discuss a woman. He went out of the room quickly, with a nervous impatience, over which he had no control. In the experience of all sensitive persons, there arises now and then a moment when contrariety seems in the very air, and everything turns against them. Edmund felt that on every side his wishes, his feelings, his ideas of all that was just and fit, were contradicted, and that the entire world was out of harmony with him. Not only his father and brother, and the atmosphere of the house which was full of them, opposed him and jarred his nerves and temper at every turn, but the most trifling things appeared to rise in antagonism, and cut every possibility of relief. The *sourd*, mysterious something which stood between him and Elizabeth, which made even old Pax, his most familiar confidant, repellent and unharmonious, scarcely affected him more than

those lesser jars of contradiction which met him at every turn. That Mrs. Ford should have refused information about Lily, that he should be supposed the champion of the family, that it should be possible, however falsely, to gibe at his forgetfulness of their disastrous influence over Roger,—he whose heart was the only one faithful to Roger,—exasperated him almost beyond bearing. He went out with that sensation of being unable to bear anything more, or endure another moment of this contrariety and horrible antagonism of everything, which is at once so natural, so inevitable, so foolish. Women find relief in tears at such moments, but Edmund could get no such relief; everything was against him; he was despondent yet exasperated, angry as well as sad. Why should he go to Mount Travers, where everything was already decided against him? Why stay here, where he was put out of all influence, misrepresented, misunderstood; where his attempt to do justice was taken for partiality towards the offender, and his anxious endeavour to carry out his dead brother's wishes repulsed as a curiosity of his own?

It was time, surely, for him to shake the dust off his feet, and leave the place where he was disinherited, contemned, and set aside. He felt the jar of the vexation, of the contradiction, go to his very soul. How much better to go away from the house where he was displaced, from the love that would have none of him, from the country where his charities, his faithfulness, his desire to help and succour, were all misconceived! Roger had done it in the most conclusive fashion, shaking off so many embarrassments and troubles along with the mortal coil. Edmund thought wistfully, with a certain envy, of his brother's complete escape. He had no temptation to put an end to his life, yet a great weariness took possession of him. If he could but turn his back on everything, flee far from them! O for the wings of a dove! But where? Not to some foreign land, which was the ordinary commonplace expedient,—to change the sky, but not the mind. What Edmund really wanted was to escape from himself; and that, alas, is what none can do.

At the same time, amid all this contrariety, there was something, a spirit in his feet,

driving him to that high house on the hill, to which he had been invited that morning. To see Mr. Gavelkind! He laughed, with a bitter sense of humour, at that idea. The old lawyer was his friend,—there was no scorn of him in Edmund's mind; but with a heart full of Elizabeth, to go to her man of business! It would have been too ludicrous, if it had not been the greatest contradiction, the most irritating contrariety of all.

XLI

AT MOUNT TRAVERS

'YES, I am just going. I wish you could have come a little earlier. I've been here three days,—to be sure, one of them was a Sunday. There are a great many things I should have liked to talk to you about.'

'I am sorry,' Edmund said; but he had not the same sense that to talk things over with Mr. Gavelkind was a matter of importance which the lawyer seemed to feel on his side.

'I see; you don't feel that it's of very much consequence what I think. Well, perhaps not. Few things are of much importance taken separately; it's when they come together that they tell. No, don't apologise; I am in no danger of misunderstanding. I'll tell you what, though: you shouldn't leave things too long hanging in the wind.'

'Hanging in the wind?'

'Come,' said Mr. Gavelkind, 'I don't intend to summer it and winter it, as the country people say. You and I have been able to understand each other before now without putting a dot on every *i*. There's something going on up there which I don't understand.'

He pointed, with a wave of his hand, to the house on the hill. The sun was blazing in all the plate-glass, and made it flare over the whole country, as if it were some great heliographic apparatus. Edmund had met the lawyer going down to the station by the steep and short path which old Travers had made through the grounds. He had a little bag in his hand, and his coat over his arm.

'To have to do with ladies in business is a trial,' he resumed. 'In your own family it's a different matter, and I'm fond of women for friends, notwithstanding all that's said to the contrary; but to have their business to do, and to hold them to it, and to keep reason always uppermost, is almost too much for me.'

'I have heard you commend Miss Travers's capacity for business, all the same.'

'That I have, and meant it, too! She has a good head, and a clear head; but there's always some point in which reason is not the sole guide with women. It may take a long time to find it out, but it always appears at the end. There's this business about these Fords—— Ah, Mrs. Travers!' exclaimed Mr. Gavelkind, hastily transferring his coat to his left arm that he might take off his hat. 'I knew you were out of doors, but I didn't think you would venture down a steep road like this.'

'I didn't. I came the other way to say good-bye to you; I couldn't let you go without saying good-bye. And my compliments to Mrs. Gavelkind. I hope she will really arrange some time to come with you and stay a little while. Saturday to Monday I don't consider a visit at all.'

'You are very kind, I'm sure,' said the lawyer. 'It's been Friday to Monday, this time, and a great deal of business got through. I'll give my wife your kind message. Miss Travers had already asked——'

'I daresay,' said the old lady quickly,

'that your wife, being an older person, would not think much of an invitation from Lizzy, while the mistress of the house said nothing; but you can tell her from me that it's all the same. We'll be highly pleased to see her any time before the end of the summer. Good-bye, Mr. Gavelkind.'

The lawyer shot a glance at Edmund underneath his brows, but he took his leave very ceremoniously of the old lady, who had been accompanied by a female figure, a few steps behind her. She turned round to take this companion's arm, to mount the slope.

'Why, the girl is gone!' she cried. 'Mr. Mitford, I beg your pardon! I was so occupied in saying good-bye to Mr. Gavelkind that I've never said "How d'ye do!" to you. I wonder if you'll give me your arm to help me up the bank. Thank you. I've always noticed you were nice to old people. And so was your poor brother. Is it true what I hear that it's the youngest that is to succeed to the property? Somebody told me so this very day.'

'There is no question of succeeding to the property at present, Mrs. Travers. My

father is well and strong, and I hope may keep it himself for many years.'

'That's a very proper feeling; I approve of it greatly. When Lizzy marries, I hope it will not be any one who will grudge me every day I live; for of course I will leave her everything,—everything that is in my power.'

Edmund made a little bow of assent, but he did not feel it necessary to enter into the possible sentiments of the man whom Lizzy might marry. The old lady looked at him closely, her keen eyes undimmed by the little gasps and pantings with which she had dragged herself up the steep ascent.

'I have not so much in my power as you would think,' said Mrs. Travers, 'for all the property belongs to Lizzy after my death. Her uncle thought that was only just, seeing that her father began the business, though it was my husband who made the money. Everybody has his own way of thinking, Mr. Mitford, but I must say I felt it a little not to have anything in my own power. Of course I should have left it to Lizzy,—who else should I leave it to?—but everybody likes to be

trusted, and to have something in their own power.'

'No doubt,' returned Edmund gravely. The little old lady clung to his arm, and kept looking up from time to time suddenly, as if to take him at a disadvantage, and read whatever unintentional meaning might pass over his face.

'If she married a man whom I approved of, they might go on living with me, perhaps. I would not make it a promise; but if he were a person I liked, and one who would behave properly to an elderly lady. They don't generally, Mr. Mitford; when a woman has ceased to be young, they have a way of looking at her as if she had no right to live at all. Oh, I know what I am saying. I am not Lizzy's mother, it is true, but I should be more or less in the position of a mother-in-law, and that is what I never could put up with. Give a dog an ill name and hang him, they say; call a woman a mother-in-law, and it's the same thing; though why a respectable woman should be turned into a fiend by the marriage of her daughter I have never been able to find out. Happily, Lizzy is

not my daughter, but it comes to very much the same thing.'

As she paused for a reply, Edmund felt himself obliged to say that the general hatred of mothers-in-law was 'only a joke.'

'A joke! It's a joke in very bad taste, Mr. Mitford. But you may rely upon it, I know what I am talking about. You were very civil, giving me your arm when that girl ran away. (It was very silly of her to run away, but she can't bear to be seen about, poor thing!) And your father was very polite the last time he was here. He looked to me as if he were bent on finding out something; but he was very polite all the same, and made himself quite agreeable. Tell me about your brother,—the brother that is to be the successor, according to what people say. Oh! I forgot; you don't wish to talk of that.'

'I have no objection to talk of it. I believe you are quite right, and that Stephen is to be my father's heir.'

'I have always heard it was a very nice property,' she remarked. 'My dear Mr. Mitford, I am sure you must have played

your cards very badly, when your kind father cuts you off like that.'

'Perhaps so,' replied Edmund, with a half smile; 'or perhaps he thinks my brother better fitted to keep up the character of a country gentleman, and he may be quite right.'

'You take it very coolly anyhow,' said Mrs. Travers; 'and you really think that Mr. Stephen—isn't that his name? Oh, Captain, to be sure; I had forgot—will keep it up best? Well, I never was brought up with any superstition about an eldest son, myself. I know your younger brother least of any of you. I hope he'll come and see us. I am devoted to the army, and I like people of decided character. Tell him I shall be glad to see him at Mount Travers. Mr. Mitford, I am very much obliged to you. I don't require to trouble you any more, now we have got up to the level of the house.' And she drew her arm briskly out of his, and stood still for a moment, turning round upon him as if to give him his dismissal.

Edmund felt with a sense of pleasure that, notwithstanding all that had happened, his

mind was as capable of being amused as ever. He had been vague enough up to this moment, not decided whether he should go or not. But Mrs. Travers made up his mind for him. 'I hope,' he said, 'I may call, though I am no longer of any use; for I have a message for Miss Travers from the Rectory.'

'Oh, from Pax, as Lizzy calls her; an absurd name, and I think she's rather an absurd person. I can't see what Lizzy finds in her,—very limited and prejudiced, like all the clergy people, and very fond of her own way. Oh, surely, Mr. Mitford, come in, come in: you'll find Lizzy in the drawing-room. Good-bye, in case I should not see you again.'

Elizabeth was seated at the farther end of the room, at a writing-table, with her back turned towards the door. She got up with a little stumble of excitement, when she became aware of Edmund's presence. 'You must pardon me,' he said, 'for coming in unannounced. I met Mrs. Travers at the foot of the bank, and came back with her. She told me I should find you here.'

'Yes,' said Elizabeth, holding out her hand. She added, in a voice which was slightly tremulous, 'I am always at home at this hour.'

Did she wish him to be aware of that? Or was it a mere impulse of shyness, and because she did not know what to say?

They sat down near each other, in the great room with the vast plate-glass window, which took away all sense of being within doors, and made that wide landscape part of the scene, and for perhaps a whole long minute neither spoke. There was a screen arranged round Mrs. Travers's little table and easy-chair, to preserve her from some imaginary draught, or perhaps to give a sense of shelter where all was so blank and wide. Elizabeth looked at her visitor with something like a sentiment of alarm in her wide-open eyes. The two seemed at last to have met alone, in a vast centre of naked space, where there could no longer be any veil of mystery between them. Edmund was not so ready as she was expectant. He had not come with any definite idea in his mind as to what he was to do or say, but only to see

her, to speak to her, to follow any leading that good or evil fortune might put in his way.

'I met Mr. Gavelkind, on his way to town.'

'He has been here since Friday. He is a very warm friend——'

'You could, I am sure, have nobody more devoted to your interests.'

'I meant of yours, Mr. Mitford. He has always a great deal to say of you.'

'Of me?' responded Edmund, with a smile. 'That's strange! I have got so wiped out of everything that it is odd to hear of any one who thinks of me.'

'You are too kind,' said Miss Travers; 'you let the thought of duty carry you too far. Duty must have a limit. There is something that perhaps I ought to tell you; but when I see that you are deceived, or that you think yourself bound to regard as sacred, to uphold and to justify——'

'What?' he asked, bending forward towards her, too much astonished to say more.

'Mr. Mitford, I don't know how to speak.

It is not a thing to be discussed between you and me. But when I see how you are making an idol of one who—when I perceive how you are devoting yourself to carry out plans which—and letting your life and everything in it go by——'

Elizabeth's voice had begun to tremble, her eyes were filling with tears, her colour changed from red to white. She kept clasping and unclasping her hands, in the strain of some excitement, the cause of which he could not discover. What was its cause, and how was he involved in it? And what was this purpose which she attributed to him, which made him let his own life go by?

'My own life?' he said. 'I seem to have none. I am pushed aside from everything, but I wish I could think you cared what became of my life. I should like to tell you how it has been arrested for months in the only great wish I have ever formed for myself. Miss Travers, my brother Roger——'

'Oh!' she cried, clasping her hands with something which looked like a wild and feverish impatience. 'Don't speak to me of

Roger,—I don't want to know any more of him! I would rather never hear his name again!'

She got up as she spoke, starting from the chair as though she could no longer tolerate the situation, and stood for a moment in front of the great window, her tall figure showing against the background of the vast landscape outside. She turned her back upon it, and stood facing him, twisting her fingers together, in her agitation.

'Mr. Mitford,' she said, clearing her throat, 'I know I ought to have told you—I ought to tell you——' The door opened while the words were on her lips. Elizabeth made a movement of almost angry impatience. 'I had made up my mind to it, and now I can't do it!' she cried, turning away hastily. Edmund had risen too, he could scarcely tell why. She had turned round, and stood gazing out of the window, in a tremor of suspense and agitation, disappointed and excited. Mrs. Travers appeared at the door, relieved of her outdoor garments, with her little pale face surrounded by the dead white of her widow's cap, and everything about her

breathing the tranquillity of the common day. The extraordinary difference and contrast startled Edmund. He did not know why Elizabeth should be so excited; but he perceived the seriousness of her agitation, and how much it must mean, when he saw her spring up and go to the window, as Mrs. Travers came softly in and took her usual place. A third person, whom he did not remark, except that there was a movement of some one following, came in with the old lady; half visible for a moment then disappearing behind the screen. He had an impression, of which he took no heed amid the other images, more urgent, that filled up all the foreground, that this third person, the attendant, whoever she was, remained in the room, though unseen.

'So you found Lizzy, Mr. Mitford?' said Mrs. Travers. 'I thought you would find her here. I did intend to let you have her all to yourself, while I rested a little. But to tell you the truth, we saw your father and your brother coming this way, and I put on my cap and came down. I couldn't leave Lizzy to entertain three gentlemen, all of the

same family; that would have been too much.'

Elizabeth turned quickly from the window. 'I see them: they are just here,' she said.

'And I wanted particularly to see the Captain,—I have always told you I liked military men,' returned her aunt; 'but don't let Mr. Edmund Mitford go away for that. He is not ashamed, I suppose, of being found here.'

Elizabeth came and sat down near him, not concealing the tremulous condition in which she was; she gave him a look of disappointment, mingled with an almost feverish irritation and annoyance, and faintly shook her head. She had something to tell him, and she had been made to stop with the very words in her mouth. Her eyes had a certain pleading in them that he should not go away, and Edmund had no wish to go away. He was glad to be here, to watch what his father and brother intended, to find out their purpose. Whatever aim they might have, it was well that there should be some one to keep a watch on that.

XLII

A REVELATION

'Oh, you've got here before us, Ned?' Stephen remarked in an aside, in his amiable way. He drew a chair near to that from which Elizabeth had risen on the entry of the newcomers, and which she had resumed nervously, still with that thrill of agitation. She was thus seated between the brothers, Stephen bending towards her, half turning his back upon the window. 'It is dazzling to come in here,' he observed. 'The country doesn't look half so sunny and brilliant outside. It must be something in this room.'

He looked at her, as he spoke, with a laugh and an admiring gaze which indicated his meaning almost too distinctly. The time of broad compliment has passed away, and Elizabeth was unacquainted with that form of address. She gave him an astonished look.

'Of course it is something in this room,' said the Squire. 'Young fellows are not so ready as they were in our day, Mrs. Travers. I think I could have put it more neatly, in my time——'

'It is the plate-glass,' suggested the old lady. 'As for the other sort of thing, my time's over, and Lizzy's too serious. I don't know why the plate-glass should have that effect. I always told Mr. Travers that we wanted shade; but trees won't grow in a day, and the plate-glass is like a mirror,—that's what it is.'

'It's the light within,' said Mr. Mitford, with an old-fashioned bow that took in both the ladies. 'My son Stephen has scarcely been at home, to stay, since he was a boy. But he turns up when I want him. We need to hold together now.'

'Yes, indeed,' Mrs. Travers replied, with the gravity that befitted the situation, 'the fewer you get, the more you ought to cling close; but it isn't all families that do that.'

'It wants a pretty strong inducement,' said Stephen, 'to make a man bury himself in the country in June. Don't you think so?

Oh, I know it's the height of summer, and all that; but on the other hand, there's nothing for a man to do. Tennis, yes; but tennis soon palls, don't you think so, Miss Travers?—with the Miss Tredgolds and a curate or two.'

His own laugh was the only one that Stephen drew out, which was uncomfortable. Elizabeth was too completely preoccupied to be able to give him more than the faintest smile. 'I am no authority,' she said. 'I never play.'

'We must find something for him to do till September, Miss Travers,' remarked the Squire. 'I shall trust to you ladies to help me in that. In September we all come to life, you know. And that reminds me of our particular errand, Stephen. It appears there is one of our keepers, Ford, whom you ladies have taken a fancy to.'

'Ford?' Elizabeth said, with a sudden interest. 'Yes, I know something of him.' She gave a quick look round, and seemed to hesitate for a moment whether she should not get up and call some one, but reconsidered the matter, and sat still.

'My dear young lady,' said the Squire, playfully holding up and shaking a finger at her, 'don't you know—— But I am sure you don't, or you would never have done it. Among us men, it's not quite the thing—it's not considered quite the thing to interfere with another man's servants. We are but savages, more or less. I know our ways are not ladies' ways.'

'I beg your pardon,' returned Elizabeth. 'I have never intended to interfere. I take an interest in the man, that is true. He came to tell me he was turned out at a moment's notice,—threatened with the police.'

'That was all a bit of nonsense,' observed the Squire, bland and smiling. 'There's the culprit, looking ashamed of himself, as he ought, come to beg your pardon, my dear young lady. Speak up, Steve. You're on your trial, my boy, and before such a judge it's worth while clearing yourself.'

'I hope I'll meet with mercy,' said Stephen. 'It's my ill-fate that though I know Miss Travers so well, she knows me little, I fear, and possibly doesn't—trust me.' He was used to good fortune with women, and he

knew that among the class to which he was accustomed a bold front was half the battle. He looked at Elizabeth with an air which was half ingratiating, half insolent. 'I'm not, perhaps, good for very much; but if I had known you took an interest in the people, why, that would have made all the difference. But I hadn't a notion—— You'd better speak for me, sir. I haven't the ear of the court.'

'Well, to tell the truth, we take a very strong interest in the Fords,' said Mrs. Travers, looking up from her work. 'We think they've had a great deal to bear from your family. I don't know all the details myself, but Elizabeth does. Probably Mr. Mitford himself doesn't know, Lizzy; and Captain Mitford, who has been away for so long, and is really almost a stranger in Melcombe——'

'It is true,' interrupted Elizabeth. 'I ought to have thought. I know only one side, and perhaps you know only another. I have no right to be the judge.'

'My dear Miss Travers, we are delighted—delighted to have you for the judge. Where could we find one so gentle, one so fair, in both senses of the word? Speak up, can't you,

Steve, and tell all your bad meaning? Of course he had a bad meaning; not abstract justice,—oh no, that's seldom what we think of. Speak up! A fellow like you should get the ladies to take his part.'

'I'm quite ready, for one,' responded little Mrs. Travers, laying her work down upon her lap. 'I'm always a friend to military men. Where should we be without them? There would be no security for anything, I always say.'

'There's encouragement for you, Steve,' remarked his father, with a laugh.

'If there's to be a trial, the court had better be cleared,' said Edmund, getting up,—a movement which made Stephen's face lighten with evident satisfaction.

'That's true,' he assented. 'I had better have as few listeners as possible, to take notes of my enormities.'

Elizabeth put up an eager hand. 'Don't go away,—don't go away,' she pleaded, almost in a whisper, with an anxious look and a return of that agitation which was so inexplicable to Edmund, and with which he alone seemed connected. The only answer he could

make was a bow of submission, but he withdrew from the group, and going to the window, that universal resource for persons who find themselves *de trop*, stood looking out, seeing nothing, as such persons generally do.

'I say, sir,' exclaimed Stephen, 'this isn't fair. Here is Ned, a sort of counsel for the defendant. No, not exactly that, for I am the defendant; but at all events for the other side. Don't you know, Miss Travers, that brothers are usually on different sides?'

'Come, come,' cried Mrs. Travers, 'begin! This is getting more and more interesting.' She was delighted with Stephen's air of assurance, with his banter, though it was not very refined, and that look of a conquering hero, which he rarely laid aside.

'Well, then, here goes. Miss Travers, you must know our view of these Fords. They are people, though I don't know details any more than Mrs. Travers, who have been mixed up in—in most painful events. I know that much, though I mayn't know all. The governor, there, has heard a great deal too much about them; that's the truth. I knew he'd be glad to be rid of them. I knew also

that he'd rather never hear their name again. Don't you see? I therefore thought I'd make bold to take it into my own hands.'

'I think you were very right. Mr. Mitford might indeed have painful associations, and *he* could not be to blame.'

Edmund turned round in amazement to hear these words from Elizabeth. To hear the question discussed here at all was in itself strange enough, but to hear it with Stephen's gloss of pretended solicitude for his father, approved by Elizabeth! The story was dim, and full of mystery to himself. The chance of hearing it cleared up or explained away, from Stephen's side, was one which startled him out of all pretence of calm spectatorship. He turned, with involuntary excitement, to watch the speakers. As he did so, Edmund's eye was attracted by a flicker of movement behind the screen. There was a very narrow interval between its edge and the wall,—so narrow that a person standing behind might see without being himself seen. There seemed to be preparations for some one sitting there: a table with something white on it, a chair pushed against the wall. These details caught

Edmund's eye instantaneously, as he turned his head. But a second glance showed him more. Some one stood, a slight dark figure, at this coigne of vantage, leaning against the screen. Her head was bowed, her face invisible. She had the air of clinging so close as to obliterate herself in the shadow and dark line of the piece of furniture. Perhaps he would not have been sure at all but for the lighter colour of her hair; her very face was pressed against the dark velvet of the screen. He was so much startled that for the moment he scarcely heard what Stephen was saying, though that had an interest to him beyond anything which could be roused by a visitor or servant at Mount Travers, thus clandestinely listening to something which she had no business to hear.

'Yes,' Stephen said, 'I own that I thought that a kind of duty; but there it is that my bad meaning, as my father calls it, comes in. To get rid of Ford was all right—a relief to the Squire without bothering him; but the fact was, I had a man of my own.'

'A man of your own! Go on, Mr. Stephen, go on. It is always more and more exciting,'

cried Mrs. Travers, sitting up erect in her chair, and clapping her hands.

'Yes, *mea culpa*,—that is the height of my offence: I wanted to put in my own man. It is a nice little cottage, with a charming garden; and instead of that troublesome fellow, Ford, with his bad antecedents, I had planned to put in a nice young couple, my own—— Hallo! What's this? Who's this? What—what do you mean by it?' Stephen cried.

Something had flitted across his line of vision,—a figure which Edmund alone had previously seen. But even Edmund did not observe, so quick was her motion, how it was that she detached herself from the shadow, and suddenly became visible to the whole group, standing in the full light of the great window. Stephen acknowledged the wonder, the strangeness, and the power of this apparition by springing suddenly to his feet; his face, slightly flushed by his story-telling, grew crimson in a moment; his eyes seemed to project from his head.

'Eh?' exclaimed the Squire, turning towards the new actor on the scene. 'Who is it? What's happened? Why, it's Lily Ford!'

'She has heard her father reflected upon,' said Mrs. Travers. 'Dear, dear, I forgot she was about! Go away, my poor girl, go away; it was not meant for you to hear.'

'Miss Travers,' said Lily, in a tremulous, hurried voice, 'I told you all my story, every word, the very first day. I told it all, except who it was. I meant to hide that from you, for his very name was a shame to say. Perhaps I've done harm by it; I'm afraid I have. I'm mended of my folly now. To hear him speak of Ford, that was troublesome, that had bad antecedents, that Mr. Mitford could not bear the name of—— Look at him, Miss Travers; do you want me to say more? That's the man that beguiled me up to London; that was to take me to a woman's house, where I should be taken care of, and marry me in the morning. I told you every word. He was to have the license in his pocket, and it was to be at a church in the city. There he is, there he stands! That's Stephen Mitford, that was to be my husband, but never meant it; that's the man that is turning out my father and mother, and threatening the police to them, because I escaped

away from him out into the streets! Rather the streets than him! Rather anything in all the world than him!'

'It's a lie!' retorted Stephen, forgetting all his precautions. 'Hold your tongue! How dare you speak? It's a lie!'

'Lily!' cried Elizabeth. 'Oh, Lily! What are you saying?' She had uttered a cry and started up at the first words of this strange revelation; and without looking at Edmund she put out her hand to him, saying, 'Edmund, forgive—forgive me!' as Lily went on.

'He knows it's all true!' the girl cried, pointing to Stephen. 'He used to meet me in the park, and he offered to marry me. He said, Not church; church was of no consequence,—a registrar's office; but I said, No, the church or nothing; and he was to get the license for a church in the city, and all straightforward, and to take me to a good woman's. But there was no woman, and he had said I was his wife. Then I opened the door and ran out into the streets; and I walked, and walked, and walked, till I was like to drop, till the morning; and then I

got to the railway, where there was a woman, and slept all day; and there you found me. I told you all the story, every word, except his name. And there he stands,—Stephen Mitford. Oh, I have good cause to know his name!'

'The girl is mad!' Stephen cried. 'It's a lie! She means my brother. My brother would have married her. He was a fool. It was Roger; it was not I.'

'What's all this about?' blustered the Squire. He had sprung up, too, from his seat. 'He's right, Miss Travers. This girl, confound her!—my poor boy wanted to marry her. She had—she had—got over him, somehow. It's true, Roger wanted to marry her. Stephen was never in it. Stephen is not that sort!' Mr. Mitford laughed in a wild way, with an indignant braggadocio, ready to boast of his son's want of virtue. 'He's not a—he's not one of the innocent ones. He is up to most things!'

'Lily, my child,—Lily, come here,' cried Mrs. Travers. 'Oh dear, dear! To hear that about her father has quite upset her. Lily, come here,—come here.'

Lily obeyed the call. She was very docile, though trembling with passion; and in that stirring up of all her being, she was glad of some one to cling to, some one to lean upon. She obeyed the movement of the old lady's hand, and went and stood behind her chair. The others were all standing up, gazing at each other. Elizabeth, in her compunction and astonishment, had put her hand suddenly into Edmund's, not knowing what she did, calling him by his name; and notwithstanding the wonderful commotion which this involuntary act roused in him, he had said or done nothing save hold that hand firmly in his, not attempting to interrupt the strain of a stronger interest, the question now raised between his father and brother, between whom a whole tragedy lay. As if a magnet had drawn them, they both followed Lily's movements with their eyes; as if her change of position could impart something new to the startling tale.

'Speak up, man!' cried the Squire, growing gradually excited. 'Don't leave me to answer for you,—you've a big enough voice when you please. Take your oath to it!

Are you going to let them believe that—that lie?'

'That's what it is,' answered Stephen. His voice was big enough, but there was something hollow in it. 'It *is* a lie. I've said so. You see she can't face me and say it again!'

'Sir,' said Lily, leaning over her friend's chair, over the head of the little old lady, who looked like some curious white-and-black bird, with eager little sparkling eyes, 'I have but one word. I can't vary it. Mr. Roger, —oh! he was too good; he spoke to me as if I had been the highest lady in the land. But Stephen made me leave my home; he said we were to be married, and he would get a license; it was to be in a church in the city.' Lily went over those details again with a monotony of repetition, as she had gone over and over them in her mind in circles of confused and miserable thinkings. 'I trusted him, and I went to him, but he never meant it. When I saw how it was—— Oh, ask him; he will tell you!' she cried, suddenly turning upon her former lover. 'Ask him, look at him! Can't you see it in his face?'

'You liar!' he cried, hoarse with passion; 'you jilt, you little devil! The streets,—that was where she came from, where she belonged! Yes, I'll take my oath! I tell you it's an infernal lie!'

'I walked about the streets all night. God protected me,' said Lily. 'It was like the dead walking, but I was safe there from him. I told Miss Travers every word, but not who he was. I would have spared him, if he had spared my father and mother. For he did me no harm, only a night in the streets; an awful night, on my feet, walking all the time, but that's all. He did me no harm!'

Stephen looked as a bully looks when he is beaten down and can brag no more. 'I took her from the streets,—that's what she means. I wouldn't go after her there,—that's what has made her mad. She's a liar,—she's a d——d——'

Mr. Mitford raised his stick, and made as if he would have struck his son on the mouth. His own forehead and cheeks were purple. He tried to speak, and the foam flew from his mouth like spray. 'You hound!' he

cried. 'Do you know there are ladies here? D—— you, you make me forget it!' He struck his stick upon the ground in his passion, and snapped it as if it had been glass. 'Enticed the girl like a villain and lost her like a fool! I'm glad my stick's broken, or I'd have struck him. Don't speak to me,—don't speak to me. Get out of my way, sir. I'm going home.'

They all stood staring, accused and accuser together, while the father, stammering, maddened, pushing everything, furniture and persons, wildly from him, turned round, clearing the way with the broken end of his stick, and rushed out of the room.

XLIII

THE CULPRIT'S REVENGE

THEY were left, as the exit of an important actor in a stirring scene leaves the rest of the parties to it, in an enforced pause before the movement can be resumed, at watch upon each other, distracted for the moment, each antagonist a little astray, not knowing how the debate is to be resumed, and against which of the adversaries he is to find himself engaged. To Stephen it was a moment of relief. Among the others there seemed no one whom he could not cow by his louder voice and stronger denial. It appeared to him that he could crush that slight creature standing opposite by the mere lifting of his hand. But for the moment he did not know whether it were she or some other against whom he would have to stand.

'Dear, dear!' said Mrs. Travers, lean-

ing back a little upon Lily, who stood behind her. The old lady was frightened, flurried, horror-stricken. 'Oh dear, dear!' she cried, wringing her little transparent hands. 'I knew there was something, but I never knew how bad it was. Oh dear, dear!—oh dear, dear!'

'Stephen,' said Edmund, 'I think we had better follow my father. After what has passed, it can do you no good to stay here.'

'After what has passed! What has passed? The story of a—of a—the sort of creature no man is safe from. It might have been you instead of me. Would you slink off, and let her have it all her own way? I'll appeal to Mrs. Travers. *You* know what the world is: will you trust that woman against me? a girl that has nothing to lose against——'

'Oh, hush!' interposed Elizabeth. 'For Heaven's sake, don't go any further,—there has been enough. Oh, get your brother to go away! We do trust her,—we know her better than we know him. Oh, get him to go away!'

'Dear, dear!' exclaimed Mrs. Travers,

'oh dear, dear! I can't bear this sort of thing, Elizabeth. He's a gentleman, a military man. And don't you hear him? He appeals to me. Lily may have been mistaken; he may be able to explain. Oh dear, dear! Mr. Mitford will have a fit, and it will kill me. To have such a disturbance and such things talked of in a lady's house, —oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!'

'Let me alone, Ned,' cried Stephen; 'it's my character, not yours, that is at stake.' He straightened himself, and looked round him with rising courage. 'You say true,' he continued. 'Mrs. Travers, *you* understand. How am I to explain before ladies? Things look dreadful to ladies that are no harm among men. If you will get Miss Travers to go away, and that girl, I will tell you all I can. I'll explain as well as I can —to you——'

'To me!' interrupted the old lady, with a subdued shriek,—'explain improprieties to me! Lizzy, he oughtn't to be allowed to talk to me like this. Unless she has made a mistake—— Oh, don't be too hasty, my dear! Are you sure, are you quite sure, it's

the same gentleman? Oh, Lily, look again; you might be mistaking him for some one else. Are you sure it is the same gentleman, Lily? If it was the right one, do you think he'd appeal to me?'

'It is the man whom I was going to marry,' returned Lily, drooping her head. 'How could I make a mistake as to him?'

'That was my brother Roger,' said Stephen, 'as is well known. Why she should wish to ruin me in your opinion, I can't tell. She came up to London to Roger. What happened to her there, who knows?' he added, with an insulting laugh. 'Perhaps it's natural she should seek out some one to answer for that adventure,—I shouldn't blame her. It's fair enough to do what you can in self-defence.'

'Let my brother Roger's name be left out of this,' said Edmund sternly. 'Say what you will for yourself. She never went to London to Roger. He was as delicate and tender of her and her good name as if she had been the Queen's daughter. Keep his name out of it. I cannot allow any reference to him.'

Mrs. Travers sat up erect in her chair, and looked at Stephen with her small, keen eyes. 'They are not like each other,' she said; 'and how could she mistake the man she was going to marry, as she says? Captain Mitford, I think you had better go away. I am very sorry, for I have a partiality for military men, but I don't really see how there could be any mistake. And you mustn't speak about the girl and that sort of thing. We know her, as Elizabeth has told you, a great deal better than we know you.'

Stephen looked round upon the audience, which he began to perceive was hostile to him, with lessening self-command and growing wrath. His father's departure had sobered him out of the first burst of passion, but he was not a man to fight a losing battle. He went on, however, repeating his plea. 'I can't go into it now, before ladies. Name a man, and I'll explain everything. I can't speak before ladies. A man would soon see it was all a made-up story. Send for old Gavelkind, or somebody. I'll explain to a man.'

'You are not upon your trial here, Captain

Mitford,' remarked Elizabeth. 'We have nothing to do with it. It has been all very unexpected and very painful.' She turned to Edmund with an appealing gesture. 'It would be much better if it could end here. There is nothing more for us to do; it is no business of ours.'

'That is to say,' cried Stephen quickly, 'I am to consent to a slur upon my character because there isn't a man in the house to whom I can speak, nor any one who can see through a made-up story. I shan't do that! Send that little devil away, and not me. You can't know her half so well as I know her. How should you? She puts on one face to her backers-up, but quite a different one to me. She's——'

'Captain Mitford,' Mrs. Travers said, 'you seem to think, after all, that you know Lily very well.'

He stopped short, confounded, and looked at the old lady with a dangerous glitter in his eyes—like a bull putting down its head before it charges.

'You think you know Lily very well,' she repeated; 'and how should you know her,

unless what she says is true? I'm very sorry, for you are a near neighbour, and I always thought I should like you best of the family. If you please, Captain Mitford, will you go away? I don't want to hurt your feelings, but there's no man in the house, as you say. We are only ladies; we have ourselves to take care of. Please go. And I don't think,' added the old lady, upon whose face there had come a little colour, a flush of roused temper and feeling, 'that so long as this is my house, I shall want to see you here again.'

He burst out suddenly into a loud laugh. He was exasperated by her little air of authority; her precise words, the majestic aspect she put on, and he was half mad with the efforts he had made to restrain himself, and the sense that he had failed, and the fury and shame of the exposure. No one had listened to what he said in his own defence; but he had it in his power to startle them into listening to him at last. 'Your house?' he cried, hurling the words at her as if they had been a stone picked up in haste; 'you've no house, any more than you have the right to judge me!'

'No house! The man must be going mad!' Mrs. Travers exclaimed.

'Captain Mitford,' cried Elizabeth, 'if you have any sense of honour, go,—go away!'

'I'll not allow myself to be insulted,' he returned, 'not even by an old woman. Her house! It's no more hers than it's mine. She's got no house,—she has not a penny but what you give her. Do you think I don't know? Do you think that everybody doesn't know? Let go, Ned. I'll not be put out, either by her or you. By Jove! to order me out of her house, when she's a pauper, a pensioner, a—— Good-evening, Mrs. Travers. I hope I've given you a piece of information which is as good as yours to me!'

The little old lady had risen to her feet. It was not possible for the small, worn face in the white circle of her widow's cap to be paler than it habitually was; but her eyes were opened more widely than usual, and her lips were apart. 'Lizzy!' she said, with a gasp, putting out her hands. She paused until Stephen had gone out of the room before she said any more. Then she resumed: 'Lizzy! Is that true?'

'Mrs. Travers,' replied Edmund, 'my brother is entirely in the wrong. He has received a dreadful blow. I am dazed and confused by it, though I have nothing to do with it. He did not know what he was saying. He wanted to revenge himself on some one. It was a dastardly thing to do; but that is all. Don't think of it more.'

'I am asking Lizzy. Lizzy,' said the old lady, 'is that true?'

'Aunt, listen to him, he knows everything, and we've done him injustice!' cried Elizabeth, with an effort, scarcely conscious, to turn the discussion into another channel. 'Ask him to forgive me. I thought he was involved in all this dreadful story. I thought it was all different.'

'Lizzy,' said Mrs. Travers, 'is that true?'

'Aunt, how can you ask me? It is nothing; it is revenge, as he tells you.'

'What does it matter what he tells me, or the other? The other meant what he said. Lizzy, is it true?'

'Aunt, dear aunt!'

'You call me by my name, but that's no

answer; nor is it an answer,' cried the old lady, holding Elizabeth at arm's length, thrusting her away, 'to come and coax me and kiss me. Is it true—*true?*' She grasped Elizabeth's shoulder after a moment, and shook her, as a child might grip a woman in vain passion. 'I want an answer,—I want an answer. My husband thought it right to leave you everything—after me: that's what I've been told, and I thought it was hard. Was there more than that? I'll not be deceived any longer!' she cried, stamping her foot. 'If I'm a pauper, a pensioner, as he said, tell me. I'll not be deceived any more!'

'Oh, aunt! Never, never that! Oh, never that!'

'Never what? There may be degrees of lies, but there can be but one truth. What? I will know!'

'Aunt,' said Elizabeth, who had grown very pale, 'there is but one truth, but I might tell that truth so that it would be almost a lie. If you will sit down, and have patience, and let me explain——'

'Explain, when it's a simple matter of yes

or no? Mr. Edmund Mitford, this is between my niece and me; but she seems to wish you to remain,' Mrs. Travers added querulously. 'And I suppose you know, as he said everybody knows. Oh, that Mr. Gavelkind should have gone, just when he was wanted!' Mrs. Travers began to moan. She clasped her little attenuated hands together; tears began to gather in her eyes. 'Lily Ford,' she said, 'I've been kind to you, I've asked you no questions, you've been living in my house—— In my house? I don't know if I have a house. Oh, what am I to do,—what am I to do?' She sank back into her chair, and began to whimper and cry. 'I was his faithful wife for forty years. I brought him a bit of money that was of great use to him at the time. I was never extravagant,—never wanted anything that he wasn't the first to get! The plate-glass and all that,—was it my doing? I never had any interest but his. And now he's left me without a home, without a home, after being his wife for forty years!'

'Oh, dear aunt,' cried Elizabeth, flinging herself on her knees beside Mrs. Travers's

chair, 'he never thought of that. You were like himself to him. It was a mistake, it was some delirium, he never thought.'

'Ah!' she said, 'there's mistakes; yes, there's mistakes. You asked me, Lily Ford, if you could mistake the man you were going to marry; and it seemed both to me and you as if you couldn't. But I was married to mine for forty years, and I was mistaken in him all the time, it appears I never thought he would leave his wife a—a pauper, a pensioner, as that villain said. Oh, that villain! Get up, Elizabeth, get up; don't hang on me. I'll be your pensioner no more.'

Elizabeth, repulsed, still knelt at her aunt's feet, her hands clasped, the tears streaming from her eyes. Lily Ford, behind the old lady's chair, put her arms timidly round her, caressing her, crying too. Beside all these weeping women, what could Edmund do? He stood irresolute in sheer masculine disability to bear the sight of their tears: and yet he could not go away, nor desert Elizabeth at this crisis. Not a word had been said between them, and yet she had called him, bound him to her side. He turned from

them, and walked about the room in the confusion of despair.

'That's what marriage is,' Mrs. Travers resumed, after an interval of sobs. 'I'll go out of my husband's house with the little bit of money I brought into it, and glad to have that. It was all mine for forty years; but what was I all the time? What's a wife but a pensioner, as that man said? She has no right to anything; it's all in the man's hands, though she's helped him to make it, though she's taken care of it and saved it, and done her work as honest as he. But when he dies, he does what he likes; he takes her home from her, and gives it to some one else. She's got no right to anything. Oh, talk of mistakes, Lily Ford! You might well mistake the man you were going to marry, when I've mistaken mine, after I've been his wife for forty years.'

'Aunt,' Elizabeth cried, 'have some pity upon me! You cannot have the heart to leave me! I would have died rather than let you find out—anything to wound you. Every word you say goes to my heart. It's all true; but he never meant it so. He never, never

meant it. It's true, and yet it's not true. And why should you punish me? What have I done? Will you leave me alone in the world, in a house that's no longer a home, because I have been put in a wrong position, and because his mind got confused at the end?'

'Hold your tongue,' said Mrs. Travers angrily, turning sharply upon her. 'Don't say a word against my husband to me. I know what I think; but it's not for you to say it,—you that he was always so good to. Respect your uncle, if you please. You shall not say a word against him to me. And as for leaving you,—why, what's this young man here for, Lizzy? He wants to go away; he has feeling enough to see he has no business here; but you won't let him; you keep him with your eye. I suppose you'll marry him, and then you'll want nobody,—there will be no further need for an old woman; though perhaps she *is* wanted, enough to earn her living, enough not to be a pauper,' Mrs. Travers said, drying her eyes indignantly.

'I must speak, if I am to be here at all,' said Edmund, coming forward; 'let me be

of some use now, at least. You are all excited,—too much excited to decide anything. If Elizabeth will have me, I have been long at her disposal, Mrs. Travers; and in that case I can speak for her as well as for myself. This house will never, by my consent, be anybody's but yours. She will never live in it, with my approval, except as your daughter should live. It is better this should be cleared up, perhaps, and that we should all understand each other. You shall never leave here with my consent. I can't but be of some importance, if what you think is true. All the rest is little, and means nothing. These are the facts of the case: you are here at home, and Elizabeth lives with you. What is to happen after shall be arranged between us,—you, as the head of the house, having the first voice. I know nothing about wills and law; in nature you are the head of the house and the mistress of the house, and so you shall always be for me.'

When a man speaks words of wisdom, it is very seldom that they are not received by the women about him as oracles from heaven.

Elizabeth rose from her knees, and came and stood by his side, putting her arm into his with a timidity unusual to her. Mrs. Travers sat up in her chair, with her face raised to him, in attention, half bewildered but wholly respectful. Even Lily Ford, behind the old lady's chair, looked up as if her salvation depended upon this supreme and serious statement. When he stopped, there was a breathless pause.

'Well, if it's any satisfaction to you, Lizzy, I think he speaks up like a man,' Mrs. Travers said.

XLIV

THE SQUIRE GOES HOME

THE Squire went out of the house like a man distracted, his brain on fire, a surging as of a flood in his head. He passed out into the hot sun, with his hat in his hand, feeling the rush in his ears too hot and terrible to permit of any covering upon the temples, which throbbed as if they would burst. Very few times in his life had it happened to him that the fiery commotion within dazed and confused him as to what was going on without, but so it was to-day.

He had been without any premonition of trouble when he climbed that slope with Stephen. He was going to smooth over all offence on Elizabeth's part. Stephen was to tell his tale, to explain, as he seemed convinced he could. 'Let me alone. I hope I know how to talk over a woman,' he had

said. Mr. Mitford had been such a fool as to trust to him. Such a fool! he said to himself now. As if Elizabeth had been an ordinary woman, as if the circumstances had been so simple! The Squire could not imagine how he had been such a fool, forgetting that he had known none of the circumstances. Now it seemed as if his own folly were the thing most apparent. How could he think that it would be so easily disposed of! How could he imagine that all would be well!

Mr. Mitford was not a severe judge. He had, perhaps, in his heart more sympathy with Stephen's errors than with the virtue of his other sons. He was not a man to make any fuss about a little irregularity, about what had been called youthful folly in the days when he was himself subject to such temptations; so long as there was nothing disgraceful in it, he had said. But a girl upon his property, the daughter of an old servant, his wife's favourite,—nay, good heavens! the girl whom Roger had meant to marry! Was there ever such a hideous combination? To entice that girl away on the

old pretence of marriage, what a scoundrel! and to let her slip through his fingers, what a fool! Everything that was most unbearable was involved in it. It would be over the whole county to-morrow, flying on the wings of the wind,—a scandal such as had not happened for a generation, and ridicule worse still than the scandal. It was like a Surrey melodrama, the Squire said to himself, crossed with a screaming farce. To have meant to outwit the girl, and to have found her too sharp for him! A Lovelace *planté-la!* a brilliant and conquering hero, made a fool of, like the old nincompoop in the plays. Jove! and this was his son! And the scandal and the derision, the county talk, the shaking of the wise heads, the roar of ridicule would peal round the house like a storm. The laughter, that was the worst. Had Lily been altogether lost, Mr. Mitford would have been perhaps not much less disturbed: he would have felt keenly the shame of such a scandal, the noisy echoes awakened, the shock of that overthrow of all the decorums and betrayal of all those trusts which an old servant puts in his master, and which public

feeling protects and authorises. But that the laugh should be added to the shame; that when people heard what villainy Stephen had been about, they should also hear how the tables had been turned upon him, how the biter had been bit and the deceiver deceived,—that was more unbearable still! The echoes seemed all to catch it up, to breathe it about him, to come back laden with derision and scorn. Stephen, who had been admired in the county, who had a reputation as a dashing fellow, of whom his father had been proud! Proud! Jove! there was not much to be proud of: a base, abominable seduction, and not even a successful one, the laugh turned against him, the victim holding him up to shame. If everything had been put together that could most humiliate and expose the family,—just on the edge of a family affliction, too, when decorum ought to have the strongest hold,—it could not have been more thoroughly done!

It was a very hot day, the very height and crown of summer, and the road between Mount Travers and Melcombe was for a great part of the way quite unshaded, ex-

posed to the full beating of the afternoon sun. It was afternoon, but the sun was still high in the heavens, and the air was penetrated by the fierceness of its shining. Three o'clock is almost more than the climax of day; it has the meridian heat, with an accumulation of all the fiery elements stored up in every corner and in the motionless air, which has not yet been freed from the spell of noon. After a while, Mr. Mitford put on his hat mechanically, to interpose something between him and that glow of heat and brightness. The waves of the flood of passion, of coursing blood and heat, rose one after another, ringing and surging in his ears. He knew what his doctors had told him about that overwhelming sensation,—that he ought at once to get into a darkened room, and lie down and keep quiet when he felt it. None of these things could he do now. This rushing along in the full sun, with his head uncovered for part of the way, no shade, no possibility of rest, and some miles of blazing road before him, was enough to have given Dr. Robson a fit, not to speak of the patient, whom he had warned so seriously.

The Squire felt this dully in his confused brain, but also felt that he could not help it; that everything was intolerable; that he must get home, and do something at once. He must do it at once; there was no time to lose. A fellow who had exposed himself to the county, to the whole world, like that, could not be permitted to be the representative of the Mitfords. He had always felt uncomfortable about it, always since poor Roger was taken away. Poor Roger! It seemed to the Squire that only death had taken his eldest son away, and that it was somehow a grievance to himself that Stephen had been put in that eldest son's place; he could not make out, in his confusion, how it had come about. It was a wrong to Edmund—he had always said so,—a great injustice, an injury, a—— And now the fellow had proved how impossible it was to keep up such an arrangement. It was all his own doing, as somehow the other, the injury to Edmund, appeared to be Stephen's doing. But the Squire felt that if he could only get home in time, only reach his writing-table and his quiet library and the cool and

the shade, and get his pulses to stop beating, and that rushing surge out of his ears, things might still be put right.

But the road stretched out white before him, like something elastic, drawing out and out in endless lengths, such as he had never been conscious of before; and the sun blazed, without a tree to subdue that pitiless glare. He had a vague notion that there was some way with a handkerchief to stop the beating of the light upon his head, but his thoughts were not free enough to arrange it, or think how it could be done. And still, the farther the Squire walked, the farther and farther before him seemed to stretch on these lengths of expanding road. If he could but get home! Presently the name of Pouncefort surged up into his head on those rising waves. Pouncefort!—he must send for Pouncefort: by an express, a man on horseback, in the old way, or by the telegraph,—there was the telegraph. Vaguely it came into his mind that he might stop at the station which he had to pass, and send a message; but that would keep him longer, would prevent his getting home. To get

home was the first necessity,—into the cool, into the dark, with the shutters shut. The idea of shutting the shutters came with a sense of relief to his brain. Somebody could go to the office and send the message; or a man could go, on horseback, the old way.

The laughing-stock of the county! It seemed to him now, somehow, as if it were he who would be laughed at, he who had been outwitted, though without any fault of his. The laugh would be turned against him all over the place, who had meant to play the gay Lothario, and had been made a fool of by a little chit of a girl! Something of the mortification and rage with which Stephen himself thought of that failure entered strangely into his father's brain, but with a confused sense that he had been got into that position without any fault of his; that it was the trick of an enemy; that he had been made to appear ridiculous in the eyes of all men, by something with which his own action had nothing to do. He seemed to hear the ring of that derision all about him. Ha, ha, ha! did you hear that story about Mitford? about the Mitfords? about old

Mitford? That was what it came to at the last. Old Mitford! though he was a man that had never made a laughing-stock of himself, always kept clear of that; had been respected, feared, if you like; an ugly sort of fellow to be affronted or put upon, but laughed at, never! And now this was his fate, for the first time in his life, and by no fault of his.

How good it would be to have the shutters closed, all along the side of the house! What a change it would make all at once!—out of that beating and blazing, the pitiless heat, the sound of the laughter; for somehow the laughter appeared to come in too. Meanwhile, the road did nothing but grow longer and longer, stretching out like a long white line, endless as far as one could see, not diminishing, extending as one rushed on; until at last, when the heat was at its highest, the sunshine almost blinding, the surging in his ears worse than ever, Mr. Mitford suddenly found a coolness and shelter about him, and saw that he was stumbling in at his own door.

'Shut all the shutters,' he said to the first servant he saw.

'The shutters, sir?'

'Every shutter in the house. Don't you see how the sun is blazing? And I want something to drink, and a horse saddled at once.'

'A horse, sir?'

'Don't I speak plain enough? Send Larkins,—he'll understand; but shut the shutters, every shutter; keep out the sun, or we'll go on fire,' Mr. Mitford said.

Larkins was sought out in the housekeeper's room, with a message that master had come in, off his head, as mad as mad, calling for the shutters to be shut, and for a horse. The butler had been dozing pleasantly, and was just waking up to enjoy his afternoon tea.

'Rubbish,' he said. 'I daresay as he's hot with his walk, and wants a drink; they allays does, when a man's comfortable.'

But Mr. Larkins was not an ill-natured man, and he had a sympathy for people who wanted a drink. He sent for ice and various bottles, and there was a popping of corks which occupied some time; and finally he took in himself to the library a tray, which the footman carried to the door. He found, what alarmed even his composure, his master

tugging at the shutters to close them, though the sun had passed away from that side of the house.

'Bless me, sir, let me do that! But the sun's gone,' he said, hurrying to set down his tray.

The Squire was purple. He fumbled about the shutters as if he did not see, his eyes seemed starting out of his head, and he was panting, with loud, noisy breath. 'Every shutter,' he said, 'or we'll go on fire; and, Larkins, have a horse saddled, and send a groom——'

'Yes, sir, but please leave all that to me, and take a seat, sir; you're rather knocked up with the heat, and I've brought some of that Cup.'

Larkins, alarmed, had to guide his master to his big chair, and while he brought him a large glass of that skilful decoction, with the ice jumbling delightfully and making a pleasant noise, he resolved within himself that the groom should go for Dr. Robson, and that without a moment's delay.

'For Pouncefort, for Pouncefort,' said the Squire; 'a man on horse, the quickest way.'

'If I were to send a telegram?' said Larkins, more and more decided that the doctor should be the groom's errand.

'That's it,' said Mr. Mitford, and he took a deep and long draught; then repeated, 'The shutters, the shutters,—shut the shutters!' Larkins moved away to humour his master. But his back was scarcely turned when there was a great noise, amid which the sharp sound of the glass breaking caught the butler's ear, a rumbling as when a tower falls, all the courses of the masonry coming down upon each other; and there lay the Squire, all huddled on the floor, with his purple face fallen back, and his breathing like the sound of a swollen stream.

Stephen left Mount Travers as hastily, and not much more pleasantly, than his father. The thing had come upon him which, with horrible premonitions of shame and discomfiture, he had feared, ever since that night when his victim, at the moment of his triumph, had slipped out of his hands. The sensation had been almost worse than he had imagined it would be. The sight of Lily had filled him

with a rage which he felt to be cowardly, and which he would have resisted had he known how to do so; a desire to strangle her, to crush her, to stop that explanation by any means, however brutal. And Elizabeth's look of horror, and even the little white face of Mrs. Travers avowing with a sigh her partiality for military men, had been terrible to him. But after the shock and sting of that crisis, there came to Stephen a sense of relief. The story would have flown to all the winds, if but one of the fellows in the regiment had been there, or any man who could communicate to them this too delightful tale. But the ladies would not spread it abroad,—they were too much horrified; and the Squire and Edmund would be silent. They would know, and would not forget the story of his disgrace, and that was bad enough; but they would not tell it, for their own sake, if not for his. Nor would *she* repeat it, for her own sake. It was more safe than he could have hoped; the horrible moment of the disclosure had come, but it was over, and nothing was so bad as he had feared. True, Elizabeth's money was not for him; the tramp to whom he threw a

sixpence was as likely now to be received as a wooer as he was; but what then? There were as good fish in the sea as had ever been drawn out of it. For his part, he had no taste for such women; he could very easily make up his mind to the loss of Elizabeth: a prim woman, with that sanctimonious horror in her eyes, she was no loss at all. They were as safe an audience as he could have chosen, had he had the choosing of them. Not one of them would repeat it; and that, not for Stephen's sake, but for their own. And to console him further, he had the comfort of having revenged himself, which was sweet. He had thrown a firebrand among them, for them to extinguish as best they could. On the whole, he said to himself, with fierce exultation, it was he who had come out of it best.

Therefore his excitement calmed down more easily than his father's. There remained the question as to what the Squire would do, which was a serious one. He had been furious; he had taken it as Stephen himself did, with rage and a sense of the mortification, the failure, the horrible ridicule to which he would be exposed. But Stephen

hoped that he might make his father see what he so clearly saw himself; this shameful secret had been revealed to the most harmless audience that could have been chosen; that from Mount Travers it was very unlikely to spread or be repeated, or even whispered about; that the ladies would not do it, nor Edmund; and that the little devil herself,—the little—— He set his teeth when he thought of her. He would like to meet her once more, only once more, in the park, and see what she would say then.

He went home more quickly than his father had done, thinking nothing of the length of the way, nor of the heat, nor of the want of shade. He must see what temper his father was in; and if it were very bad, he would pack up and be off. Happily, he had not sent in his papers; and if the worst came to the worst, there would be this compensation in losing his heirship,—that he should no longer be compelled to remain at home. There was always that to be said on the other side. He met a groom on horseback, tearing down the avenue, but

paid no particular attention; nor was he roused by the scared face of Larkins, who met him at the door. He thought, indeed, that Larkins had been sent to warn him that the Squire would not see him; but this alarm lasted only for a moment. The butler looked very pale and frightened. He came forward anxiously as soon as Stephen appeared.

'I'm very thankful as you've come, sir. I didn't know how to act on my own responsibility. Master's not at all well.'

'Not well? What is the matter?' Stephen said.

'He came in what I might make bold to call very queer, sir, calling out to shut the shutters, to keep the sun out. Now the sun's gone from the library, Captain, an hour ago, as you know. John Thomas was clean scared, and came and told me as master was off his head. I says, "Rubbish!" and I carries him in some of his own particular Cup as he's fond of. He was an awful colour, sir,—purple-like, and breathing hard. He told me to shut the shutters and then to send a man on horseback for Mr. Pouncefort.

I turned my back for a moment, and there he was, smash down upon the floor.'

'A fit! Did you send for the doctor? Have you got the doctor?'

'I didn't lose a moment, Captain. I sent off the groom at once. We laid him on the sofa, and Mrs. Simmons is with him. He looks awful bad. That's his breathing, sir, as you can hear.'

Stephen steadied himself by a chair. 'This is what Robson feared,' he said.

'Yes, Captain, doctor always said as his was a risky life; and master's feared it, too. Getting in a passion's bad for him, sir, and so is the great heat and being out in the sun. Mrs. Simmons has got ice to his head, and we're doing all we know till the doctor comes. Had master been badly put out, sir, by anything? You will perhaps know?'

Stephen made no reply. He stood and listened to the loud breathing, with which the very house seemed to vibrate. 'Did you send for Mr. Pouncefort, as my father directed?'

'We've had no time to think of that. I thought the doctor was the first thing.'

'You were right, Larkins; it was better not to worry him, in that state.'

'Shall I telegraph now, sir, to Mr. Pouncefort? I thought I'd wait till one of you gentlemen came home.'

Stephen again stood silent for a long minute, paying no attention. At length, 'I don't think you need trouble yourself further,' he said.

XLV

AFTER THE STORM

TUMULT and trouble seemed to have died out of the house on the hill; the vacant room alone showed a few traces of the passion and conflict that had been there. The screen had been pushed aside, showing the little table and chair behind it, which Lily had used all the time she had been at Mount Travers, in her nervous dread of being seen by any visitors; and Mrs. Travers's chair with its cushions, her footstool, and the pretty stand with all her little requirements, stood astray, as they had been thrust to one side and another, in the sudden commotion which Stephen, before his exit, had flung into the enemy's country. There Elizabeth had knelt, distracted, imploring her aunt not to believe what was nevertheless true; and there the little lady had stood, thrusting

them all away, repulsing her footstool, as though that, too, had been an enemy, in the heat of her indignation. The inanimate things showed these traces of human emotion in a way which was curiously telling, with a suggestiveness partly comic, partly pathetic. The footstool had been turned over with the vehemence of the foot which on ordinary occasions rested on it so peacefully. The chair in which Stephen had first seated himself kept its place,—turned with an ingratiating expression towards that of Elizabeth, which had been pushed back a little,—with its chintz cover all dragged out of place by the man's impetuous movements. But all was perfectly silent here, as on other fields of battle; and in a few minutes the butler, coming in with his tea-tray, had it all put straight again. Nothing could exceed the surprise of that respectable functionary: no bell had been rung, no one had been called to open the door; and yet the gentlemen whom he had admitted had all melted away, leaving no trace, and even the ladies had forgotten that it was time for tea.

Lily Ford came into the room while he

was in the act of calling upon some of his subordinates to rearrange this place of conflict. Lily had become Miss Ford,—she was a visitor, and had no dealings, except in that capacity, with the servants; but they all knew who she was, and had a certain reluctance in serving her. It is all very well to talk of rising in the world, and bettering yourself; but to wait upon one of his own class who has succeeded in doing this is more than any free-born servant can be expected to do.

'Will you kindly take up tea to Mrs. Travers's room? She is not coming down,' Lily said.

She had been crying; her lips had still a faint quiver in them, and something like the echo of a sob came into her voice as she spoke. Though it had been her mother's delight to think that she was quite a lady, Lily, in fact, had rather the air of a very pretty, very refined lady's-maid. That is not saying much, for it is sometimes difficult enough to tell which is which, especially when the inferior in position is the prettier by nature, as sometimes happens. It is

only, perhaps, a certain want of freedom, a greater self-restraint,—such as is not unlikely to add to the air of refinement, — which marks the difference. Lily was very quiet, very reticent and subdued, and those signs of emotion seemed to betray to the man's eyes tokens of 'a smash-up.' That his two mistresses should have quarrelled did not, with his knowledge of them, appear very probable; but that Miss Ford—Miss, indeed! —should have found her level and got the 'sack,' according to the phraseology of the servants' hall, was the most natural, not to say pleasing thing in the world.

'Tea for one, miss?' the butler said, with a look that gave meaning to the words.

Lily replied only with a wondering glance, but she said in a low voice, 'You may put away the screen, if you please.'

It was very evident then to the household, through which the news flashed in a moment, that there was an end of Miss Ford; that she had got the sack, and would trouble them with her obnoxious superiority no more.

What went on, however, in Mrs. Travers's

room during the remainder of the afternoon was little like this. There the old lady sat, propped up with more cushions than usual, in a state of tearful dignity and exaltation. She had felt the blow profoundly,—as much as nature would allow her to feel. But there is this advantage in a very small body, possessed by a not very great mind: that its physical capabilities are limited, and that the greatest anguish wears itself out proportionately soon. Mrs. Travers had been deeply wounded; she had been very indignant, very angry, and then had recurred to the first pang, and felt the slight and the cruelty of her husband's injustice to the bottom of her little but affectionate heart. But when she had gone through that round of feeling twice or thrice she was exhausted, and for the time could feel no more. Everything that Elizabeth, in a compunction which was very deep, though quite uncalled for, since she had no part in the offence, and in her anxiety to soothe, and in her real gratitude and affection, could do had been lavished upon her aunt; while Lily, all overwhelmed still by the event in which she had taken so great a share, and

unable to restrain her sobbing, had lingered round the other sufferer with that fellowship which trouble has with trouble and pain with pain. Mrs. Travers, comforted by every outward appliance,—by cushions applied skilfully at the very angles of her back which wanted support, and tender bathings of her hot eyes and forehead, and gentle ministrations with a fan, and arrangements of blinds and curtains to temper the light,—sank at last into a condition of not disagreeable weakness, with all the superiority in it of undeserved affliction.

'Yes, I am a little better now. I believe that you mean well, Lizzy. I am sure you would never be unkind to me, my dear. Perhaps, as you say, it was all a muddle, just a muddle at the end. And Edmund Mitford spoke up very fair. Oh, I don't say it's your fault or his fault. But I shouldn't wonder if I'd be better with Lily, for a bit; leave me with Lily, for a bit. We've both been badly used, and she's very feeling; and you can't be expected to feel just the same, when it's all to your advantage. Oh, I didn't mean to say anything unkind. Leave

me for a bit with Lily, till I come to myself.'

This was what she had said, sending Elizabeth away; and then Mrs. Travers lay back in her chair, with that sense of being a martyr, which is never without a faint touch of pleasure in it. She had been overwhelmed by sudden trouble, which nobody could say she had deserved; she had deserved nothing but good, and evil was what had come upon her. But now the sensation of quiet after a storm, of rest after suffering, was softly diffused through the atmosphere: the storm had passed over the gentle victim,—that storm which she had done nothing to bring down; her wrongs had subsided into that quiescent condition in which, while ceasing to hurt, they continued to give her a claim upon the respect and sympathy of all near. She said in a half-audible voice, 'Let them bring the tea here, Lily;' and after her docile companion had accomplished that commission, she called her close to her chair.

'Sit down by me, my poor dear, and tell me everything,' she said.

When Saunders, the butler, brought in the

tea (which after all he had not ventured to bring in for only one), it is to be hoped it was a lesson to him to see Miss Ford seated on a stool close to Mrs. Travers's side, while the old lady held her hand, and patted it from time to time, saying, 'My poor dear, my poor dear!' Saunders said, in the servants' hall, that they were crying together, and as thick as they could be; and that he shook in his shoes for fear Mrs. Travers should say something about the tea for one; but she might be keeping it up for him, for another time. They stopped talking while he was there, so he couldn't tell what the fuss was about; but they were as thick as thick,—that he could swear. He withdrew very quietly, treading as lightly as a man of fourteen stone could do, not to call Miss Ford's attention to him, and never was more thankful than when he found himself safe outside the door.

Mrs. Travers heard all Lily's story, every word, with the keenest interest. To have a romance in real life thus unfolded to her from the heroine's own lips, more exciting than any novel, would have been an enchantment to her at any time; and now

afforded such a diversion from her own trouble as nothing else could have supplied, especially as her curiosity had been roused by partial revelations before. She would not miss a detail of the terrible night in the street, nor of how the poor girl felt when she found herself lying on a sofa in the railway waiting-room, with Miss Travers bending over her, and the kind woman who was the attendant there standing by her side with a cup of tea. Miss Travers had been her salvation, Lily said with tears; she had telegraphed at once to the mother, making it all appear quite natural, so that even her own people knew nothing, except that Miss Travers had taken her to town and was making a companion of her. They were not to say where she was, at first, on account of poor Mr. Roger, for whose sake the Fords had supposed their daughter had run away. All this had seemed most plausible to her father and mother: and thus Lily's terrible adventure had turned out the most fortunate incident in her life. Mrs. Travers asked and was told much more than this, especially about the state of Lily's heart, and how

she now believed that she had never loved Stephen at all, but had only been flattered and excited by his attentions; for the sight of him, Lily declared, had not called her heart back to him at all, but made her feel that she wished never to see him again, and that if there was not another man in the world! This she protested with many tears.

'And all the time Lizzy thought it was poor Roger, and begged me to say nothing, for he was dead; and yet couldn't quite forgive poor Edmund, thinking he knew; and was angry, something about money that Roger had left, thinking they wanted to make it up to you with money. It has been hard for you, my poor dear,' Mrs. Travers said; 'but it is a good thing for Lizzy that all this has come out. It shows what a man he is, that in his revenge he should have taken it out on me. Lily, my child, give me a cup of tea. I want it very much, and so must you, my dear; there is nothing that revives one so, when one is exhausted with crying and trouble, and when one's nerves are shattered. Lily, there is one thing this discovery has done,—it has set me quite free.

I always thought, whatever happened, I was bound to Lizzy, and to my own house, and all that. But now that I find out I have got no house, and Lizzy will be getting married, how should you like to go away travelling, to Switzerland, and all kinds of beautiful places, Lily Ford?'

'Oh, Mrs. Travers!' cried Lily, drying her eyes.

'You needn't say any more, my dear; it has brought back the light into your face in a moment. We'll go away and travel, you and I. I have thought of it a long time, but I have never said anything about it. In the first place, Lizzy never cared for going abroad; and then, though I'm very fond of Lizzy, she is a kind of tall character, you know, that does not always do to go about with a small body like me. I have always been on the look-out for a nice quiet girl that I could be fond of, that wouldn't be too serious or distracted, with other things to think of. Lily, since the first day you came here, I have always felt I could get on with you.' Mrs. Travers raised herself a little upon her cushions, as she sipped her tea, and a faint

animation came into her face. 'I never could have done with a companion that had been got by an advertisement, or recommended by a clergyman, or anything of that sort. But getting fond of you before one ever thought of anything of the sort,—it is just a Providence, Lily! And your father and mother,—Lizzy has quite settled about them, so they can have no objections. We'll go abroad, you and I; we'll be quite comfortable, and take Martha, and perhaps a man too, if you think that would be a comfort, —for I have a little money of my own, enough for all we shall want. We'll make no plans, but just go wherever it will be nicest, wherever we like best: we'll be quite free and independent, for we'll be company for each other, which is what I have always wanted. Don't you think it will be very nice, Lily? It's what I've always wanted, but never have seen my way to, till now.'

'Oh, Mrs. Travers, it is like a dream; like nothing but a dream!' Lily cried.

And these two innocent creatures dried their tears, and began to talk of travelling-dresses and the most beautiful places they

had ever heard or read about. All the world was 'abroad,' to them; it meant everything, from Boulogne to Bombay, the first seeming about as far off as the last; and in the novelty and delight of this thought, their troubles floated away.

Elizabeth had left her aunt's room with a beating heart. To reckon up all that had passed in this eventful afternoon was impossible: the one thing important was the question whether she should find Edmund waiting for her downstairs. The current of these hasty events had swept the two together in a way she had never intended, nor thought of. She had put out her hand to him in her first astonishment in the shock of Lily's revelation, and in the force and impetuosity of her feelings had called him by his name. Up to that moment, Elizabeth had sorrowfully believed that it was Roger who was the pitiful hero of Lily's adventure. The girl had not said it, had not, as Miss Travers now perceived, given any indication that it was he; but Elizabeth had convinced herself of it by reasonings which it is unnecessary to follow, by one piece of cir-

cumstantial evidence after another. In all that Roger had done, Edmund had involved himself. In her own hearing, he had spoken of money which Roger had destined for Lily, and which, Elizabeth took it for granted, was given as compensation for the wrong he had intended to do. Her heart had been hot and sore with the secret which nobody knew. She could not bear to stand by and witness the love and the grief and the honour with which Roger's name was surrounded,—Roger, who she believed had stained that name with such schemes and artifices at the very end of his life! It had been intolerable to her to hear the universal praises that followed him, to feel herself compelled to acquiesce in what was said. She had stood silent, in painful repression, unwilling to consent, still more unwilling to condemn him who had gone before a higher tribunal. She had determined at last, that very day, to tell Edmund her secret,—that it was she who had recovered Lily and brought her home, and that she knew everything. When the discovery came, and she was made aware that she had been wronging Roger all

the time, Elizabeth's generous heart had turned, with a bound of repentance and acknowledgment, to Roger's faithful brother, whom she had been holding at arm's length, knowing well—as how could she help knowing?—what was on his lips. Her subdued scream of horror and compunction, her call to Edmund to forgive her, her hand put into his, had all been signs which she had no power to restrain. She had done this involuntarily, throwing herself at Edmund's head, as the vulgar say. And afterwards it had all seemed to be taken for granted by him and every one, she could not tell how. He had spoken for her, and she had accepted his guidance with proud humility, standing up by him, putting her hand on his arm. It all appeared to have been settled for them without a word said between them, without anything which usually constitutes such a bond. He had not said that he loved her, nor that he wanted her; there had been no asking, no consent. If there had been any advance made, it had come from her, with that unconscious cry of 'Edmund!' with the giving of her hand. When she left her

aunt's room, Elizabeth, for the first time able to think of herself, went down the stairs very slowly, in great agitation, not knowing what she was to find. Would he still be there? Would he have seized the opportunity to escape from a position which was not, after all, of his seeking? Or if he remained, would it be with an embarrassed acquiescence in what had happened, which had been none of his doing? She could not tell. Her heart was beating very fast, though her foot was slow. She was not a humble girl, ready to acknowledge her lord, but a woman full of natural pride and independence, very sensitive, deeply wondering what on his side the man had thought and now had to say.

She was not left long in doubt. Edmund was waiting in the hall, at the foot of the stairs. The first thought of her alarmed soul was that he was on his way out, that he was about to leave the house; and her heart stopped beating for a moment. But Edmund was not going away; he put out his hands to take hers, drawing one through his arm.

'Come out,' he said; 'now that you have

come, I don't feel that the house can contain me. I have a thousand and a thousand more things to say.'

'Oh!' she cried, 'what must you think of me? What can I say to you? Everything seems to have been taken out of our hands.'

'Think of you? It will take a long time to tell you all that. Say to me? Everything, whatever comes into your mind; for now you are I, and I am you. Come out into the free air; there is too much of me to be contained in any house. Dear Elizabeth, ever dear, there is no ghost to stand between us now?'

'Did you feel it,' she said, 'that spectre? Oh, how could I ever have entertained such an unworthy thought!'

'I knew it was not Roger,' he said. 'Some time you shall hear what he said of you and me, that last night. But in the meantime we have everything to say between ourselves and about ourselves. I cannot withhold a word; events seem to have settled it for us. Elizabeth, I am going to begin at the beginning.'

They took refuge from the wide landscape

in a summer-house which, but that nature had laden it with a wild and tangled growth of honeysuckle and jessamine, would have been an entirely cockney erection, in the taste of the late Mr. Travers, and there reviewed the complete rise and progress of a love which was now by mere force of development clear to both from the beginning, conscious as it had scarcely been, until a recent period; but of this both were now completely unaware. The sunny afternoon sped over them, the shadows lengthened, a cool breeze tempered the heat, blowing straight over the tree-tops from the sea. Everything was sweet to them,—the light and the shadows, the heat and the coolness, the sun and the breeze. The honeysuckle breathed out its sweetness into the air; and so did the birds, singing all manner of love-songs and bridal ditties, selecting the best out of their stores, such as they had used on their own account in spring. These two, sitting wrapt in airs of heaven, neither heard the birds nor smelt the flowers; they had all music and fragrance and sweetness in themselves. They were as little concerned in, as little conscious, as little

prescient of the scene going on at Melcombe as if they had lived in another world.

Thus the conflict and the misery which for an hour or so had seemed to concentrate in this innocent house, and which had overshadowed it with gloom, and given a tragic colour to every ray of light, passed away, being in no manner native to the place. Within doors, the two injured persons who had been the chief sufferers forgot everything, and planned their little consolatory travels with the freshness of delighted children; while here every cloud flitted away from the two most blest, united after long, tantalising drifts asunder, in the enjoyment of that most perfect hour of human fellowship, the lovers' first mutual understanding. It does not always happen; but here for once life and the hour brought no injustice. The clouds passed away from the innocent household, and did no harm.

The other house on the plain below was not so easily delivered. It was not innocent, but guilty; and on it the clouds descended, full of lightning and thunder and storm.

XLVI

THE LAST OF THE SQUIRE

EDMUND did not return to Melcombe till late. He stayed all the delightful evening through at Mount Travers, dining there, as in his present position it was the right and natural thing to do. That afternoon and evening fled like a dream. Sometimes it happens that to two people thus suddenly brought together, after long tending towards each other, and when the first flush of youthful security has passed, the moment of union brings a completion as well as a beginning of life, which is unique in its perfection. It combines the rapture of early bliss with that deep-seated satisfaction of maturity, which is rarer, and if not so exquisite, yet the most real version of happiness. Up to this moment, they had not lived for themselves. The life of Elizabeth had been spent in that

most perfect of filial duty which is exercised towards relations who have the claims of love and kindness without those of warm sympathy and congeniality. She was not like the kind old couple who had been so good to her. Both in what they had done for her and in what they had withheld, they had often wounded a nature which was not like theirs. Her uncle had been generous beyond measure to her in his will, but had put her into the most false position, and made her the apparent instrument of a wrong which was abhorrent to her. Edmund, on the other side, had lived a neutral-coloured life, because, no doubt, of a certain spectatorship of nature, which often betrays a man who is without any prick of necessity or strong impulse of passion into indifference and mediocrity. He was one of those, not, perhaps, the least happy nor the least useful, who stand aside out of the conflicts of life and look on, and who seem to attain to little by persistence of wanting little, —by an interest which they have rather in life in the general than in any special objects to be appropriated to themselves. Such men can be emancipated and brought into a

warmer existence only by love, which gives them a warmer and stronger identity by adding another life to theirs. Love that 'smites the chord of self,' till it, 'trembling, passed in music out of sight,' is one thing; but there is another, in which the self-same love, not less noble, takes up 'the harp of life, and smites on all its chords with might'; so that the musing spectator, the observer of other men, becomes himself a man by dint of the woman poured into him, filling his veins and his soul with an added vitality. This pair found themselves increased so, with a wonder and a delight beyond the reach of the simpler boy and girl, who only know themselves happy. They had each expanded, risen into a stronger individuality, become more in themselves by throwing everything into each other. To both the exquisite novelty of having another self was not only a blessedness indescribable, but a marvel, an exhilaration, an elevation of individual being, such as no prophecy or description had led them to anticipate. They both seemed to begin to live from that moment, to understand what it was to have that possession of human capa-

bility and power. At once out of a world mysteriously indifferent, uncomprehending, uninterested, never able to divine what they would be at, to possess each an ear into which to pour everything that came into the heart, each an eye always awake to what each was doing, each another who was themselves,—what a wonder, what a miracle, what an expansion of living; nay, what life and personal identity! This day was a revelation, a kind of gospel, a new communication direct out of heaven for both. They spent those sunny hours together, which seemed like so many moments, and yet were of more account in their life than a dozen previous years. They dined together at a table which derived a curious dignity from the thought that henceforth it was to be the centre of life dispensed to others; of meeting and communion; of breaking of bread, half sacramental with the sacred seal of domestic unity, of possession in common. All common life became splendid and noble in this illumination; they looked at each other, and read, radiant, the exposition of what existence actually was in each other's eyes.

Edmund walked home in the delicious darkness of the summer night. The road was white under his feet, the dark hedges standing up on either hand, the immense vault of sky over him sparkling with innumerable stars. In his present mood, moonlight would have been too much; it would have introduced a more dramatic element, strong shadows along with the intensity of its white light. He loved better that soft shining which filled the heavens with delightful company and silent fellowship. He walked along lightly, as if he trod upon air, that same road which his father had traversed in a passion of physical and mental excitement, which made of it an awful, half-delirious pathway from life to death, and which Stephen had trod heavily, with anxious thoughts, subsiding rage, and rising care. He thought of neither of them, nor of what he should find when he reached home, nor of how he should communicate the great event which had happened to himself. None of these things disturbed Edmund's mind. The fact that he was shut out from his inheritance had made him perfectly independent. In

comparison with Elizabeth he was poor; but that did not trouble him. It did not occur to him that any mean or mercenary motive could ever be associated with his name; nor did he think of Elizabeth's superior wealth any more than he thought of the dress she had worn, or any other matter of insignificant detail. Every trifle comes to be important in its time, and no doubt the day would come when he would be critical about his wife's dress, and like her to wear this or that. But in the meantime he had no leisure in his mind for anything but herself, and the wonderful possession that had come to him in her, Elizabeth. He said the name over to himself, looking up at the stars with a low laugh of pleasure, and moisture in his eyes. Elizabeth,—that was enough. Not Lizzy: Lizzy was not characteristic of her, as some pet names are. Elizabeth,—a name to be said slowly, savoured in all its syllables, which embodied not softness only, but strength; a queen's name, a common name, liquid in the beginning, coming up strong on the rock of that concluding sound. His laugh sounded into the silence, a low, congenial note, sub-

dued, yet the uttermost expression of human pleasure and satisfaction and content. He was not laughing at himself in his lover's folly, as perhaps a wiser man might have done, but only for happiness, for pure pleasure, for delight.

The door was still standing wide open when Edmund reached Melcombe, and a dogcart stood before the steps, with lamps, which made a contradictory yellow glimmer in the paleness of the night. As he approached, Larkins came out upon the threshold. 'You needn't wait,' he said to the driver. 'Doctor's going to stop all night.'

'How's master?' said the man.

'Don't say nothing in the house, but it's my opinion he's a dead man; and if Robson don't think so, too, I'm a—— But mind you, not a word; the family mightn't like——'

'What's that you are saying, Larkins?' Edmund laid a sudden hand upon the butler's shoulder, which made him jump.

'Mr. Edmund! I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't see you. I was telling James to put up—— Dr. Robson, sir, he's here, and will not be going—not for a bit.'

'Who is ill? My father? What is it? You said he was a dead man.'

'He's had a fit, sir. There was nobody there but me, and it's had that effect upon me that I don't know what I'm saying. I hope it ain't so bad as that, Mr. Edmund. Don't go to master's room, sir; Dr. Robson says no one's to go in. The Captain, he's in the library.'

Edmund had gone half-way up the stairs, but he stopped at this, and came slowly down again. The shock of this intimation dispersed all that bright atmosphere about him, as if it had been a bubble, and brought him back with a sudden jar into so different a sphere. He was well aware of the significance of the words 'a fit,' and remembered, with a throb of painful sensation, his father's continual preoccupation on this subject, his occasional attempts at self-restraint, because of what had been said to him of the risks he ran. Poor father! overwhelmed at last by that tempest of rage and shame. His exclamation about the harm that had come to him from his sons recurred to Edmund's mind. The Squire had passed safely enough through

the contrarieties brought upon him by Roger: he had seen his first-born die, and buried him, without any danger from emotion. But now—Edmund approached the library very unwillingly, with hesitating steps. The very sight of Stephen would, he felt, be intolerable; nor did he know how his brother could look him in the face. The door was ajar, and he pushed it open with a reluctant hand. The apartment was dimly lighted by candles on the mantelpiece, which was at the opposite end of the room from the Squire's writing-table, usually the central point, with its one brilliant lamp. The fact that the lamp had not been lighted was already a sign of approaching change. Edmund saw with relief that the doctor stood with Stephen before the fireplace,—two dark figures in the ineffectual light.

'What is the matter?' he asked. 'Doctor, I am most thankful at least to find you here.'

'Not for much good, I'm afraid,' returned the doctor, shaking his head. 'He has had a fit, and a bad one. I must not conceal from you that he is very ill. I've been afraid

of it for some time back. Nothing we have done has been of any avail as yet.'

Edmund asked anxiously how it had happened, and received from the doctor Larkins's story, cut short of various details. 'He seems to have walked a considerable distance in the heat of the sun. Your brother does not appear to be aware of any other circumstances.'

'He had been very much excited,—he had made a painful discovery.'

Stephen turned half round, with a dark glance from under his brows.

'Oh,' exclaimed the doctor. Then he added quickly, 'These things, of course, would be but secondary causes. I have warned him repeatedly that he must take the utmost care, in respect of diet and—many other things. But with all precautions, disease cannot be staved off. It was bound to come, sooner or later.'

'And you take a despondent view?'

'One can never tell,' replied Dr. Robson. 'He has had only threatenings, no attack before, and his strength is intact. I shall stay all night—or until—— In the meantime, I

have been saying to your brother, if you would like to get a physician from London. The telegraph is closed by this time; but a message could be sent by the midnight train.'

'I think it would be well to send one, doctor, notwithstanding our perfect confidence in you.'

'I didn't see the use,' objected Stephen, with averted head.

'It is no question of confidence in me. I should prefer it,' the doctor said.

'Then I'll send at once.'

Stephen again gave his brother a darkling look. There was in it a curious defiance, yet timidity. Edmund was the eldest; he had the first right to act. He asked no advice from his junior, who was tacitly put aside altogether, while Edmund consulted with the doctor, after sending off his message, which was despatched by a servant, with authority to engage a special train to bring down the great physician with as little delay as possible. Stephen walked up and down the room, while everything was thus taken out of his hands. He might have attended to these matters on his own responsibility, and

saved himself from being thus superseded in what he felt, with a *sourd* mixture of anger and alarm and satisfaction, to be his own house. He did not wish to deprive his father of any care. He did not wish him to die, though that would be a solution of all the difficulties of the moment, which it was scarcely possible not to desire. Nothing so bad as this, however, was in his mind. He could not have told why he had not acted upon the doctor's suggestion and telegraphed, so long as there was time. Perhaps it had been with a vague idea of conciliating Dr. Robson, of having the doctor on his side; perhaps merely from a reluctance to act, a hesitation, a resistance, of which he was now ashamed and wroth with himself. He might have done it, and asserted his authority, instead of letting that fellow cut in, as if he had any right. Meanwhile, Edmund acted as if he had the sole right. He went up with Dr. Robson to the patient's room, when the doctor thought it time for another visit, leaving Stephen still pacing about, agitated by feelings which he did not dare to show. His position was one to try the strongest

spirit. The probabilities were that if Mr. Mitford got better everything would be changed; and though, when he heard from Larkins his father's order that Pouncefort should be sent for, he had stopped that communication, he had at the same time sent for his man, and ordered that everything should be packed up, that he might be ready to go off at once, if *that* was what was going to happen. He was determined he would not endure abuse and loss both. So that if the Squire got well, if he saw his lawyer and carried out his new intentions, Stephen had decided to leave the house in an hour's time, perhaps never to return; while if Mr. Mitford died, in a moment all would be his, without question or remark. The balance of possibilities was thus a very exciting and uncertain one: to be reduced to the position of a son banished from the paternal home, as Roger had been, or to be the master and owner of all; to feel himself set aside from all share in the matter by Edmund, who took the command naturally, by a right which everybody acknowledged, or to be the master, and turn Edmund out. And all this

hanging upon a thread, upon the living or dying of the old man upstairs! Stephen did not wish his father to die. It was something, it was much, that he could resist that temptation. But he waited with sullen excitement, low-flaming, self-controlled. He was angry that the London physician had been sent for, and that he himself had not sent for him,—he scarcely knew which was most annoying,—and went on pacing in an angry mood, till Edmund and the doctor should come downstairs again, perhaps bringing news.

Edmund saw his brother's boxes packed, as he passed Stephen's room on his way downstairs, with some surprise. He would have preferred, had it been practicable, to have had no intercourse with him: but that, it was evident, could not be. He went, once more slowly and with reluctance, to the library, where he knew that Stephen was awaiting him. Captain Mitford stopped in his pacing up and down, and turned round, when Edmund came in. They stood and looked at each other for a moment silently; then, 'My father is no better,' Edmund said.

'I was afraid he would not be,' responded

Stephen. 'Robson,' he added, 'seems to have very little hope.'

'Very little hope. Did you see him before the seizure?'

'No.'

'Then things are the same between you as when he left Mount Travers?'

'Yes.'

After this brief colloquy, they stood for another moment looking at each other. To think that this fellow should confront him, as if he were the master, and that at any moment it might be he, Stephen, who was the master, and able to turn Edmund out! This was the thought that burned in Stephen's mind. On the chance of a moment! But as yet, no one knew how that chance might turn.

XLVII

THE BREAK-UP

THE long night passed in discomfort and gloom, in broken dozes and broken conversations, with long pauses. The two young men sat opposite to each other, obliged to keep each other company, yet with nothing to say. A jealous alarm prevented Stephen from retiring to his room. He felt that something might happen, if he were not always on the watch. The Squire might recover his senses. Pouncefort might arrive, and find some means, which neither doctor nor nurse was capable of, to get him round. Who could tell what might happen? Edmund remained up to receive the report of the doctor, to watch for the possible arrival of the physician from town, and also partly because he could not sleep. Dr. Robson came and went from the sickroom to the

library below, throwing himself on the sofa in the intervals, to take that rest which doctors as well as nurses know to be so indispensable in face of eventualities. The doctor thought in the breaks of his sleep that he had never seen anything more strange than the aspect of the two brothers, seated each in his corner, exchanging few words, taking little notice of each other, while their father lay between life and death, upstairs. Was it feeling? he asked himself, or what was it? He, too, had seen the packed and strapped portmanteaus within the open door of Stephen's room, and wondered who was going away, and why, and what had been the 'painful discovery' the patient had made, which one brother had not mentioned, and the other had at once identified as one of the causes of the seizure. This wonder did not prevent Dr. Robson, who was a young man in robust health, from sleeping, any more than anxiety for his patient did; but it passed through his mind, with some half guess at the cause, before he went to sleep, with these two dark figures before him,—one bolt upright in his chair, in a

fictitious watchfulness, the other with his face hid in the shadow of the hand which supported his head. There was no reason why they should both sit up. They seemed to be keeping a watch on each other, like sentinels of two contending parties. Their aspect was so strange, and the consciousness of their presence so strong, that they made the doctor dream. He could not shake from his mind the certainty that they were there.

The London doctor came in the morning, not having hurried himself unduly, and regretting, as he said, the great additional expense that would have been entailed upon the survivors had a special train been necessary. He arrived, fresh and neat, upon the exhausted and excited household, and with a mind quite free from any tortures of suspense. But his examination of the patient did not come to much. He said, when he came downstairs, that it was impossible to tell—the patient might linger a day or two; he might even rally, by extreme good fortune; or another attack might come on, and terminate the matter at once.

'There can be no doubt that it is to his advantage that he has survived so long,' said this great authority, with a meaning which was comprehensible enough. 'To be sure,' cried Dr. Robson, who was an imprudent young man, 'it is to his advantage that he has survived, or he would be dead by this time.'

But the fact was that no more light was to be thrown upon the question by science, and the London physician came and went, as such great authorities often do, in a case which is beyond the reach of mortal power.

The only incident in the miserable lingering day was the arrival of Mr. Pouncefort, who had, by some mysterious bird of the air carrying the matter, or other occult agency, found out that his client was dying, and had expressed a wish that he should be sent for. He arrived when Stephen had permitted himself to believe that danger was over, and was about to lie down for needful rest. But the sight of the lawyer roused the heir at once.

'I shouldn't advise you to stay,' Captain Mitford observed. 'He'll never be able for business again.'

'It's hard to tell,' said Mr. Pouncefort. 'I've seen a man turn everything upside down in his succession, after that had been said of him.'

Stephen stared at the new comer with glazed and weary eyes, in which a sullen fire burned behind the film of exhaustion; but restrained the impulse to reply. He sat down again, however, in the chair which he had occupied all night, determined to keep this dangerous visitor in sight. Mr. Pouncefort had no compassion for the supplanter who had been put into his brother's place, in spite of all he had himself been able to do against it. He asked a hundred questions: how the attack came on; what was the cause; whether there had been any 'worry' at the bottom of so sudden a seizure. 'People say something occurred to put him out, but of course you must know.'

'I don't know; he was out in the sun, on one of those hot days,—that's what the doctor thinks.'

'Oh! that's what the doctor thinks? Robson, is it? He ought to know your father's constitution. I should have thought

the Squire was pretty well used to being out in the sun.'

'You had better ask Robson,' said Stephen; 'he'll be here presently;' and then there was a silence between them.

The lawyer had a bag with papers, which he opened and looked over, perhaps ostentatiously; he had no desire to spare the young man. Stephen was overcome with fatigue. He kept dropping into momentary dozes, from which he started, opening wide in defiance his red and heavy eyes. But he would not now go to bed or do anything to refresh himself; he was like a jailer in attendance upon some troublesome prisoner; he would not let this new enemy out of his sight.

This suspense lasted till far on in the second night, when there was a sudden stir and commotion in the sickroom, and the doctor was hurriedly called upstairs. In a very short time the others were summoned. They stood about the bed, Mr. Pouncefort placing himself at the foot, with an anxious intention of catching what last glimpse of intelligence might come into the eyes of the

dying man. But it was too late for anything of the kind. The Squire had been stricken down by another and more violent seizure. He was so strong in vitality, and his physical forces were so little impaired, that even now he made a struggle for his life; but in vain. Presently the loud breathing stopped. Silence replaced that awful, involuntary throbbing of the human mechanism, from which the inspiring force had gone. Love and grief had little place in that death-scene; but there is something overawing and impressive in every transit from life to death. The two sons stood side by side, without a word. Simmons, the housekeeper, half with a feminine sense of what was becoming, half perhaps with a real human regret for the master of so many years, sniffed a little behind the curtain. The others all stood in dead silence, while the doctor closed those staring, troubled eyes.

Stephen was the first to leave the room. He went straight to his own, where his servant was hanging about, in the agitation which fills a household at such a moment. He kicked the portmanteaus with his foot,

and said loudly, 'Undo all that,' before he closed the door. He wanted rest and sleep above all things, but he could not refrain from that one token of an anxiety now laid at rest. Only Mr. Pouncefort, however, took any notice of this symbolical action. Stephen had been of no account in the house during these two days, and when he disappeared without even a good-night, without a sign of civility, the others were too much preoccupied to notice. Dr. Robson was eager to get home,—he had spent the greater part of two nights out of his house; and Edmund went downstairs with him, to settle and arrange everything. The lawyer stole away to the room which had been prepared for him, and after a few hours' rest left the house in the morning, before any one was astir. His mission had been a failure. Sometimes there is a moment of possibility, a place of repentance, afforded to a man at the very end of his life. But in this case there was nothing of the kind. The wrong done was done permanently, and all was now over. That strange injustice which lies underneath the surface of life, which gives the lie to all the

optimisms of philanthropy, which is restrained by no law, and is so often permitted to establish itself in absolute impunity, had again gained the upper hand. There was no appeal to be made, no redress possible. The dead man might have repented, had time been left him. But all the stars in their courses had fought for the unworthy. Mr. Pouncefort felt this angrily, almost shaking his fist at the serene heavens which overlooked everything, and, so far as appeared, took no heed. To Edmund the same thought came but in a different form, as he stood at his window, looking out upon a firmament all living with innumerable lights. The real sufferer was not angry. He looked out with a profound sadness, yet with that half smile of spectatorship which had been habitual to him all his life. Perhaps at no period would he have felt his disinheritance so sharply as another man might; at this moment he did not feel it at all. Poor father! was what he thought,—who had taken that step of injustice in vain; who had rewarded the evil-doer, and punished him to whom he intended no wrong. It was hard to think of

the Squire as changed into some heavenly semblance, a spiritual being moved by spiritual motives alone. Edmund's imagination could not reach so far. He thought of his father as perhaps suddenly enlightened as to this irony of fate, cognisant of the evil he had done, impotent to amend it, obliged to bow to the inexorable fact which his own arbitrary will had created, and carrying about the consciousness of this tremendous mistake and failure in a quickened being, to which, perhaps, there would no longer belong the happy human faculty of forgetfulness. Would not that be hell enough,—or purgatory, at least?

Things went on at Melcombe without further change for some days. Stephen took no charge in respect to the funeral, or any of the immediate arrangements which had to be made. He stood by, passive, while Edmund gave all the orders and attended to everything. Not a word was said while the father lay dead in the house. They even dined together in silence, broken only by a few conventional phrases from time to time. The brothers-in-law were abroad, out of reach; and though the entire county

came to the funeral, there were no relations except a distant cousin or two, and no one in the house to break the brothers' *tête-à-tête.* When all was over, they returned alone together to the house. Mr. Pouncefort was the principal executor, and there was no question between them about any of the details. Once more the family table was spread for the two brothers, who had walked side by side after their father's coffin. It would be impossible to describe the scarcely contained excitement of Larkins and his assistants as to how this dinner would go off. Stephen solved the question for them without delay. He came in first, with his hands plunged deeply into his pockets and his eyebrows lowered over his eyes, and took his father's place. Instead of the restrained and formal conversation of the intervening days, he now began to talk. He spoke of what he was going to do.

'I'll very likely go out and join the Stathams, for a bit. I'm not fond of the Continent, but one doesn't know what to do with one's self just at first. It's too early for Monte Carlo and that sort of thing. I don't

know what sort of beastly place they may have got to, but Statham's sure to look out for himself and get something or other to do. And one can't have a lot of fellows down all at once to fill up the old place.'

'No, that would hardly do,' Edmund answered.

His brother gave him a surly look from underneath his lowering brows. 'I don't see why it shouldn't do, if one made up one's mind to it. I don't mind gossip, for my part. But there would be nothing for them to do. I mean to have a lot of men down for September.'

'Yes?' said Edmund, for Stephen had hesitated.

'And I think,' he went on, after a moment, 'of shutting up the house till then. There's an idle lot of servants about.' He had paused to say this until all but Larkins were out of the room. 'I rather think of making a clean sweep. What does very well for an old lot, don't you know, doesn't do when a man's young. So I thought maybe it wouldn't be a bad plan to—let it, perhaps, for a month or two, or else shut up the house.'

'To let it—for a month or two!' exclaimed Edmund, in consternation.

'Well, quantities of people do; but I don't say I've made up mind to that. Only, I'll either take that course or else shut up. It's dull enough here, Heaven knows. I was thinking, perhaps, if you could make it convenient—when it suits, don't you know—that is, as soon as you can manage it—to clear out.'

'That is exactly what I had meant to tell you. I think of going to-morrow.'

'All right,' rejoined Stephen. 'I didn't mean to put on the screw, but it's always best that fellows should understand each other, don't you know, from the first.'

'Much the best,' Edmund said.

XLVIII

THE MINGLED THREAD

THESE were almost the last words which passed at this period between Captain Mitford of Melcombe and his brother. Stephen left within a few days, having succeeded so well in clearing the house that the servants forestalled him by giving their demission *en masse*, headed by Mr. Larkins and Mrs. Simmons, whom Stephen's speech about the idle lot, duly reported by the equally offended Larkins, had wounded to the quick. He was obliged to leave the place in the hands of some of the lower drudges of the kitchen, who had no feelings, and were delighted to succeed to the positions vacated by their betters; and to have the house set up anew, with expensive menials, supplied by a London agent, when he returned. He failed in ousting the Fords, for the excellent

reason that they had finally decided to take advantage of his first hasty dismissal; so that his emissaries found nothing but an empty house, when they went to carry his decision into effect. Stephen was not aware that he escaped an action for wages and board wages, which Ford was bent on bringing against him, only by means of Edmund's entreaties and the compensation he offered, in order that the family name should not be dragged through the mire, in public at least. But notwithstanding these efforts, the facts of the case got breathed about in the county, creating not only a strong feeling against the new lord of Melcombe, but, what he dreaded still more, a wave of riotous ridicule, such as went far, sweeping through half the messrooms in the country in echoes of inextinguishable laughter: 'Heard of Mitford of the Red Roans, — how he was sold? Thought he had got a simpleton in hand, that knew no better; but, by Jove! out she marched, colours flying, and left him *planté-là!*' The other tales about him, which roused a graver indignation,—how he had been the means of his brother Roger's death,

and, by a sudden discovery of his ridiculous adventures and shameful conduct, of his father's, — though these rumours were bad enough, were not, either in the estimation of his special public, or in his own, so overwhelming as the story of Lily's escape and the ridicule of his failure. Even Statham and Markham, his brothers-in-law, 'roared,' as they described it, at Steve's absurd position.

'But I'd cut the whole concern, if I were you, for a year or two, old fellow,' Statham said. 'Don't go back there this year. Have a go at the big game, or something.'

'Try Africa,' said Markham.

'By Jove! I'll do neither the one nor the other! What are you talking of? I'll see you all at—Jericho, first! And if you don't care to come to Melcombe for September,—why, you can try Africa yourselves,' Stephen said.

This somewhat changed the ideas of the brothers-in-law, who were not averse to coming to Melcombe for the partridges. They endeavoured to make their wives laugh, too, at the story of Lily, with but partial

success; for women are certainly destitute of a fine sense of humour.

'It was odious of Stephen, beyond anything!' Lady Statham said; 'but still, that little set-up thing!—what did she expect, I wonder?' And, 'It must have been her own fault,' Amy said. Nina told her little tale with the same gravity, without seeing the fun. '*I* knew Stephen was after Lily, when he used to go out in the park after dinner. What should he go out in the park for, if he was not after somebody? To smoke his cigar! Oh! as if a man went out like that only to smoke his cigar! Simmons always shook her head. She used to say a gentleman was up to no good when he went out in the evenings. Would you let Statham go out like that, if you knew there was somebody at the West Lodge, Geraldine?'

'Bertie's got his smoking-room,' said Lady Statham, indignant, 'if there were twenty West Lodges. But I do think poor papa was to blame about the boys, never letting them smoke at home.'

'Boys are so ready to go wrong,' sighed Amy, who was ten years younger than her

brothers. Then the party melted away, dispersing in different directions, and leaving only Nina, who knew better than any one how much neglected the boys had been, and how natural it was that they should stray to the West Lodge, while they smoked their cigars.

Stephen came back in September, and found his house perfectly established with fine footmen from London, and not an old face to remind him of the past. His friends arrived soon after, filling the house. But though the covers were in very good order, and the birds abundant, it was not a successful performance, on the whole. Even the Tredgolds had other engagements, when he asked them to dinner. When the Stathams and the Markhams came, there was one entertainment which did well, and that was a garden-party, at which nobody was compelled to pay any particular attention to the master of the house. Otherwise the county cut him, to his intense astonishment and rage. And after that he took Statham's advice, and went abroad,—not to Africa, in search of big game, which would have been the best thing, but to

Monte Carlo and other resorts of the same kind. Meantime, the London servants and the new establishment had cost him for three months more money than the old Squire had spent in a couple of years. Altogether, Stephen's affairs were not prosperous, nor his prospects bright. But, no doubt, if he stays away for a time, and keeps his estate at nurse, and especially if he marries well, and brings home a wife acceptable to the county, the weight of permanence and continuation will tell in his favour, and Captain Mitford will be received, if not with open arms, at least back again into a tolerable place.

Edmund left Melcombe the morning after his father's funeral. He did not see Stephen again. He made arrangements for the removal of all his special belongings, and went away without much regret from the house that should have been his home. There are some who feel more than others the loss of houses and lands; and there are some who tear themselves with difficulty from the walls that have been their shelter all their life. In both points Edmund was a little at fault. He felt no despair at the loss of his inherit-

ance; he had never thought of it as his. All the emotion he had on the subject he had spent when Roger was sent away, and perhaps the only pang that had moved him concerning his own share of the loss was when Roger, unaware of what had passed, had anticipated for Edmund the heirship he had himself lost. Edmund had experienced a constriction of his heart when his brother had indulged in that half-melancholy, half-smiling picture of what he believed was to be: himself with Lily, not happy perhaps, after the ordinary meaning of the word, yet feeling his only possibility of life to be by her side; and Edmund and his Elizabeth in Melcombe, the centres of a wider existence. Tears, which had not been drawn from Edmund's eyes by his own deposition, rose at the thought of that talk of things that were not to be.

He went, after he had left the house, to the corner of the parish church in which was the Melcombe vault. He was not unmindful of his father, either. What disappointments, what self-deception, what vain anticipations, never to be realised, were shut up there in the darkness, in that gloomy place where the

ashes of the Mitfords were kept from mingling with common dust! Edmund could not think of any failure of his own, in the presence of the failure of all their plans and wishes. He stood leaning upon the old brick wall, with his feet among the rank herbage; then, with an ache in his heart to leave there all that had been Roger, all the human hopes and wishes that were never to be fulfilled, and with that ache of wonder which is in all our hearts as to what they know of us who have left us, in the mystery of their new existence, Edmund turned away, and set out upon his own. Happy Edmund in his mourning, in his deprivation, with his home shut against him, and all natural expectation cut off! He passed through these troubles lightly enough, having his own happiness to fall back upon, which waited serenely for him after all was over; holding upon the gates of another paradise, the individual inheritance, which is for every man who has a centre of love to turn to, and a meet companion awaiting him there.

Stephen, as it turned out, had been of the greatest use to the household at Mount

Travers, by the firebrand he had thrown into the midst of it. Mrs. Travers did not, indeed, recover from the shock all at once; at least, she did not relinquish the pleasure of taking up that exhausted firebrand, and thrusting it at Elizabeth, as a sort of offensive weapon, inflicting a wound which, when she saw how it hurt, the old lady wept over and kissed to make it well, with an alternation of reproach and conciliation which was not without its enjoyment. Elizabeth, delivered from the incessant strain of keeping this secret from her aunt, was now free to use what means she could to set the wrong right,—a thing which in her ignorance she had supposed to be attended by endless difficulties, but which, with Edmund's help and backing up, became the easiest matter in the world. Before they were married Elizabeth settled upon Mrs. Travers the great house on the hill, with its plate-glass windows and all its luxuries, with an income sufficient to make the keeping up of the establishment possible to the widow. This was a serious diminution of her wealth, but Edmund liked it all the better. They were still rich enough

for all their desires. They had the luck to get possession of an old house which had been the Melcombe dower-house, a picturesque, old-fashioned place, which had passed out of the hands of the Mitfords several generations before, and now came suddenly into the market, to the great satisfaction of the disinherited son. We will not deny that it gave Elizabeth a pang to think of her husband settling down in the same county, on a little bit of property so much inferior to Melcombe, and in a house which was nothing but a dependency of the family home possessed by his younger brother. But Edmund only laughed at this feminine grudge.

'Whatever he does, he must always carry that mark of cadency,' he said. 'It frightened my poor father almost out of changing his will, but it does not seem to impress you, Lizzy.' By this time, our young man had got so familiar with his own good fortune, and so possessed by the ease of his happiness, and felt it so difficult to realise that she had not always belonged to him, that he had forgotten that superlative sentiment of his about the name of Elizabeth, and called her Lizzy,

like other people, with the best grace in the world.

'If that were the only sign of cadency, as you call it, I should not care much about it,' said his wife indignantly; 'but when I think what you are, Edmund, and what he is——'

'I am no such great things, if I had not you to back me up. But whatever poor Steve has, he can't get rid of that little mark. I must be the head of the family, though I have nothing, and he has all.'

'And you say "poor Steve!"' cried Elizabeth, with a flash of disdain in her eyes.

'Yes, my dearest,' Edmund said, 'poor Steve. And when he thinks, as he must do now and then, you may be sure he feels it, too.'

Mrs. Mitford shook her head indignantly (it was very certain that she was Mrs. Mitford, and that the lady of Melcombe, when there might come to be one, could be nothing but Mrs. Stephen), and perhaps hers, though the less generous, was the truer estimate. Stephen had sundry pricks to put up with, but in the end, no doubt, people would forget, and he would remain the most important

personage in the consciousness of many persons who forgot that old story. It is much to be doubted whether Edmund himself, though he produced it laughing, to smooth down his wife's indignation, thought very much of the mark of cadency, or of the fact that he himself bore the family coat without a difference. What pleased him most was that he had possession of certain simpler things; that is to say, that he had got the wife he wanted, and the happiness which he had long despaired of, and a home such as he had dreamed of, but up to his marriage had never known. He thought these things were enough for a man, with or without the position which befits the head of the family; and a number of persons, we hope, will think that Edmund was right.

Lily Ford remained Mrs. Travers's companion, and a most congenial one,—more congenial than Elizabeth, though it was not necessary to say so. When the old lady received the deed of gift which reinstated her in full possession of what her husband ought to have left her, she accepted it with difficulty and much resistance, and would

really have preferred to keep her grievance instead, which was a thing that involved no responsibilities. She managed to retain a little of that, however, by making her will instantly, and leaving the property again to Elizabeth. 'What could I do?' she said. 'Of course, whatever I wished, she left me no alternative, after the step she took.' The plate-glass windows were all shut up for a long time, and the house stood blindly staring out upon the landscape, with no eyes to see it, while Mrs. Travers and her companion went abroad. It would be difficult to say which of the two more completely enjoyed these travels. Lily, with the honest, peasant foundation of her character, found it indispensable to give an equivalent for what she received, by bestowing double care and attention upon the old lady, who was not her mistress, but yet depended upon her for a great part of the comfort of her life. As she was quick and intelligent, and soon able to make her smattering of boarding-school French useful, and pretty, and well-dressed, and pleasant to behold, and incapable of conceiving anything happier or more elevated

than the little course of commonplace tours, which were to both the most exciting of travels, she satisfied Mrs. Travers's every requirement as a companion. No mother and daughter could have been more happy together. To travel about in first-class carriages, to live in grand hotels, to be looked up to as one of the simple tourist ladies, to whom every innkeeper was obsequious, filled Lily with an elation which had, after all, something more in it than personal aggrandisement; it was the ideal after which she had sighed, the plan that pleased her childish thought. Perhaps the aspiration to be a lady, in the acceptation of the word which occurs to a gamekeeper's daughter,—to live among beautiful things, according to what her imagination holds for beautiful; to have the leisure, the grace, the softness, the brightness, of ladyhood about her, instead of inhabiting a cottage and working at needlework for a living,—is not, after all, an aspiration to be despised. It was the best thing she knew, just as travelling on the Continent was the finest occupation she knew, the thing which the finest people did. She would not have

bought that elevation, as she had proved, in anything but an honest way. Meantime, her father and mother had charge of Mount Travers, Mrs. Ford occupying the fine position of housekeeper, while the 'ladies'—oh! the delight of that word, which the mother, with profound self-abnegation, turned over in her mouth like a sweet morsel, as she said it —were absent on their tour. Lily had now a little fortune of her own,—the money which Roger had meant to settle upon her when she should be his wife. She was not sure that she could have chosen anything more desirable for herself, had she been permitted to choose her own fate.

Poor Roger! This was all his foolish love had come to,—the love which he knew to be foolish; which had cost him his inheritance, and, in a manner, his life. Was not his fate, perhaps, the best after all?—to escape from all the network of misery which would have caught his feet, the unsuitable companionship which never could have satisfied his mind, and to begin over again in a world where at least the same mistakes cannot be possible? But it is hard for men to think so, to whom

it must always seem a better thing to fulfil the mortal course set before them, through whatever pains and troubles, and live out their life.

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