THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE AND THE HEIR APPARENT

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BY

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PREFACE

THE conditions of literary work, especially in fiction, have so much altered since the time when a book came solidly before the world in one issue, that I think it right to say a word in explanation of the rapidity with which one work of mine has recently, within a few months, followed another. The fact is, that a writer of fiction is now so much drawn into the easy way of serial publication that he, or she, not unfrequently loses command of the times and seasons once so carefully studied. We have not yet come to the *feuilleton* of French newspapers, but there are said to be indications that this is on its way; and in the meantime the mode of publication in

magazines, and country newspapers under the enterprising syndicate of Messrs. Tillotson, which are sometimes delayed and sometimes hurried according to the need of the periodicals rather than the calculations of the writer, brings together sometimes a small crowd of books by the same hand which have all run their little course, and ended it about the same time. These bring with them new complications in respect to American copyright, which must be claimed at once or not at all; so that the writer of fiction when such a combination occurs has little choice, and must bring out his books much more quickly, one after another, than he has any desire to do. And some are necessarily delayed by the stream which hurries on the others. The present work was written some years ago, before the days of American copyright (such as it is). And it has happened that another recent publication of mine, "Diana Trelawney," published by Messrs. Blackwood, went astray and lost

itself for many years in the dark recesses of the editor's cabinet, where it came to light suddenly after the seclusion of half a lifetime, its author herself having almost forgotten its existence. What the little manuscript might be doing all that time among other drifts of literature, who can say? But it had to come before the public when it reappeared. Thus it is that, without intention, and without any helter-skelter of composition, it sometimes happens that one work hurries on the heels of another, without any power on the part of the writer to stay them in their career.

It has been my fate in a long life of production to be credited chiefly with the equivocal virtue of industry, a quality so excellent in morals, so little satisfactory in art. How it is that to bear so virtuous and commendable a character should be unpleasing, is one of those whimsicalities of nature which none of us are without. I should prefer to disclaim that excellence if I might; but at all events

so old a friend of the public as myself, who has always found so much moderate and kind friendliness of reception if seldom any enthusiasm, may be allowed to disclaim the corresponding vice of hurry in composition, which is alike disrespectful to the common patron, and derogatory to one's self.

M. O. W. O.

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AND

THE HEIR APPARENT

CHAPTER I

LORD FROGMORE was about sixty when his stepbrother, John Parke, his heir presumptive, announced to him one day his desire to marry. John was thirty-five, the son of another mother, with whom, however, Lord Frogmore had always lived in the best intelligence. A more indulgent elder brother could not be. He had never himself married, or even thought of doing so, so far as anybody knew. He had considered John's interests in everything. Had he been his father instead of his elder brother he could not have been more thoughtful. Whether, perhaps, it was John's advantage he was thinking of when he remained unmarried

was another matter, though you would have supposed that was the elderly peer's only notion to hear how John's mother spoke of it. At all events it was very much to John Parke's advantage. His creditors did not press him, his tailor and he were the best friends in the world, everything was in his favour in life, and in London, where even his little extravagancies were greatly encouraged and smiled upon. Heir presumptive, the Honourable John Parke: that one line in the "Peerage" made life very smooth for John.

Lord Frogmore was not, however, so entirely actuated by consideration for his brother as his stepmother thought. He was a man who took, and had taken all his life, very great care of himself. Whatever was his reason for not marrying, it was not on account of his brother John. No doubt he was aware that in all probability his brother would be his heir: but he did not dwell on that thought, or indeed contemplate the necessity of an heir at all. He took great care of his health, which was perfect, and had a system of life which secured him the utmost possible comfort and pleasure with the least

possible trouble. A man who has no family to interfere with his liberty, plenty of money, perfect control of his own time and actions, and no duties to speak of, can make himself exceedingly comfortable when he sets his mind to it, and this was what Lord Frogmore had done.

He was, however, a little startled but much more amused when John announced to him his intentions. It was at the beginning of the season, before as yet Mr. Parke could have been endangered by any of the blandishments of society, and Lord Frogmore's mind, which was a very lively one, made a sweep over the country houses at which he knew his brother to have been staying. "Do I know the lady?" he asked, with a twinkle in his eye. He had not a very high opinion of his brother John, in point of intellect at least, and he immediately leapt to the conclusion that it was not John's intention so much as the lady's which had decided this important step.

"I don't think so," said John. "She is of a good family, but very fond of the country, and they don't come much to town. She is a Miss Ravelstone, of Grocombe — Yorkshire

people — perhaps you may never even have heard the name."

"No, I can't say I have ever heard the name," said Lord Frogmore, with his face lengthening. For there is this unconscious arrogance in people who belong to what is called society, that it seems to them as if it was the same as not to exist at all, if you are not at once recognised and identified by the mention of your name.

"No," said John with something of a blush, "I did not expect you would. Her father has got a nice little estate, but they don't much mind society. There's several brothers. I don't suppose I shall have very much money with her. They're chiefly a hunting family," John said.

"Well, that is no harm. But it's a pity if there is no money," said Lord Frogmore calmly. "You have not money enough yourself to make you independent of that. What do you mean to do?"

Lord Frogmore looked with great composure at John, who in his turn looked very blank at his brother. John was very much more warmly conscious of being Frogmore's

heir than Frogmore was. He had taken it for granted, though not without cold sensations, that Frogmore would do something, nay, much for him in this emergency. The old gentleman would feel that John was fulfilling a duty to the common family which he himself (thank Heaven!) had never taken the trouble to do. John felt, indeed, that Frogmore ought to be grateful to him for marrying, which was clearly a duty, as he was almost the last of the race. Lord Frogmore saw through this with very lively perceptions, but it amused him to play a little on his brother's fears.

"You will wish to get an appointment of some sort or another," he said. "It is a thing not very easy to get, but still we must see what can be done for you. But I don't know how you are to pull through those examinations which are necessary for everything, John."

John kept silence for a time with a very disconcerted countenance; then he burst forth almost with an explosion. "I thought you would have been pleased, Frogmore——"

"I am not displeased. You are old enough to judge for yourself and to choose for yourself. Of course, I am delighted that you should be

happy," said Lord Frogmore with his bland smile which always took the fortitude out of John. But when he had reduced the poor fellow almost to a jelly, and made his purpose and his prospects look equally impossible—which was not difficult to do—the elder brother relented; or else it would be better to say he did for John what he had always intended to do, notwithstanding that he could not resist the temptation of turning him outside in. He inquired into the antecedents, or rather into the family of Miss Ravelstone, for she had no antecedents, happily for herself, and discovered that there was at least nothing against them if they were scarcely of the caste of those who usually gave heirs to Frogmore. Her father was a squire in Yorkshire, though but of small estate, whose family had been Ravelstones of Grocombe long before the Parkes had ever been heard of. Unfortunately, ancient family does not always give refinement or elevation either of mind or manners, and horses, though most estimable animals and the favourite pursuit of the English aristocracy, have still less influence of that description. Horses were the devotion, the vocation, and more or less the living of the

Ravelstone family. From father to son, all the men of the house were absorbed in the cultivation, the production, the worship of that noble animal. Women there were none in the house save Miss Letitia, who was only so far of the prevailing persuasion that she was an admirable horsewoman. But in her heart she never desired to see a horse again so long as she lived. She had heard them talked of so long and so much that she hated the very name. The stable talk and the hunting talk were a weariness to her. Her mind was set on altogether different things. To get into society and to make some sort of figure in the world was what she longed for and aspired to. The county society was all she knew of, and that was at first the limit of her wishes. But these desires rose to higher levels after awhile, as will hereafter be seen. She had as little prospect of admission into the elevated society of the county as she had of access to the Queen's court at the moment when kind fate called her forth from her obscurity.

This happened in the following way. A very kind and good-natured family of the neighbourhood, one of the few among the

county people who knew the Ravelstones, had as usual a party for the Doncaster races. It was not a good year. There were no horses running which excited the general expectation, nothing very good looked for, and various misfortunes had occurred in the Sillingers' usual circle. Some were ill and some were in mourning, and some had lost money—more potent reasons for refraining from their usual festivities than the buying of oxen or even the marrying of wives—and the party at Cuppland was reduced in consequence below its usual numbers. It was then that Lady Sillinger, always good-natured, suggested to her daughters that they should ask "Tisch," which was the very unlucky diminution by which Letitia was known. Poor Tisch had few pleasures in life. She had no mother to take her about—hardly even an aunt. She would enjoy the races for their own sake, the family being so horsey—and she could come in nobody's way. The Sillinger girls were young, and pretty, and careless, quite unconcerned about the chance of any one coming in their way, and very sure that Tisch Ravelstone was the last person in the world to fear as a rival. They agreed to

the invitation with the utmost alacrity. Poor Tisch never went anywhere. They were as pleased to give her a holiday as if it had been of some advantage to themselves. And Letitia came much excited and very grateful, with one new dress and something done to each of the old ones to make them more presentable. The result was not very satisfactory among all the fresh toilettes from London and Paris which the Sillingers and their friends had for the races; but Letitia had the good sense to wear dresses of subdued colours, which were not much remarked. She was not pretty. She had light hair without colour enough in it to be remarkable, and scanty in volume—hair that never could be made to look anything. Her nose was turned up a little at the tip, and was slightly red when the weather was cold. Her lips were thin. She herself was thin, with an absence of roundness and softness which is even more disadvantageous than the want of a pretty face. She was said by everybody to be marked out for an old maid. So it may easily be perceived that Lady Sillinger was right when she said that poor Tisch would come in nobody's way.

On the other hand, John Parke was a very eligible person, highly presentable, and Lord Frogmore's heir presumptive, a man about town who knew everybody and who never could have been expected in the ordinary course of affairs to be aware of the existence of such a homely person as Tisch Ravelstone. He did not indeed notice her at all except to say good-morning when they met, and good-night when she joined the procession of ladies with candlesticks going to bed, until the third day. On that fatal morning, before the party set out for the Races, Mr. Parke had an accident. He twisted his foot upon the slippery *parquet* of the breakfast-room, which was only partially covered by the thick Turkey carpet; and though the twist was supposed not to be serious, it prevented him from accompanying the party. He was very much annoyed by this *contretemps*, but there was nothing for it but to submit. Before Lady Sillinger set out for Doncaster she had everything arranged for his comfort, so far as could be foreseen. He was put on a sofa in the library, with a table by his elbow covered with all the morning papers, with the last

English novels out of Mudie's box, and the last yellow books from Paris which had reached the country. There was an inkstand also, a blotting book, pens and pencils—everything a disabled man could be supposed to want.

"I would stay to take care of you," said kind Lady Sillinger, "but Sir Thomas ——"

"Oh, don't think of such a thing," said John, "I shall be very comfortable."

They all came to pity and console him before they drove away — the girls in their pretty dresses, the men all spruce and fresh. He felt it a little hard upon him that after having been invited specially for the Races he should have to stay at home, and he felt very angry with the silly fashion, as he thought it for the moment, of those uncovered floors and slippery polished boards. "What the blank did people have those things for?" he said to himself. Still he did his best to grin and bear it. He settled himself on his sofa and listened to the distant sounds of the setting off, the voices and the calls to one and another. "Tom will come with us——" "No, but I am to have the vacant place in

the landau." "Oh, now, Dora, there is room for you here." Dora was the youngest of the Sillingers and the one he liked best. He wondered with whom she was to be during the drive. There was another vacancy beside his own. One of the ladies had stayed behind as well as himself. He wondered which it was. If it was Mrs. Vivian, for example, he wished she would come and keep him company. But, perhaps, it was some horrid cold or other which would make her keep her bed.

The sound of their departure died away. They had all gone. No chance of any one now coming into the room to deliver John Parke from his own society. He would have to make up his mind to spend his day alone. With a great sigh, which nearly blew the paper which he held so carelessly out of his hand, John betook himself to this unusual occupation. He read the whole of the *Morning Post* and *Standard* from beginning to end, and then he began upon the *Times*. There was nothing in the papers. It is astonishing how little there is in them when you particularly want to find something that

will amuse you for an hour or two. He felt inclined to fling them to the other corner of the room after he had gone over everything from the beginning to the end. And it was just at this moment, when he was thoroughly tired of himself and would have welcomed anybody, that he heard a movement at the door. He looked up very eagerly and Miss Ravelstone came in. To do her justice Letitia was quite ignorant of the accident and that Mr. Parke had been left behind. She had woke with a violent cold—so bad that she too had been compelled to give up the idea of going out. She had put on her plainest dress, knowing that no one would be back till it was time for dinner, and feeling that her gray gown was quite good enough for the governess and the children with whom she would have to lunch; she had indulged herself by having breakfast in bed, which was quite an unusual luxury. Her nose was more red than usual through the cold, her eyes were suffused with unintended tears. She did not want to see any one. When she met John Parke's eager look, Miss Ravelstone would have liked the substantial library floor to open

and swallow her up. "Oh, I beg your pardon," she cried.

"Is that you, Miss Ravelstone?" said John. "Is it possible that you have not gone with the rest?"

"I had such a bad cold," stammered Tisch —for a moment she actually felt as if she had done something wrong in going into the room.

"And here am I laid by the leg—I mean by the ankle," said Mr. Parke. Even then Letitia was not fully awakened to the magnitude of the chance which her good fortune had thus put into her hands. She said she was very sorry, and for a moment stood hovering at the door uncertain whether she ought not to retire at once. But John was so much delighted to have somebody to tell his story to that he would not let her go.

"It was all those confounded boards in the breakfast-room," he said. "Why can't they have carpets all over the room? When one is abroad one makes up one's mind to that sort of thing, everything's slippery and shiny there; but in a house in Yorkshire I came down like an elephant, Miss Ravel-

stone. I wonder you did not feel the whole house shake."

"I was in bed," said Letitia, "nursing a bad cold."

"A bad cold is a nasty thing," said John, "but it is not so bad as a twist in the foot. You can move about at least—and here am I stuck on a sofa—not able even to ring the bell."

"I will ring the bell for you with pleasure, Mr. Parke."

"That's just one of the last things one would ask a lady to do," cried John, "and I don't know why you should ring the bell for me. If the fellow was here I don't know what I want. I couldn't tell him to sit down and talk to me. It's such a bore to be left here alone, and every one else away."

"I'll sit down and talk to you if you like," said Tisch, with a laugh. Her eyes recovered in the most marvellous manner. She felt inclined to sneeze, but shook it off. She began to wake up and see what was before her. Heir presumptive to Lord Frogmore! She had made up her mind that she was likely to meet somebody of importance on this great

visit—and had no intention of neglecting any opportunity—though she had never even supposed, never hoped, to have such a captive delivered into her hands in this easy way.

"I wish you would," said John. "I'm afraid I'm not very lively, and this confounded ankle hurts; but perhaps we can find something to talk about. Are you fond of playing games, Miss Ravelstone? I wonder if there are any here?"

"There is a chess-board, I know," said Letitia; "but I don't know much about chess; and there's bezique, and I have a 'go bang' of my own."

"Oh, if it's not too much to ask, please fetch the 'go bang,'" cried John.

Miss Letitia nodded her head, she disappeared, and in two minutes returned a little out of breath with the box containing that intellectual amusement in her hand. She had done something to herself in the meantime, John felt; but though he was trained in the things that ladies "do" to make themselves more attractive, he could not make out what it was. They played about twenty games at "go bang," and time which had been so

leaden-footed flew. But everything exhausts itself after a while. When an hour and a half had passed thus, John began to fidget again, and wonder what o'clock it was, and if it would soon be time for luncheon—which was at two in this late house; and it was now only one o'clock, another lingering hour.

"Should you like," said Miss Ravelstone, "to hear a great secret about Cobweb?" Now Cobweb was the favourite for the next day's race, and John Parke had, as he would himself have said, a pot of money on that horse.

"Anything about the race? Why, to be sure, of all things in the world," he said.

It has already been mentioned that the Ravelstones were all horsey to the last degree except Tisch, who was not of that persuasion; but she had heard horses talked of all her life, and while she entered into the biography of Cobweb, John Parke listened with eager eyes.

CHAPTER II

THIS was how it all began; how it went on was more than any one could say, certainly not John himself, who woke up one morning to feel himself an engaged man with a more startled sensation than words could express. He knew that it was all right; that Letitia had been everything that was nice and proper, and had even spoken humbly of her own merits as not good enough for such a distinguished person as himself; but what were the steps that led up to it, or how it had come about, John could give no clear account. He spoke of the incident with a kind of awe. How it happened, or what had come to pass before it happened, was something too great for him, which he could not follow; but from the very first moment he was aware that it was, and could neither be got rid of nor

explained away. John was not a very triumphant lover. He was a little subdued indeed, scarcely knowing how to announce it to his friends; but Letitia took it upon her instantly to bear his burdens, and it was she who told Lady Sillinger, who told everybody, and so that matter was got over. I do not mean to say that it was all settled during the Doncaster week at the Sillingers'; for however Letitia might have felt, John could never have been got to be so prompt as that. But another benevolent lady who saw how the tide was turning, and who thought it a great pity that a girl should not have her chance, invited Letitia and also John, who happened to have no other pressing engagement, and in a fortnight more great things were done. I have said before that he never could tell how it was, but he very soon came to understand that it was all settled, and that it necessitated a great many other arrangements. One of them was the conversation with Lord Frogmore with which this story began. John Parke was still a little dazed and overawed by the great event when he informed his brother, and the manner in which Lord Frog-

more at first received his confidence at once bewildered and disconcerted him. But afterwards everything came right, and the arrangements made were satisfactory in every way. Lord Frogmore paid his brother's debts. He gave Miss Ravelstone a very handsome wedding present, and he made such an allowance as became the conditions and expectations of his heir. He did, indeed, everything that could have been expected in the circumstances. He did not say "I shall never marry, and of course you will have everything when I am gone," which Letitia thought he ought to have said, considering all things; but he acted exactly as if he had said this. You do not make your younger brother an allowance of three thousand a year unless your intentions towards him are of the most decided character; nor, indeed, was it in the least probable that anything could come to snatch the cup from John Parke's lips.

When the time came for the wedding it was discovered by all parties that Grocombe was too far off among the fells—too much out of order, too bare, and—in a word—too shabby for such a performance. Letitia had felt this

from the very first moment, and had been strongly conscious of it when she wrote to Lady Sillinger on the very evening on which the engagement took place. She had told her kind friend that she was the happiest girl in the world, and that nobody knew how much there was in John; but even at that early period when she had said something modestly of her lover's ardour and desire to have the marriage soon, she added: "But oh! dear Lady Sillinger, when I think of Grocombe and old Mr. Hill, our vicar, my heart sinks. How can I ever—ever be married there?"

As Lady Sillinger entered with great enthusiasm into a marriage which she might be said to have made, Miss Ravelstone had many opportunities of repeating this sentiment, and the conclusion of all was that this kind-hearted woman invited her young friend to be married from Cuppland if she pleased. "It will be such fun for the children," Lady Sillinger said. It was therefore amid all the surroundings of a great house that Lord Frogmore first saw his brother's bride. John did not ask any questions as to the impression Letitia had made. He had a dull kind of

sense that it might be better to ask no questions. He was not himself at all deceived about her appearance, nor did he expect his friends to admire her. He took the absence of all enthusiasm on their part with judicious calm. He was not himself enthusiastic, but he had a sober satisfaction in the consciousness that his income was more than doubled, and that he was likely to be very comfortable until the time should come when Frogmore would in the course of nature die. And then, of course, he knew very well what the succession would be. Letitia knew it too. She had read a hundred times over every detail in that paragraph in the Peerage. She managed to get a copy of the county history and study everything that was known about the family of the Parkes and their possessions. She had even managed to find an old dressmaker who had once been maid to one of the ladies of the family, and who told her about the jewels which must eventually be hers. By dint of industry and constant questioning Letitia had discovered everything about the Parkes before she became one of them. And it was all very satisfactory — more so to her, perhaps,

than to any other of the family. John's mother was not at all pleased, but what did it matter about that? She was only the Dowager, and, except so far as her own little savings were concerned, had no power.

When Lord Frogmore first saw his sister-in-law she was in all the importance and excitement of a young lady on the eve of marriage surrounded by dressmakers and by presents. The dressmakers were many and obsequious, the presents were few and did not make a very great show. This was got over, however, by the explanation that most of her wedding gifts had been sent to Grocombe, and that the show at Cuppland was only accidental, not contributed by her old family friends, by whom, of course, the most important were sure to be supplied. The head of the family of the Parkes, when he was asked into Lady Sillinger's boudoir to make acquaintance with his sister-in-law, had a small packet in his hand, to which he saw her eyes turn almost before she looked at himself. Her eyes were light, and not very bright by nature, but there was a glow in them as they shot that glance at the packet in his hand. Did she think it

was but a small packet? Lord Frogmore could not help asking himself. The jeweller's box, which he carried done up in silver paper, thus became the chief and first thought on both sides. Letitia was in a pale pink dress which was not becoming to her. It made her thin hair and colourless complexion more colourless than ever. It threw up the faint flush on the tip of her nose. She rose quickly, and came forward holding out her hand, and rising suggestively on her toes. Did she mean to kiss him? the old gentleman asked himself, which was certainly what Letitia meant to do; but in such a salutation in such circumstances the initiative should at least be taken by the elderly brother-in-law, not by the bride. She stood suspended, however, for a moment, as it were in the air, with that expectation, and then resumed her seat with a little shake out of her draperies like a ruffled bird.

"I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Ravelstone," said Lord Frogmore.

"Oh, I am sure so am I," said Letitia. "Dear John's brother."

She simpered and held down her head a little, while Lord Frogmore did not know

whether to laugh or be angry. He was not accustomed to this way of stating the relationship.

"Yes, to be sure dear John is my brother," he said, "and as I don't doubt you are going to make him a very happy man, the family will all be much indebted to you, Miss Ravelstone. In view of the coming event I have brought my little offering." He began to open it out, fumbling at the string in a way which was very tantalising to Letitia, who would have liked to pounce upon it and take it out of his hand.

"Let me cut it," she said, producing scissors from the dressmaker's box which was on the table, and once more her eyes gave a gleam enough to set that troublesome paper on fire.

"Thank you, but I like to save the string," said the old peer. He felt himself, however, though he rather liked to tantalise her, that all this delay would make his present look still more unimportant in her eyes. It was a pearl necklace with a pendant of pearls and diamonds, and it had in reality cost him a good deal, and was more valuable than Letitia thought. She drew a long breath when it was at last disclosed.

"Oh!" she said (adding within herself "it's not diamonds after all"). "Oh, how very pretty; oh, how sweetly pretty; oh, what a delightful little necklace! Oh, Lord Frogmore, it looks like some one younger and much, much prettier than me."

"I am very glad you like it," said Lord Frogmore.

"Oh, Lord Frogmore, any girl would like it. I am sure it is quite beautiful. I thought married ladies didn't wear pearls; but only just to keep in the box and look at it would do one good. It is the loveliest little thing I ever saw."

"You are mistaken, I am sure, about the married ladies, Miss Ravelstone."

"Am I?" she said, looking up at him with engaging candour. "I am so inexperienced I don't know, but some one told me so; dull stones for girls and bright ones for married ladies is what I was told; but I dare say that was all wrong and you know best——"

"I really don't know what you mean by dull stones," said Lord Frogmore stiffly.

"Oh, I mean pearls and turquoises and such things: and the others are rubies and

emeralds and diamonds; but I don't at all understand such questions, I only know they are lovely. How am I to thank you, Lord Frogmore?"

"I am quite sufficiently thanked if you are pleased, Miss Ravelstone."

"Oh, but that is so cold," said Letitia. "I know what I should do if it was my father, or my uncle, or any old friend. But when it is Lord Frogmore——" She stopped with the same arrested motion which had startled him so when they had first met. Decidedly the girl meant to kiss him. He started rather abruptly to his feet and made her a very elaborate bow.

"I am more than repaid, Miss Ravelstone, if you are good enough to be pleased with my little present," he said.

"Oh! please call me Letitia—at least," said the too affectionate bride.

If Lady Sillinger had not come forward at this moment to relieve the strain of the situation by boundless praise and admiration of the necklace, Frogmore did not know to what extremities he might have been driven. He withdrew as soon as he could without any demonstrations of tenderness, and hurrying

through the suite of rooms came, to his confusion, upon Lady Frogmore, his stepmother, John's mother, a woman a little younger than himself, and of whom he had always been a little afraid. She was very large, as so many ladies become in their maturity, and had a way of constantly fanning herself, which was disturbing to most men and to her stepson most of all. But as they had naturally perceived each other some way off there was no avoiding an encounter. The dowager Lady Frogmore had a voice not unlike a policeman's rattle, and as she spoke her large bosom heaved as if with the effort to bring it forth.

"Well, Frogmore," she said, "you have been paying your respects to the bride?"

"I have indeed," he replied with much gravity, and a nervous glance behind him.

"You look, my dear Frogmore, as if you were running away."

"Something like it, I don't deny. I—I thought she would have kissed me," he said, with a burst of feeling. It might have seemed comical to some people, but it was not at all comical to Lord Frogmore.

The dowager Lady Frogmore stopped

fanning herself. "She kissed me," she said, in sepulchral tones; "actually got up upon her toes, and, before I knew what she was about kissed me. I never was so taken by surprise in my life. If there is any kissing to be done it is the family, certainly, that should begin."

"That is quite my opinion," said Frogmore; "but I suppose she means it for the best."

Lady Frogmore shook her head. She shook it so long and so persistently that the flowers upon her bonnet began to shed little bits of feather and tinsel. "Frogmore," she said solemnly, "mark my words. She will lead John a life!"

"Let's hope not," said his brother.

"Oh! don't tell me. Men never understand. She will lead him a life."

"At all events it is his own doing," said Frogmore.

"I don't believe it is his own doing. He could not give me a rational account of it when I asked him. I believe she's a scheming minx, and this Lady Sillinger's a designing woman."

"What good will it do her? She's got daughters of her own."

"That is just the wonder of it," said Lady

Frogmore, nodding her head. "If it had been one of her own daughters I would not have said a word. Her own daughters are well enough, but this girl! My poor dear John has been made a victim, Frogmore. He has been made a victim. I wish he had broken his leg or something before he came to this house."

"Nonsense," said Lord Frogmore, "he might have met her anywhere else as well as in this house."

"It's all a deep-laid scheme," continued the dowager, behind her fan. "What that woman has against my poor dear John I can't tell, but it is she that has done it. And mark my words, Frogmore——"

"How many more words am I to mark?" said Frogmore peevishly; then he added, in the freedom of close relationship: "All you say about poor Lady Sillinger is the merest nonsense. She's as good a woman as ever lived."

"Mark my words, Frogmore," repeated the dowager, "that girl will never rest till she has got you out of the way."

"Me!" he laughed. "Set your mind at rest," he said. "I am not in her way at all. She means to make a friend of me."

"She'll make a friend of you, and then she'll make you something quite different. She will never be happy," said Lady Frogmore, till she has got us all out of the way."

"Oh! come, come! We don't live in the fourteenth century," Frogmore said.

And next day, notwithstanding all these prognostications of harm, John and Letitia were married, and set off for their honeymoon. And whatever her intentions might be, there was no longer any possibility of shutting out the Honourable Mrs. John Parke from the amenities of the family. She was kissed. She was blessed. Old slippers were flung after her, and if she had been the most desirable wife in the world, no more could have been done by the family to put the best face upon this event before the eyes of a too quick-sighted world.

CHAPTER III

NOTWITHSTANDING the dissatisfaction of his family, John Parke began his married life very comfortably, and it is doubtful whether he had ever been so happy in his life before. Lord Frogmore had let the newly married pair have a house of his in Berkshire, in a good hunting neighbourhood, and not very far from town. John was by no means a great hunting man, but it is a respectable occupation to fall back upon when one has nothing else to do, and he was able to keep up his character and take a moderate interest in all that was going on without very much hard riding or sacrifice of comfort. His wife rode with him to the admiration of all the hunting field. But it was not in that way that Letitia meant to gain distinction. She had known too much about horses in her earlier days. She did not

intend to be a hunting lady. Still it is always something to be known for one of the best horsewomen in your county. If you do not hunt after that it shows that you have higher aspirations. And it was very good for John to know that there was one thing at least which would have made any man proud of his wife. What Letitia was much more anxious about was that everybody should call. She procured a list of all the county families within reach, and carefully compared their names with those on the visiting cards that were left at Greenpark. And gradually her high aspirations were carried out. Gradually, not all at once, but under the weighty influence of the peerage and the hunting, most people came. Letitia found herself at the apex of the happiness she most desired, when she ascertained finally that she knew everybody—scarcely one was left out, and those who were left out were the insignificant people for whose opinion nobody cared.

She made a capital wife. She knew a great deal about housekeeping and how to make a little go a long way, and as she was very quick and kept her eyes wide open

wherever she went, she very soon picked up those minutiæ of comfort and domestic luxury which were not understood at Grocombe. Grocombe, in fact, passed away altogether like a dissolving view. Sometimes when she sat in the boudoir which everybody said she had made so delightful, with its soft chairs and mossy carpets, and bewildering drapery, there would come before Letitia's eyes a vision of the shabby parlour at home with its horsehair sofa and thin Kidderminster. The curtains were maroon rep in that family abode. The cover on the table was red and blue worsted; there was not a cosy chair in the place. It is true that there was a drawing-room in Grocombe, but everything in it was falling to pieces and it was never used. What a house to have been brought up in! And what a difference between Tisch Ravelstone, the hard-riding squire's neglected daughter, who had never been educated, or dressed, or looked after by any one, whom the parson's wife had been sorry for, who had been invited to the vicarage out of kindness, who had once thought the vicar's son when he returned from Oxford the most splendid of young persons,

and the Honourable Mrs. John Parke in her own beautiful boudoir, with her fine dresses and respectful servants and luxurious prosperity! What a difference! Letitia never permitted it to be seen or even divined that such luxury was new to her. But sometimes there would gleam before her a fading dissolving vision of that other life, and she would ask herself was it possible? Could it ever have been? To go back to such a state of affairs now would be the most horrible misfortune. She said to herself that she would rather die. It is true that the moors were glorious round about that Yorkshire house, but Letitia had seen too much of them to care for the moors; and the stables were admirably arranged, the pride of the district, but Letitia had seen a great deal too much of them and hated stables. And when she thought of the miry ways through which she used to tramp in her Wellington boots and short skirts, and the wintry blighted fir wood, all blown one way as if the trees were shabby pilgrims going to the west, which surrounded the house, and the garden in which a few straggling rose-bushes and old-fashioned flowers formed a

respectful border to the cabbages, Letitia drew a long breath. Oh-h! she said to herself. What a difference! what a difference! But this breath of wondering transport was only breathed when she sat alone in her boudoir and John was well out of the way, and could not look up with an "Eh? did you speak?"

There were some things, however, not so easily dropped as Grocombe—and these were its inhabitants. Letitia had five brothers, such a number for a young woman on her promotion, whose aspirations were so far removed from anything they could understand. They could all ride like centaurs, they could doctor horses as well as any vet., harness them as well as any groom, and were as conversant with the pedigrees of their quadruped nobility as the Garter-King-at-Arms is with the precedence and qualifications of dukes and earls. Letitia was not unaware that knowledge of this kind is sometimes very valuable, and that in the society of a hunting country it is much esteemed. She knew there were distinguished houses in the neighbourhood in which the stud-groom was a person highly prized for his conversation and social qualities; and on such a

dreadful emergency as the appearance of Will, or Jack, or Ted, or Harry at Greenpark, she had already settled in her own mind how to make the best of their qualities; but it was a thought which made her shiver. She had made up her mind that intercourse with her old home was a thing to be gradually dropped altogether. Heaven be praised there were no sisters. Had there been sisters they would not have been so easily shaken off, they would probably have insisted upon sharing Tisch's good luck, and getting "their chance" also through her means. "Tisch!" Think only of hearing that name again ringing through the house in the stentorian voice of one of the boys. If there were no more than this to be avoided it would be enough. Letitia put her hands up to her ears as if to shut out the horrible sound. No, fortunately, nobody here, nobody in her new world had ever heard that dreadful name: the Sillingers, indeed—but they were people who knew better than to perpetuate such an injury. And on the whole Letitia thought it advisable to drop them also. They were so far off. The north of Yorkshire is a long way from Berks. It is much further off

than either place is, for instance, from London. Mrs. John Parke lamented in her new neighbourhood that she was so far off from the old; but on the whole it was a dispensation of Providence with which she was well pleased.

In the meantime Letitia began without delay to do her duty in the station to which she had been so fortunately called. She produced with much fortitude and pride a son and heir at the end of the first year, and after that judiciously, and not with too much haste, other little Parkes, one after the other, two boys and two girls, thus establishing the family upon a broad and sturdy basis, which precluded all fear of extinction to the family honours. Three sons —such a thing had not been known in the Frogmore family since the creation of the title, which was not, however, a very old one. There could be no doubt that Lord Frogmore was pleased. He sent Mrs. John some of the family diamonds, those jewels which she had so coveted, but which were by no means as splendid as she had hoped, after the first of these events—and he made a great many jokes with his brother as the family increased. But, in fact, he was very considerate indeed, making

more than jokes, a considerable addition to John's income, and also giving up to his brother the house in Mount Street, which Mrs. John had so long coveted. It is very evident, therefore, that Letitia's course of prosperity for the first eight years of her married life was as nearly perfect as falls to the lot of woman. Her new family had forgotten that she was plain—they all had a respect for her as a very clever woman, who had done her duty by the race. She was not, perhaps, all that they could have desired; "not what I should have chosen for my dear boy," said Lady Frogmore. "A little sharp for my taste—but then my taste had nothing to do with it," said the old lord. But a woman against whom nothing was to be said. Her first season in London—the first season in which she had actually a house of her own, and could be said to take the place which the future Lady Frogmore had a right to aspire to, was not, indeed, triumphant—Letitia did not aspire to triumphs—but it was, as all her progress had been, a gradual and steady advance. She did not wish to take an insecure place among the fast duchesses and the wild millionaires. She disapproved of all the votaries

of dissipation. "We come to town to meet our friends, and pay our duty to our Sovereign, and see what is going on," she said, "but our delight is in our country home." She had said 'ome at first, as, indeed, many very well-bred persons do; but Letitia had outgrown any weakness of that kind. And she was making her way. When she met the Sillingers now she was in a position to patronise them. The girls had not made very good marriages; and what was Lady Sillinger after all, but the wife of a country baronet, well off, but not very rich, with a nice house and very hospitable in their way, but not a great country place. The Honble. Mrs. John Parke, the future Lady Frogmore, was very good-natured, and glad to be of use to her old friends.

There was another old friend who at this period was brought to her mind by an unexpected encounter at one of the exhibitions, which is a place where the poor may meet the rich without anything surprising being in it. Letitia, in the course of her cursory survey of the pictures, found before her a group which she recognised — or rather it would be more just to say she recognised one of the members

of it. She looked, she turned away her head, she looked again. Yes, certainly, it was! it was! the very vicar's daughter who had always been kind to Letitia Ravelstone, who had been held up to her as a model, whose neat frocks and pinafores it had been a vain effort to emulate. The name of the vicar's daughter was Mary Hill, one of the most commonplace of names, yet capable of no such horrible travesty as that nickname of Tisch, which had been the burden of Letitia's youth—yet she had always been prettier than Letitia, as well as more neat and carefully dressed. Mrs. John Parke stood in her fashionable London garments, in what might be called the height of her dignified maternal—but not too maternal —position (for Letitia had preserved her figure and was still slim), and gazed upon the companion of her youth. Miss Hill looked forty, though she was not quite so much as that. She was dressed in a gray alpaca, very simply made. She had a close little bonnet of the same colour, tied with pink ribbons under her chin. She was as neat as she used to be in the old days when she was held up as an example to Tisch Ravelstone. She was accompanied

by two elderly ladies of homely respectability, one of whom called to her continually, "Mary, Mary, you have not looked at this." They were doing the honours of the pictures to her, not sparing her one. She had a catalogue in her hand, but between that and the lady who called Mary, Mary, and the other who stopped before all the worst pictures and said, with a wave of her hand, "This is one that has been a great deal talked about," their gentle country cousin was evidently a little confused. She smiled, and allowed herself to be dragged in two directions at once. Letitia stood and watched with a sensation which was very mingled. There was good in it and there was evil, a sense of triumph which so swelled her bosom that had her dress not been so perfectly fitted some of the buttons must certainly have burst, but along with this a certain sense of kindness, of pleasure in such a kind face. If it had been anybody but Mary Hill, not even the delight of showing how different she herself was from Tisch Ravelstone would have made Mrs. Parke pause. But a softer impulse touched her breast. She stood still where she was until

Mary, in one of the many gyrations she had to make to please her companions, turned round full upon her and recognised her with a start and a cry. Letitia, in the excitement of the moment, actually forgave her old friend, whose cry was "Tisch!"

"It is surely Mary Hill," she said, advancing in her turn, with all the magnificence of which she was capable, and that was no small matter. "I have been looking at you for five minutes wondering; but it is you. And you have not changed a bit."

"Oh, no; how should I change? But you; now I look at you again I wonder that I recognised you at all. It was the first glance. I felt it could be no one else."

"It makes a great difference to be married and have a number of children," said Letitia with genial dignity. "You have never married, Mary."

"Oh, no," said Mary, with a faint laugh.

"And are you just at home—as you used to be?"

"Just at home—as I used to be. We are all older; the boys are out in the world, and little Fanny too, as a governess; but Agnes

and I are just the same, taking care of father and mother."

"They can't want two of you to take care of them."

"That is true," said Mary, with a faint change of colour, "but we had no education—we elder ones—and we can't teach, and there's nothing else for a girl to do."

"A girl!" said Letitia under her breath, looking at Mary in her gentle middle-agedness from top to toe. But she perceived that the two elderly ladies, who had hitherto kept at a distance overawed by her fashionable appearance, were now consulting together with evident intention of advancing, so she added quickly, "I am so glad to have seen you. Come and see me, please, in the morning before one, at 300, Mount Street, Berkeley Square—the Park end—will you? Come to-morrow, Mary, please."

"I will indeed," said Mary, with fervour. "It is the finest thing I have seen in London, dear Tishy, the face of an old friend: and as kind as ever," she said with a glance of tender gratitude. She had not perhaps quite expected, nor had Letitia expected, that any

such soft sentiment should have arisen in her bosom, if truth be told.

"Don't call me that, for heaven's sake," cried Letitia, waving her hand as she hurried away. And so the two elderly ladies were balked, and Mrs. Parke left the exhibition with a new plan taking form in her mind—a plan which would be a great kindness, yet very useful to herself—a plan which was to produce fruits of an importance almost awful to Letitia, yet at this moment altogether hidden, and the very possibility of them, from her eyes.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. PARKE went home with a little excitement in her mind, caused by the sight of this friend of her youth. The familiar form brought back still more distinctly all that was past and its extraordinary contrast with all that was present. Mary Hill in the clothes that she must have been wearing all this long time ("I am sure I know that frock," Letitia said to herself), afforded the most perfect example of all the difference that had arisen in her own life. But this was not her only thought. Perhaps her mind was moved by a little touch of old kindness. Such darts of light will come through the most opaque blanks of a self-regarding life. Letitia was very practical, and it seemed to her that to keep two women like Mary and Agnes Hill in the depths of the country with nothing to do but

to take care of the vicar and the parish, which one could do amply, while she herself stood much in need of a companion and help, was the greatest waste of material possible. Her active mind leaped in a moment to all the advantages of such a visitor in the house as Mary Hill, an old friend with whom it would not be necessary to stand on ceremony, who could be sent about whenever there was need for her, who would look after the children, and "do" the flowers and make herself useful. And what an advantage it would be to her! She would see the world; she would make acquaintance with the best society. She might perhaps meet some one; some old clergyman or family doctor who would make her an offer. The idea took possession of Letitia. It would be such a good thing. She spoke of it to John when they met at luncheon. "Should you mind if I asked an old friend to pay us a long visit?" she said.

"I——mind? I never interfere with your visitors," said John, surprised. He added, however, with a little surprise when he thought of it: "I never knew you cared for old friends."

"They are generally a bore," said Mrs. Parke; "they remind you of things you want to forget and people you hate. But not this one. It is Mary Hill. She is the vicar's daughter at Grocombe. Poor people, they are very poor. It will be a kindness to them. A mouth to feed in such a house is a great matter."

"It is very kind of you, Letitia, to think of it."

"Oh, as for that! and she would be so useful to me. I do feel sometimes the burden of all I have to do—the housekeeping—to make a good show on such a limited income, and to keep up one's social duties; and then the children always wanting something. I don't know how I have borne it so long without any help."

"But I don't see," said John, "how having a friend in the house would mend that."

"No," said Letitia with a sigh; "I did not expect you to see it. But so long as I see it!—all I want is to make sure that you won't go on as so many men do. 'How long is that Miss Hill going to stay? I can never say a word to you without that Miss Hill hearing

everything! Is that Miss Hill to be always here?' Now you must have heard men going on just so, making their wives' lives a burden."

"I hope I shall never do that," said John mildly.

"Mind you don't," said Letitia. And that was all that was said. But when Miss Hill came next morning with a pretty flush of pleasure on her face, and her gray dress looking so prim and old-maidish, and everything about her showing a life arrested just at the point where Letitia had left her—Letitia who had made so much progress—Mrs. Parke's resolution became firmer than ever. She showed her visitor all over the house, apologising for its small size and imperfections. "We must put up with many things," she said, "in our present circumstances, you know. Frogmore is very nice to us, but so long as he lives we can only have the second place."

"I wish I had only a hundred times as much to put up with," said Mary, smiling. "It all looks very delightful to me."

"You should see Greenpark," said Letitia. "We have a great deal more room there. But we are only in town for a short season, and,

of course, I don't bring all the children. Yes, baby is just about ten months. They are all troublesome children. They give me a great deal to do. I often think I shall die of it if it goes on long. And there you are, Mary, a lady of leisure at home with next to nothing to do."

Mary's countenance changed. "I have more than you think," she said, "but not in your way."

"Oh, no, not in my way. When you are not married you can form no idea of the troubles one has. But I do wonder you should stay at home when there is so little for you all. Your poor mother must grudge it so. Two daughters to feed and clothe and no likelihood of any change."

"Oh, Tishy, it is cruel to tell me so! Don't I feel it to the bottom of my heart?"

"Don't call me by that horrible name. If I was you I should certainly do something for myself. Who were the two—— whom you were with at the exhibition?"

"It was my aunt—— and a friend of mine. They live together," said Mary.

"You should go and live with them," said Letitia boldly.

Mary shook her head. "My aunt is as poor as we are at home. She has asked me for a short visit, that is all she can do. But please, Tis—— I mean Letitia, don't make me wretched to-day. I want to get a little pleasure out of this day."

"If I make you wretched it is for your good," said Letitia. "If you have only come for a short visit it is not worth your while. Your railway fare would cost you more than all the relief it would be at home."

"They were glad I should have the change," said Mary, "but I'm afraid what you say is true, and it was perhaps selfish to come."

"I should say it was very selfish to come if it's only for a short visit. But you are dreadfully thoughtless people about money and always were. If I did not count up everything and calculate whether it was worth while, I don't know what I should do. Now getting to town and back again from Yorkshire must have cost you two pounds at least, even second class——"

"I came third class," said Mary, much downcast.

"But I am sure it cost you two pounds—

why, there must have been a cab from the station, and there will be a cab back again to the station, and I should not at all wonder if you gave the porter sixpence, though probably he is much better off than you are. And how long are you to stay with your aunt?"

"A fortnight," said Mary almost inaudibly, hanging her head.

"A fortnight! You don't imagine it can cost your father and mother a pound a week to keep you at home? Ten shillings is the very outside, I should say. Well, then, you have thrown away a whole pound on this visit, and probably you got a new frock for it, or a bonnet or something. Oh, that is not the way to get on in the world! At this rate you will always be poor——"

"They were very glad I should have the change," said Mary, pale but plucking up a little courage. "They don't count up every penny like that. Oh, Ti—Letitia, I am sure you mean to be kind; but when you put things before one like that it is like flaying one alive! For what can I do? I can't be a governess, and there is nothing else that I can be——"

"You might have married," said Letitia, "if you had played your cards as you ought."

At this Mary gave her friend a startled glance and grew very red, but then turned away her head and said nothing. Letitia saw and understood, but took no notice. She went on:

"You might have married old Captain Taylor when he came home from abroad. And what a nice house he had, and plenty of money, and only think how comfortable you might have been. But you just threw him into Cecilia Foster's hands—I don't mean to reproach you, Mary; but it is all the same sort of thing. You never calculate beforehand; now how are you to make up that pound?"

Letitia said these words with the greatest deliberation and emphasis, looking her friend almost sternly in the face. And to poor Mary a pound was no small matter. She had never thought of it before in this light, and an almost hysterical constriction came into her throat. Make up a pound! It is but a small sum of money, but she did not know how to do it any more than she knew how to fly.

When Letitia had thus brought her friend

down to the very earth, she suddenly made a rush at her and gave her a little dab of a kiss. "I will tell you, you dear old thing," she said; "you shall come and pay a long visit to me."

"Tishy! I mean Letitia, oh what do you mean?" said Mary in her surprise.

Letitia threatened her with a forefinger. "I will kill you if you call me that again! What do I mean? I mean just what I say. You shall come and pay me a long, long visit —as long as you like—as long as—you live—or let's say till you are married," cried Mrs. Parke with a somewhat mocking laugh.

"You know very well I shall never marry," said Mary reproachfully.

"Well, never mind—wait till you have seen all the people at Greenpark. You shall come to me as soon as you have done your fortnight with your aunt, and you shall go down with us when we go to the country, and you will keep me company when John is away, and talk to me when I am lonely, and make friends with the children. That will be worth your while, not like a fortnight in London, where you must always be spending shillings and sixpences. Now is it settled, or must you write home and

ask if you may come? For it is a real long visit I shall want."

"Oh, Letitia," said Mary, with tears in her eyes, "is it possible you can be so very, very kind, when we have not met for years, and when I thought——"

"What did you think? That I had forgotten my old friends? I am one that never, never forgets," said Mrs. Parke. "The first moment that I set eyes upon you I said to myself, 'It's Mary! and she must come to me for a long, long visit.' I can see no use in asking people for a fortnight. It only costs money, and it is not a bit of relief at home."

"I am sure you are quite right," said Mary. "I have been thinking so myself; but then they all thought it would be a change, and though I am fonder of Grocombe than of any place in the world——"

"You are a hypocrite, Mary," said Letitia. "I never was fond of Grocombe at all. It is the dullest place in England—there is never anything going on. Oh, here is Mr. Parke, whom you don't know yet. John, this is Miss Hill, who is coming to us for a long visit. I told you what a dear friend she was of mine."

"How do you do, Miss Hill?" said John, and then he added, the only thing it occurred to him to say to a stranger, "What fine weather we are having! Have you been in the Park to-day?"

This was how it came about that Mary Hill became an inmate of Greenpark. She paid Letitia a long—very long—visit, so long that it looked as if it never would end. Mrs. Parke stood on no ceremony at all with her friend. She confided her children to her with as much freedom as if she had been the nursery governess. She suggested to her that her place was wanted at table when there was a dinner party, and her room when the house was very full for the shooting. She made use of her to interview the housekeeper, and to write the *menus* for dinner. Mary soon came to occupy the position which is sacred to the poor relation —the unsalaried dependent in a house. She sometimes replaced the mistress of the house, sometimes the nurse, sometimes the lady's-maid. She was always at hand and ready, whatever was wanted. "Oh, ask Miss Hill! Don't, for heaven's sake, bother me about everything," was what Letitia learned to say.

She made the children's clothes, because she liked needlework. She arranged the bouquets for the table because she was so fond of flowers. She even helped the maid to arrange any changes that were necessary in Letitia's toilettes because she had so much taste. Mary was a very long time in finding out why it was that her friend was, as she said, "so kind." Perhaps she never entirely discovered the reason of it. She began, when her visit had extended to months, to discover that Letitia was not, perhaps, so invariably kind as she had supposed. But that was a very natural discovery, for nobody is perfect; and to do Mrs. Parke justice, it was only when there was a very large party for the shooting, or a very important dinner, that Mary was ever disturbed either in her room or her place. When anything was said of Mary's visit coming to an end, Letitia was in despair. "Oh, Mary, how could you go and leave me when you see how much I have to do? Oh, Mary, how could you desert the children, who are so fond of you? And don't you think it is far better to be here, costing them nothing, than to go back to be a burden at home?" These

mingled arguments overcame the humble-minded woman. Though it was bitter to hear it said that she was a burden at home, no doubt it was true. And thus it happened that she stayed, always under pretence of being on a long visit, an unremunerated, much exercised upper servant at Letitia's beck and call, for one whole long year.

It is true that nobody would have divined what confusion of all Mrs. Parke's plans was to result from this expedient of hers; yet it was apparent enough to various people concerned that she was less long-sighted than usual upon this occasion—apparent, that is to say, after the event which proved it. There could be no doubt that Mary's presence in the house made an opening for other persons to appear who were likely to be much less acceptable to Letitia, and whom, indeed, she had carefully kept at arm's length up to this time, when that brilliant idea of seizing a domestic slave for herself entered into her mind. The world could never get on at all if the selfish people in it were always long-sighted and never forgot themselves. But for the first year all went very well—so well that Mrs. Parke was used

to congratulate herself on her own cleverness and success. And everybody was pleased: Mary, who wrote home that she was so happy to be able to save dear Letitia in many little things, and it was quite a pleasure to do anything for her; and the people at the vicarage, who were never weary of saying how kind Mrs. Parke was to Mary, and how many nice people she saw, and what a delightful, long visit she was having; and John, who declared that Miss Hill was the most good-natured and the nicest to the children of any one he had ever seen. An arrangement which brought so much satisfaction to all concerned must surely have been an admirable arrangement. And how it could lead to any upsetting of the life and purpose of the Honourable Mrs. John Parke, or check the full breeze of prosperity that filled her sails, or in any way endanger her career, was what nobody could have divined. But the great drawback of all mortal chances and successes is that you never can tell, nor can the wisest of mankind, what strange things may be effected in a single day.

CHAPTER V

It was in the beginning of the shooting season, when birds were still plentiful and the best of the sportsmen visitors were come or coming, that Letitia was one evening startled by hearing of the arrival of a gentleman, who was one more than the number expected. Such a thing had been known before; for John's invitations were sometimes a little vague, and he occasionally made a mistake; but it was particularly annoying on this occasion, because Mrs. Parke had not been at home for tea, and, therefore, was not at hand to place the unexpected guest.

"The only thing I could do, ma'am, in the circumstances," said the butler, "was to refer to Miss Hill, and she said the gentleman must have her room; so I put him in Miss Hill's room."

"You were quite right, Saunders, since Miss Hill was so kind; and I dare say it will be all right. But you have not told me who the gentleman was."

The butler made a little pause — a respectable family servant never forgets that every family has its secrets. He coughed discreetly behind his hand. "I did not ask the gentleman's name, ma'am — Miss Hill seemed to know him very well."

"Miss Hill—knew him very well!" Astonishment and a certain consternation came into Letitia's face. But she recollected herself, perceiving Saunders' look of extreme discretion, which is always an alarming thing. "I have no doubt it is all right," she said, with great self-possession, "and you have done exactly what you ought to have done in referring to Miss Hill—send up some one to my room with a cup of good tea. One never gets tea one can drink out of one's own house."

Mrs. Parke repeated to herself, "Some one Mary knows," under her breath. She was momentarily disturbed. Could it be a piece of presumption on Mary's part bringing in some one she knew? But this was so incredible

that Letitia dismissed the idea, laying it all upon the broad shoulders of John. "He must have made a mistake again," she said to herself. She was late, every one had gone to dress for dinner, and the mistress of the house only lingered for a moment in the drawing-room to see that all was in order, to give a little pull to the curtains, and a little push to the chairs such as the mistress of the house always finds necessary when she is expecting guests, breaking the air of inevitable primness which the best of servants are apt to give. She looked round to see that all was right, and then she went upstairs to her room to dress. Mary was standing on the stairs at the end of the corridor which led to the nursery, evidently waiting for her. "Oh, can I speak a word, Letitia?" she said.

"I don't see how you can," said Mrs. Parke, "for I am late, and you know the Witheringhams are coming. I cannot keep them waiting. But come into my room, if you like, while I dress."

Mary was not coming to dinner on that evening: so that she had no need to dress. She looked pale and anxious standing in the

doorway at the end of the nursery passage in her old gray gown. "But I must speak to you alone—not before your maid," she said.

"Some naughtiness, I suppose," said Letitia with a little sigh of despairing impatience. "Really, you are too particular. But it must wait till to-morrow, my dear — I have only time to slip on my dress."

"But oh, Letitia——"

"For goodness sake don't bother me to death when you know the Witheringhams are coming," Mrs. Parke said. And she went into her room, leaving her friend standing outside. Letitia did not close the door, but left it possible for Mary to follow her, if the communication was so very urgent. But this Miss Hill did not do. She hesitated a moment, wrung her hands, and then disappeared like a ghost within the narrow portals of the nursery passage. Had Letitia only known the words that were on her lips, had Mary been less frightened, less terrified at the sound of her own voice! But it could not have made much difference after all — the shock would have been perhaps less great—but to do away with it altogether was not in any one's power.

Letitia dressed in great haste. She had only time to swallow the cup of tea which she had ordered—to put on her new velvet with the point lace and diamonds—a *rivière*, but nothing much to speak of, which Frogmore had sent her on the birth of the heir—and to pull on one of her gloves, when a sound of carriage wheels in the avenue made her hurry downstairs to be in her place before the Witheringhams arrived. The Witheringhams had never dined at Greenpark before. They were very fine people indeed, the oldest family in the county, though he was only a baron, so rich that they did not know what to do with their money. They lived a great deal abroad, and it so happened that Letitia had never before been able to offer her hospitality to these distinguished persons who were so little in need of a dinner. For the first time it had "suited" to-night, and to have been a moment late, or to have anything out of order, would have been a sin which Letitia, such a model of social propriety as she was, would not have forgiven herself. Happily, she was not only in the drawing-room herself, but two or three of the *élite* of her guests had come down in good time

and stood about like black statues in that irreproachable *tenue* which specially distinguishes Englishmen. It was a moment indescribable when Letitia placed Lady Witheringham in the easiest chair, and sitting down near her, with the warmest cordiality mingled with respect, made the discovery that this great lady's diamonds were really after all not as good as her own. She did not betray the consciousness, but it gave her a secret exhilaration. She felt that she approached her guests upon nearer terms.

"It is a pleasure we have wished for so long, dear Lady Witheringham," she said, "to see you in our own house."

"We are a great deal away," said the old lady. "Witheringham can't stand the winter in England—and to tell the truth, when we are at home we are not fond of new people, neither he nor I."

"I hope," said Letitia, "that we can scarcely be considered new people now. After nearly seven years——"

She saw her mistake immediately, but Lady Witheringham only smiled. "My husband," she said, with a slight emphasis, "knew the

first Lord Frogmore. He got his title for something or other—services to the Government." Here the old lady laughed, as if there could be nothing more ridiculous than acquiring a peerage in this way. "But I have heard," she said, after a pause, "that your own family was quite respectable."

Letitia was not proud of her family, and liked to bring it forward as little as possible, but a natural sentiment still existed in her bosom, which was touched by this remark.. "Oh, indeed, I hope so," she cried, with a slight movement of irritation, which she was not able to conceal.

"I mean, of course, in point of antiquity," said Lady Witheringham, "in other respects we're all in the hands of Providence. Nothing, you know, can secure morals, or those sort of things—and less in an old family than in others, I sometimes think—Dear me," she added, raising a double eyeglass, and looking at the other end of the room with curiosity, "what have we here?"

Letitia looked up, following Lady Witheringham's glance. I may truly say that if Mrs. Parke were to live for a hundred years she

would never forget the spectacle that now presented itself to her eyes. The drawing-room at Greenpark was a long room, opening from an ante-room with large folding doors In the middle of this ample opening stood a figure in a velvet coat the worse for wear, with a huge beard, long hair, and a general air of savagery. He was a little scared apparently by the sight of so many people, and by the looks directed towards him, and stood with a certain hesitation, looking with a half-bold, half-alarmed air at the circle of ladies near the fire. Letitia sprang to her feet, and caught John by the arm. "Go and see who it is; go and send him away," she said; but even as she spoke her voice went out in a kind of hollow whisper. Oh, heaven and earth! That this should happen to-night!

Everybody was looking towards the same point, and John, much surprised, but not daunted, was walking towards this strange intruder, when he seemed to catch sight of Letitia standing thunderstruck by her own hearth. If she had kept her seat and thus kept partially out of sight, things might not have turned out so badly; but everything went

against her to-night. The stranger saw her and came forward with a lurch and a shout. "Hallo, Tisch!" he cried. His voice was like a clap of thunder, and shook the pictures on the walls. His big step made the whole house thrill and creak. He caught her in his arms in the middle of all the astonished ladies and gentlemen, and gave her a resounding smack that might have been heard half a mile off. "How are you," he said, "my lass? I'm as glad to see ye as if ye were the winner in a tip-top race. I began to think I'd been wrong directed and this wasn't my sister's house after all."

The thoughts that passed through Letitia's mind in the moment of that embrace were too many and too swift to be put on paper. She tore herself out of the huge arms which held her up like an infant, jumping on the floor in a momentary paroxysm of passion, in which if she could she would have killed the inopportune visitor. But even while she did so a whole discussion, argument and counter argument flashed through her mind. She would have liked to have killed him; but he was here, and the butler was at the door announcing

that dinner was served, and Lady Witheringham was certainly surveying this big brute, this horrible savage as Letitia called him in her heart—through those double eyeglasses. It was necessary that the mistress of the house should quench every sentiment and keep up appearances. She said, "Ralph!" with a little shriek in which some of her excitement got out. "Gracious goodness!" said Letitia, "I thought you were in Africa. How could you give me such a start without a word of warning? John, it's Ralph——" She paused a moment, and the desperate emergency put words into her mouth. "He has been after—big game—till he looks like a lion out of the woods himself," she cried, with another little shriek —this time of laughter. There was a wildness in it which half betrayed her, but she recovered herself with a little stamp of her foot. "John," she said, "dinner is waiting—don't let us keep everything back for this little family scene." She seized her brother by the hand while her guests filed off decorously, almost wounding him with the sharp pressure of her finger nails. "Don't come to dinner," she whispered; "Mary Hill's in the house."

Ralph gave another great laugh. "As if I didn't know that," he said; "but I'm coming to dinner. I want to see you in all your grandeur, Tisch."

She had to take old Lord Witheringham's arm while the brute was talking, and to smile into the old gentleman's face and to sweep past the stranger, leaving him to follow or not as he pleased. Her heart was beating wildly with fury and dismay. "Don't you think, Lord Witheringham, it is a bad thing when young men go off into the desert—after big game—and grow into savages?" she said. She laughed to blow off some of the excitement, but there was a glare which nobody could have believed possible in her dull eyes.

"That depends very much," said Lord Witheringham oracularly. He would not commit himself. "Sometimes it is the best thing a young man can do—sometimes it is not so fortunate." Letitia, who expected every moment to have a denial thundering over her shoulder about this big game, and who knew very well that her brother Ralph had not gone away for hunting, as the men did among

whom she passed her life, but for very different reasons and to very different regions, was very glad to hurry along at the end of the procession listening to what went on behind, hoping against hope that Ralph might do what she suggested; that he might go in search of Mary, and not appear at all among people who so plainly did not want him. She thought for some time with a great relief that this was what had happened. But when she had taken her place in the dining-room between Lord Witheringham on one side and young Lord George Hitherways on the other, that place to which she had looked forward with so much pride and pleasure, she saw by the little commotion among the detached men who came in last, the men who had no ladies to take care of, that there was no such relief for her. Ralph was in the midst of them conspicuous in his velvet coat. He pushed them about a little so as to get nearer to his sister. "I beg your pardon if I'm taking your place, but I have not seen my sister for ten years," she heard him saying in his big voice; and when all the guests were settled as near as possible in their right places, lo, there he was planted

next to Mrs. Kington, within three of herself. Letitia grew pale when she saw that her brother was so near—then thanked her stars that at least, since it must be, he was within reach where she herself could do what was possible to subdue him. Oh that Mary had but been there! Oh that Mary had but said that word of warning which she had been so anxious to give! Why did not the fool speak? What did it matter whether the maid was present or not? Three words only were needed—"Ralph is here," and then she would have known what to do.

Letitia had looked forward to that dinner as her greatest triumph. She meant to have been so brilliant and entertaining that Lord Witheringham, who liked to have amusing young women to talk to him, might have been filled with admiration: but how can you be witty and brilliant when you are straining your ears to hear what somebody else is saying? The conversation flagged in spite of all she could do. Lord Witheringham devoted himself to his dinner with a look of supreme gravity. She herself sat, violently loathing her food, but swallowing it in sheer

desperation, feeling every idea that had been in her head desert her. In fact poor Letitia was never brilliant in conversation, but this she did not know.

Meanwhile Mrs. Kington was amusing herself very much, and young Lord George did nothing but laugh and listen to the back-woodsman. "Tell me about the big game," the lady had said in a little mellifluous voice. "I shoot myself, and my husband has made the most famous bags. He was in Africa too. Pray tell me about the big game. Did you go in for lions or elephants or what was it? It is so interesting to meet with a man fresh from the desert."

"You are very kind to say so, my lady," said Ralph, "but it's all nonsense about big game. That's only Tisch's fun. She knows very well I had something quite different in my mind. I've had a shot at a kangaroo or a dog, and I'm sorry to say I've hit a black fellow more than once by mistake. Perhaps that's what she calls big game. Well, it is if you come to that, and deuced serious game, too. You may shoot as many tigers as you like, and get a reward for it, as I've heard;

but if you shoot a black fellow, he's no use even for his skin; and if it's known, you get the Government upon your shoulders just the same as if he was a Christian."

"That is hard," said Mrs. Kington, in her pretty voice. "I suppose you mean negroes, Mr.——" She stopped and looked at Letitia with that delightful impertinence of the higher orders which is one of the finest flowers of civilisation. "Do you know," she whispered to Lord George, yet not so low but that Letitia could hear, "John Parke married so much out of our set that I don't know what was her name."

"My name is Ravelstone, and I don't care who knows it," said Ralph. "We are not very particular about names in the bush. Sometimes you may live for years with a fellow at the same station and never know more than some nick-name that's been given him. They used to call me——"

"Your name is as old as any in Yorkshire, Ralph," said Letitia, arresting the revelation. "Dear Lady Witheringham was just saying so. Do you know what she said? That you knew the *first* Lord Frogmore, Lord Witheringham.

We won't let John hear, but I know what she meant. She meant that the Parkes were nobody to speak of; but I am happy to say Lady Witheringham was quite acquainted with my family. We have never had a title. What is the good of a mushroom title, that dates only from this century?"

"I entirely agree with you, Mrs. Parke," Lord Witheringham said.

"What is the use," cried Letitia, "of putting on a gloss of nobility when you have the substance before; and what is the use of plastering over a name that means nothing with titles? For my part I think there's nothing like real antiquity—a family that has lived in the same place and owned the same ground from the beginning of time."

"Mrs. Parke, I admire every word you say. Such just feeling is very uncommon," Lord Witheringham said.

"Lord, Tisch, how you do run on! How father would have stared if he had heard you! A title for us!—oh, by Jove!" cried Ralph. His roar shook the table. Oh, if some one would kill him—poison him—put him out of Letitia's sight!

CHAPTER VI

THE room swam in Letitia's eyes; a mist seemed to rise over the sparkling dining-table —over all the faces of the guests. The voices, too, rang in a kind of hubbub, one confused, big noise through which she seemed able to be sure of nothing except the words of Ralph and the laughter, in which all round were so ridiculously, so horribly ready to join. What revelations he might make! How certainly he would prove to the others that he was no elegant prodigal from the fashionable deserts where so many great persons went after big game, but a mere Australian stockman sent there because nobody knew what to do with him at home! She was vaguely aware of talking a great deal herself to stop his talking, if possible, with the dreadful result of merely increasing his outpourings, and of

having to subside at last in sheer prostration of faculty, into an alarmed and horrified silence. Ralph, it was evident, amused her guests though he did not amuse Letitia. And that dreadful Mrs. Kington, how she devoted herself to him; how she played upon him and drew him out! When the moment came for the ladies' withdrawal, Letitia rose with mingled relief and terror. She said to herself that no man could be so dangerous by Ralph's side as that clever, spiteful woman; and yet at the same time the dreadful consciousness that among men when they were alone revelations still more appalling might be made, and that John knew nothing of this prodigal brother, gave her a new cause of alarm. Even in such dreadful circumstances, however, a woman has to endure and say nothing. She gave Ralph a glance as she passed which might have annihilated him, but which conveyed no idea to the obtuse mind of the bushman: while he elevated his eyebrows at her, and made a noise with his tongue against his palate. "You are in all your glory, Tisch!" he said, as she passed. But furious and terrified as she was, she had to go like a martyr to the

stake and leave him—to do further harm—who could tell? Mary Hill was in the drawing-room when the ladies filed in, wearing a dyed dress which Letitia had given her, with nervous hands clasped tightly together, and anxiety and panic in her eyes. Mrs. Parke gave her an angry grip as she passed, and said in a fierce whisper, "How could you let him come?" to which Mary answered with a confused murmur of anxious explanation. And then the ordeal began once more.

"How amusing your brother is, Mrs. Parke. I don't know when I have laughed so much. It is so delightful to meet a man like that out of the wilds—and so genuine—and so funny!"

"You had all the fun at your end of the table," said another lady. "We heard you all in shrieks of laughter, and wanted to know what it was about."

"It was about everything," said Mrs. Kington, laughing at the recollection. "He is so delightfully wild, and such a democrat, and so unconventional."

"Too much so, a great deal, for the comfort of his family," said Letitia, with a

gasp. She was clever enough to seize upon the chance thus afforded her. "It is not so amusing when the person belongs to you, and when you know how he has thrown away all his chances," she said, panting.

"Ah!" said Lady Witheringham, with sympathy, "young men are so silly; but none of us can throw a stone in that respect."

This, though Letitia did not know it, was as good as a bombshell to Mrs. Kington, who knew a great deal about prodigals.

"To be silly is one thing and to be amusing is another," said that lady; "every man is not such fun who sows wild oats abroad. You must make him tell you about the black fellows. I nearly died of laughing. There is one story I must tell you——"

"For my part I would rather not die of laughing," said the great lady. She took Letitia by the arm and drew her in the direction of the conservatory. "Let me see your flowers," she said, "and never mind what they say. I know what it is," she added, shaking her head, "to have a boy in the family that you can make nothing of. I sympathise with your parents, Mrs. Parke."

The emergency lent a cleverness which she did not possess to Letitia. She said with a half sob, "He had no mother." This was not a loss which she had ever been specially moved by before; but necessity develops the faculties. Lady Witheringham clasped her arm still more closely. "Ah, poor boy!" she said; "tell me if it does not pain you, dear Mrs. Parke."

Dear Mrs. Parke! the words inspired Letitia. Was it possible, she asked herself piously, that good was to come out of evil? and she did tell Ralph's history, with many details unknown to that gentleman himself, to her sympathetic listener. They walked about softly in front of the subdued lights in the conservatory, the old great lady leaning tenderly upon the arm of John Parke's wife, while the other guests were discussing the brother and sister. "He's not a gentleman at all, and I dare say she was a milliner," Mrs. Kington said, feeling it very piquant to communicate these conjectures all but within hearing of the person most concerned. And Letitia divined but now did not care, for had she not got Lady Witheringham on her side?

Mary Hill sat alone, not noticed by any one. She occupied the place which a governess of retiring manners does in such a party. All governesses are not persons of retiring manners, and consequently the rule does not always hold. And Miss Hill was not the governess. She was not a salaried dependent, but a friend who in reality conferred instead of receiving benefits: but it was as a dependent that everybody regarded her. She sat very quiet with a sense of guilt towards Letitia, which was entirely gratuitous, and a confusing feeling that she was somehow to blame. That she would be blamed she was very well aware, and her powers of vindicating and asserting herself were small. Beyond this there was great trouble and confusion in Mary's mind. The sight of this big, flushed, disorderly, half-savage man had been a revelation to her even more distressing than his sudden appearance had been to her friend. Letitia's pride was assailed, but in Mary the wound went deeper. When Ralph had been sent to Australia ten years before, he was young, and his offences, though terrible to a girl's sensitive innocence and ignorance, had been things to weep and pray over rather than

to denounce. Poor Ralph! he had been her sweetheart when they were children, he had supposed himself in love with her years ago, and Mary had carried all these years a softened image of him in her heart. She had sighed to herself over it in many a lonely hour. Poor Ralph! if her expectations of his return had never been clear, it was still always a possibility pleasant to think of. And now he had come, and her faintly visioned idol had fallen prone to the ground, like Dagon in his temple. He had never attained the importance of a demi-god, to whom sacred litanies might be said. But there had been a vague niche for him in the background of the temple. And in a moment he had fallen, with the first sound of his rough voice and sight of his deteriorated countenance. Mary was still under the influence of this shock, and it was complicated by the conviction that she was to blame, that Letitia would think she was to blame, that she would be accused and would not know how to defend herself. She sat alone, trembling over the evening paper which she was pretending to read. She heard the *chuchotement* of the soft yet venomous voices near, which were tearing

Letitia's pretensions to pieces, and assuring each other that they had always known her to be a nobody—and the other less audible strain of Letitia's narrative to Lady Witheringham. What romance was she telling about poor Ralph to interest the old lady so—poor Ralph, who never had any story but vulgar dissipation and the sharp remedy of being turned out of his father's house to do as he pleased!

The gentlemen as they came in made the usual diversion, arrested the talk of the ladies, and made an alteration in the groups. But Ralph kept his place among the younger men, standing in a group of them telling his bush stories, keeping up noisy peals of laughter. Somehow the carriages of Lady Witheringham and of Mrs. Kington lingered long that night—or rather, which was a sign that the evening had not been a failure so far as they were concerned, these ladies lingered and showed no inclination to go away. When the great lady got up at last she bestowed a kiss upon her palpitating hostess. "I am so much touched by your confidence in me, my dear," she said, and actually held out her hand to

Ralph with a condescending good-night. "I hope you will find your native country the best now that you have returned to it, Mr. Ravelstone," she said. Ralph was so dumbfounded that fortunately he could only reply by a bow. But Letitia's troubles were not over even when her outdoor guests were gone. There were still the visitors in the house, and the familiarity of the smoking-room, in which she was sure her brother would fully unveil himself. She made an attempt to draw him with her when the moment came for the candlesticks. "Come with me to my boudoir, Ralph," she said in her kindest note. But the monster was not to be cajoled. "Oh, I think I see myself in a bouduar as you call it when there's a lot of jolly fellows waiting me." Letitia caught him by the hand sharply, though without putting her nails into it as she would have liked to do— "Mary's coming with me," she said with the most winning notes she could bring forth. Ralph roared over her head, opening a wide cavern of a mouth in the middle of his big beard. "Mary—'s an old maid," he said. As for John Parke, he had a troubled air, and cast curious glances of mingled reproach

and interrogation at his wife; but he could not leave his guests in the lurch.

By the time she had escaped from the surveillance of her guests and had got half-way up the stair, Letitia had come to have one clear purpose in her mind if no more—and that was vengeance. She said to herself that all the miseries of the evening were Mary's fault; its alleviations, Lady Witheringham's kindness, and her kiss of sympathy Mrs. Parke felt she had achieved for herself—but for Ralph's appearance, unannounced, and indeed for his presence at all, it was Mary that was to blame. She paused on the stairs where the passage led off to the nursery apartments where Miss Hill, when her room was appropriated as now, found a refuge, and turning sharp round gripped Mary's hand, who was so fluttered and frightened that she made a step backward and nearly lost her balance. Letitia held her up with that grip furious and tight upon her arm —"You come with me," she said fiercely, "I've got something to say to you——"

"I'd rather—hear it to-morrow," said poor Mary.

"No, to-night," said Letitia between her

pale lips. She led the way to her boudoir, which indeed was a room sacred not to sulkiness but to many a conflict. It was where she received her housekeeper, her nurse, her husband when he was in the way, the homely dressmaker who helped Mrs. Parke's maid with her simple dresses, and Miss Hill; these were the privileged persons who knew and had to listen to the eloquent discourses of Letitia—and they had all a sacred horror of the boudoir. She swept into it this evening with Mary following, and flung herself into a chair. Her eyes, not generally bright, had little flames in them. She was pale, and panted for breath. After all her long repression it was an unspeakable relief to get to this sanctuary to give vent to herself, to heap wrath upon everybody who was to blame——

"Well, Mary Hill!" she cried with a snort of passion, turning upon her friend. The diamonds on her neck gave forth little quick gleams moving with the panting of her wrath, as if they simulated the passion which burned in their mistress' eyes.

"Well, Letitia," said the mild Mary, "I see you are very angry——"

"Have I not reason to be angry? Why on earth didn't you let me know? What motive could you have to keep it a secret? Why for goodness sake didn't you tell me? I never will fathom you, Mary Hill! And to think that you should have brought this upon me without a word, without making a sign——"

"I implored you to let me speak to you, Letitia. I waited on the stairs for you."

"Implored me! waited for me! why, you should have forced me to hear. Do you think if it had been as important as that I should have been content to wait on the stairs? I'd have let any one know that minded as much as you knew I'd mind. If they'd killed me I'd have let them know; and to think I've tried to be so kind to you—oh, Mary Hill. To think you should have stood by and seen it all and never lifted a hand!"

"What could I do?" said poor Mary. "I wasn't even there——"

"And why weren't you there? There are no risks in such a case as that; you should have dressed and come to dinner, and made him take you in and kept him quiet. That's what you would have done if you had been a true friend."

"I couldn't have taken—such a liberty; when you had settled it all."

"What did it matter about my settling it all? Did I know what was going to happen? And to take the advantage just then of coming when I was out of the way! But I tell you what, Mary Hill. I blame you for more than that. You never should have let him come in at all —you never would had you been a true friend."

"Oh, Letitia, what could I do? Your own brother."

"My own brother! such a pleasant visitor, don't you think?—such a credit to us all—without even an evening coat! like a clown, like a blackguard, like a navvy——Oh, my patience!" cried Letitia, whose eyes were starting from her head and who had no patience at all. "But I know why you did it," she added after an angry pause to get breath. "Oh, I remember well enough. It's not for nothing you're an old maid, Mary Hill! Don't I know that you've had him in your mind all the while."

Mary, though she was so mild, was being driven beyond the power of self-restraint. She was all the more easily shaken perhaps

that there was a certain truth in it. It was true that Ralph Ravelstone had never been forgotten — and that his shadow had come between her and the only marriage she had ever had it in her power to make—but not, oh, not as he appeared now.

"I think," she said with some gentle dignity, "that it is very improper of you to say anything of the kind. If I am an old maid it's at least by my own will, and not because I could not help it." Mary was very mild, and yet she felt that, standing upon the platform of that proposal which was so very distinct an incident in her past life, it was hard to be assailed as an old maid by one who knew her so well.

Letitia stood for a moment surprised—scarcely believing her ears. That Mary should have turned upon her! It was like the proverbial worm that sometimes at unexpected moments will turn when nobody is thinking of it. "I know as well as you do that you refused a good offer. What was it made you do it? Oh, I can see through you, though you don't think so! I always suspected it, and now I know it. But what did you expect to

gain by bringing him here? Why should he be brought here? If you had ever told me, if I had known! a man who has been ten years in the bush, a man with a hand like that, and not an evening coat! Oh Mary, you that I have always been so kind to, how could I ever have expected such a thing of you?"

Tears of rage came to the relief of Letitia's overburdened soul. But she suddenly regained command of herself in a moment, dried her eyes and turned to the door. It was now her own part to stand on the defensive, to give explanations and excuses. There was no mistaking the step which was approaching, the heavy step of the outraged husband, he who had never even heard of Ralph's existence. John Parke was not a man before whom his wife was accustomed to tremble. But she did not know what John might be about to pour forth upon her now.

CHAPTER VII

JOHN came into the room with gloom upon his countenance, and a frown upon his noble brow. Letitia had arrested the course of her own passion—she had dried her eyes, and dropped her voice, and prepared herself to meet him with a real apprehension. It was not often that she was afraid of John, but for once there was no doubt that if John was in the mind to find fault he had a sufficient reason. The sight of her husband's troubled face checked her anger and dried up the tears of vexation that had been in her eyes. She gave Mary an appealing look, and made her a motion to sit down by her. It went through her mind quickly that Mary might make a little stand for Ralph when she could not do it herself, and thus break the edge of the assault. If

John could be made to see that Ralph was Mary's old sweetheart, that it was Mary's indiscretion which had brought him there, it would be easier in every way to manage the dilemma. John came in with his heavy step and his countenance overcast, but he looked like a man perplexed rather than angry, and as he came forward it was apparent that he held a telegram in his hand.

"Look here," he said, "Letitia, here is a bore: just when we have got the house full to the door: look at that—that he should choose this time of all others for the visit that has been spoken of so long!"

"John," said Letitia, with a gasp, "I never meant him to come here."

"You never meant Frogmore to come here?"

"Frogmore!" she said, with a sort of wondering obtuseness. She was never stupid, and it made John angry, because he was quite unaccustomed to be misunderstood.

"You had better look at the telegram," he said impatiently. "I don't pretend to know what you mean. Here is the house crammed with men, and my brother, for the first time

since we have been married, proposes a visit. What are we to do?"

It took Letitia some time to understand; her mind was so preoccupied by the other subject that she could not distract her thoughts from it. Frogmore — Frogmore or Ralph — which was it? She tried to shake herself together and grasp the sense of the words at which she was gazing:

Could come to you to-morrow for three or four days, if it suits you. FROGMORE.

"Was there ever such a bore?" John continued saying. "The first time he has proposed to come. And we've got the house crammed, and not a corner to put him in. What am I to do?"

"Frogmore!" Letitia murmured again to herself; and John went on saying, with a monotony which is natural to many men, the same burden of regret, "The house full of men and not a corner to put him in," as if, in some way, the repeated statement of that fact might make a change.

"I don't know what you are thinking of," said Letitia at length with much relief, feeling

that her own brother would be forgotten in the importance of his. "Of course, Frogmore must come, and there is an end of it. I hope you answered his telegram at once."

"How could I answer the telegram—when the house is crowded with men and we have not a——"

"Yes, yes," she said, "we know all that. Of course, he must come. If I should have to give him my own room; of course, he must come. There are so many things I want done. It would be tempting Providence to refuse Frogmore. I want a new nursery, and a cottage for the gardener, and I don't know how many things. You had better write a telegram, and give it to Saunders to be sent the first thing in the morning."

"But, Letitia, when you know the house is crowded, and there is not a——"

"Oh, don't bother me," said Letitia, "as if I had not enough without that! It is not a corner that will do for Frogmore. He must have, of course, the best room in the house. For goodness sake, John, go back to your men in the smoking-room, and tell them you have a very bad account of the covers, and

that there are no birds to speak of. Say you're dreadfully sorry, and that you find you've asked them on false pretences."

"But——" said John. "Why, Letitia! I have heard nothing of the kind."

"I have, then," she said. "They didn't like to tell you—scarcely a bird. Those sort of accidents will happen. Go and tell them. Say you don't know what to make of it."

"I don't, indeed," said John; "I can't understand it. Martin never said a word to me on the subject. That's bad news, indeed. The men will think—I don't know what they will think." He turned to go away, looking more gloomy than ever; but when he got to the door of the boudoir turned round for a moment. "That brother of yours," he said, "is a very queer fish."

"Ralph! Oh, goodness gracious, do you think it's necessary to tell me that?"

"He's a very queer fish," said John, with a laugh. "Those fellows are drawing him out. He is telling them all kinds of bush stories. I don't believe half of them are true. Why did you never tell me you had a brother in the bush?"

"I thought he was dead," she said. "I wish he had been dead before he came here. If I had only been at home it never would have happened. What's the good of you, a man, if you can't turn a fellow like that out of the house?"

John turned round upon her with amazement. "My wife's brother!" he said.

"I don't want to think of him as my brother. For goodness sake, if you want me to have any peace, turn him out of the house."

"Letitia," said John, "in most things you have your own way, and if you like to do a nasty thing yourself I never interfere; but as for turning your brother out of my house——"

"I'm ready to give up even my own comfort to your brother," she said.

John stood for a moment feeling that there was something strained in the parallel—but not quite clever enough to perceive what it was. "Oh, as for that!" he said vaguely. Then he gave it up, the puzzle being too much for him. "And so would I," he said, "do a great deal to please you, Letitia—but I can't turn a man out of my house. If you have nothing more to say than that, I'll go and tell those fellows about the birds."

Letitia sat clenching her hands to keep in her wrath until he had closed the door, and his heavy foot sounded remote and far off as he went down the stairs. She then turned to Mary, who had made several attempts to go away, but had been retained by a gesture more and more imperative at every move she made. "Mary, I hope you know how much you owe me," she said.

"You have been very—kind, Letitia—" said Mary falteringly.

"You've been no expense to your father and mother for a whole year, not even for dress —you know there's not many friends would do that."

Mary hung her head and made no reply. She had not the courage to say that she had done something in return—scarcely even to think so, being very humble-minded—and yet —it was not generous to remind her so often of what was done for her, and the gratitude thus called for would not form itself into words.

"Well, now, you must do something for me. You must get Ralph out of this house."

"I!" said Mary, in dismay.

"Yes, you. He came for you. Don't deny

it, for I am sure of it. What else would have brought him here? He and I were never friends. He knew I wouldn't have him at any price, but he thought that through you, as you were always his sweetheart——"

"I never was anything to Ralph—never! He went away without so much as saying good-bye," Mary said, with indignation.

"That proves exactly what I say. If he had been nothing to you you would not have remembered that he went away without saying good-bye—you needn't try to deceive me, Mary. Now, you must get him out of this house."

"Oh, Tisch!" said Mary, in forgetfulness of all injunctions. Their youth together and all its incidents came rushing back upon her mind. "Oh," she said, "if you will remember, mother was kind to you then. Oh, don't you recollect how often you were all at the vicarage then? Oh, Letitia, I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to say that; but don't—don't be so hard upon me now!"

Letitia rose up with her eyes and her diamonds sending forth kindred gleams. "Do you dare to compare your mother's kindness with mine?" she said. "What was it?—a bit of

cake to a child—and I've taken all your expenses off them for a whole year. Where did you get that dress you are wearing, Mary Hill? Who is it that keeps a roof over your head and a fire in your room, and everything as comfortable as if you were a duke's daughter? Your mother kind to me? I wonder you dare to look me in the face."

But, indeed, poor Mary did not look her in the face. She had put down her head in her hands, beaten by this storm. Though it was but the most timid of reprisals, Mary felt that it was ungenerous to speak of her mother's kindness — and, after all, was not Letitia right? for there never had been much in the vicarage to give. And it was true about the dress—it was that dyed silk which Mrs. Parke had given her, a silk richer than anything poor Mary could have bought for herself. It was true, also, about the fire in the bedroom, which was a luxury impossible in the vicarage. It might not be generous to remind her of these things, but still they were true.

Letitia drew an angry breath of relief. She sat down again with the satisfaction of one who has achieved a logical triumph and

silenced an adversary. "Look here," she said. "I don't think anything can be done to-night. We must just leave it. He's done as much harm as he can. But if Lord Frogmore were to come to-morrow and find Ralph I should die. That is all about it. I should just die, rather than let that horrid old man see my brother in a velveteen coat, like a gamekeeper, and with the manners of a groom. I'd—— take chloral, or something. Now you know! I can't bear it, and I won't bear it. The Parkes were never very nice to me. And that old man as good as said—No, I will not bear it, Mary Hill. If he comes before Ralph is gone I shall be found dead in my bed, and you will be answerable: for without you he never could have got admission here."

"Oh, Letitia! don't say such dreadful things," cried Mary, raising a horror-stricken face.

"No, I shall not say them, but I shall do them," said Mrs. Parke. She was like one who has given a final decision, as she gathered up in her hands the train of her heavy velvet dress. "Good night," she said; "I may never say it again."

"Letitia!" Mary's horror and trouble could find no words.

"I can't think—that you'd kiss me like Judas—and mean to kill me all the same," said the possible martyr, withdrawing within the curtains which screened the door of her bedchamber. She heard the still more horror-stricken tone of Mary's protest, "Oh, Letitia!" as she disappeared. Mrs. Parke was not afraid of a bold simile. She dropped her excitement as she dropped her velvet skirt, as soon as the door had closed upon her, and submitted herself to the hands of her maid with much calm. She had not the least doubt that Mary would lie awake all night, trembling over that threat, and that in the morning, by some means or other, her commands would be done.

Mary fulfilled these prognostications to the letter. She never closed her eyes all night, but pictured to herself all the horrors of suicide, the dreadful discovery, the guilt of which she would never feel herself free all her life. She said to herself, indeed, a hundred times that people who threaten such dreadful acts never perform them, but then reflected that many people had taken comfort from such a thought

and then found themselves confronted by a horrible fact contradicting everything. It might be folly for a hundred times, yet if once it should come true! Mary, who had never seen old Lord Frogmore, figured to herself a sneering, dreadful old man, whose satirical looks would be enough to make life intolerable. She had read of such men in books, and specially of the relations of the husband who would pursue with rancour or contempt a wife whom they did not approve. She went over it so often in her waking dreams that she seemed to see the dreadful old cynic whose very glance would be like a sharp arrow. Poor Letitia! It was bad enough to have a brother like Ralph without exhibiting him at his very worst to the old lord. Though the sight of the man, who had once been her hero, in his fallen state was dreadful to poor Mary, it became more and more plain to her that she must see him; that she must even ask him to see her, and execute Letitia's will and clear this obstacle out of her friend's path even if she herself were to die of it, as Letitia threatened she would. Mary's heart jumped up in her throat

and beat like a fluttering bird as if it would escape altogether from her bosom at the thought. How was she to speak to him, to argue with him, to persuade him? What words could she find to bid him leave his sister's house and never show himself there again? Poor Ralph! Her tender heart pitied him too—he was a terrible apparition, shaming the past, a scare and horror in the present, but what could be so dreadful for a man coming back after so many years as to be disowned and turned away by his nearest relations—to be forbidden his sister's house? Mary thought, but with a thrill of horror, what she would have done had he been her own brother, or if Will or Harry should come back like that. What misery would be so dreadful, what misfortune so terrible! But Mary knew well that she would never turn her back upon "the boys" whatever happened. The worse things were, they would have the more need of her. She would stand up for them, cover their faults, invent virtues for them if they had not any, make everybody but herself believe that they were guiltless. Oh! nobody should say a word against those who were dear to her—no one!

Not husband nor husband's kin—no one, not even if it was the Queen herself. Mary said this to herself with a burst of generous indignation — and then her heart sank down, down into the depths, thinking of Letitia's threat, of Letitia perhaps possibly—if it were only possible, that was bad enough — doing what she said! And the horror in the morning; the little children weeping, John Parke confounded, not knowing what to think, looking dully at the bed.

Mary got up in the horror of this thought in the dusk of the October morning, before daylight. She heard with a tremor that Mrs. Parke was not very well, was not coming downstairs, but was consoled by the sight of the plentiful breakfast which was being carried up to Letitia. Her maid would not have carried up a breakfast like that if there had been anything really wrong; and besides, nothing could have gone wrong so far, for there had been no time as yet for sending Ralph away. The dreadful thing was that he did not appear to breakfast any more than his sister. Mary, as she sat behind the tea urn, heard the gentlemen laughing over the previous night. They

were sure the bushman would not come up to the scratch this morning, they said. If he appeared in time for lunch, that would be all that could be looked for. Mary, listening with an anxiety which she could scarcely conceal, soon discovered that one at least of the guests was going away, called, as he said, by sudden business. If Ralph did not come down till luncheon what should she do? Lord Frogmore might come early, he might meet the prodigal brother—and then! Mary trembled from head to foot. She said to herself that it was folly, that nothing would happen, that Letitia was not that kind—and then she said to herself, who could tell, who knows what might happen? By dint of thinking one thing and another her brain was in a whirl. What was she to do?

Sometimes it happens that by dint of mere terror a coward will do a more daring thing than the bravest person would undertake in command of his faculties. Mary ended by sending to Ralph, while he was still sleeping off the whisky of the smoking-room, a note with these words:

"Dear Ralph,—I must speak to you.

Come to me for God's sake in the garden by the sundial at twelve o'clock. It may be a matter of life and death."

She sent this up after breakfast, and for a little while Mary was more calm. At least she would do what she could for Letitia. For herself and for what he might think of her, or how he might take her summons, she thought nothing at all.

CHAPTER VIII

It was a dull morning, one of those gray days which sometimes come in autumn, when all the winds are still, when the changed and ruddy foliage hangs like a sort of illumination against the colourless atmosphere, and the air is soft and warm, though without sunshine. There had been a great deal of stir in the house in the morning. Two of the visitors had gone hastily away, summoned by urgent business which coincided strangely with the despairing account of the covers which John, prompted by Letitia, had carried to the smoking-room on the previous night. These gentlemen had been driven from the door, one in the dog-cart, one in Letitia's own brougham, and the going away had caused a little bustle and commotion. The others had gone out late to the discredited covers, not expecting much sport. But by

noon all was quiet about the house, where, as yet, Mrs. Parke was not visible, nor yet the unwelcome visitor who occupied Mary's room, making her wonder, with a sense of disgust, whether she ever could go into it again. She went to the sundial with great perturbation and excitement, just as the stable clock was preparing, with a loud note of warning, which made a great sound in the still air, to strike twelve. The sundial was at some little distance from the house, in a little dell on the outer edge of the gardens, surrounded by blooming shrubs on one side and on the other by some of the large trees of the little park—a very small one, but made the most of—which surrounded the house. It was fully open to the gray still light in which there were no shadows, and a little damp with the autumnal mists. Mary wondered at herself for having given this rendezvous when she came to think of it. She might just as well have asked Ralph to meet her in the drawing-room or the library, where at this time of the day there was nobody. There were, indeed, two lady visitors in the house, but the morning-room was their usual haunt; and she now reflected that she was

much more likely to be seen by them in this opening, which was swept from end to end by the full daylight, than in any room in the house. She asked herself whether it was some romantic association—some thought of what people did in novels—which had made her suggest a meeting out of doors. How ridiculous it was! How much more likely to be remarked! But it was too late to think of this. She wandered through the garden, gathering a few late blossoms from the geraniums, which were just about to be taken up for the winter, and a handful of the straggling long stalks of mignonette, which had a kind of melancholy sweetness in which there was a touch of frost and decay. Mary could never in all her life after endure the scent of mignonette.

She saw him after awhile coming, directed by the footman, whom he had evidently asked the way without any veiling of intention, rather —as she suddenly perceived to be quite natural, and the thing she ought to have expected— —with an ostentatious disclosure of what he wanted. She could almost imagine him saying that he had an appointment with a lady. The shock which had been produced in Mary's mind

by the sudden destruction of her youthful ideal in the person of this (as she now thought) dreadful man made her perhaps unjust to Ralph. He came towards the sundial, however, in the full revelation of the gray light, with a smile of self-satisfaction on his face which strengthened the supposition. He had an habitual lurch in his walk, and his large, broad figure was made all the broader and more loose and large in the light suit of large checks which he wore. He had a flaming red necktie to accentuate the redness of his broad face. Mary felt with a shudder that there was reason in Letitia's horror. To let this man be seen by a fastidious, aristocratic, cynical old gentleman, natural critic and antagonist of his brother's wife—oh, no!—she understood Letitia now. If Will or Harry should come home like that! But the idea was too horrible to be entertained for a moment. Ralph came up to the sundial—she had hidden herself behind a clump of lilac bushes to watch him—with that smirk upon his face and a swing and swagger of conquest about him. He leant upon it, arranging himself in a triumphant pose to wait. Then he began to whistle, then he called "Hi" and "Here" under his breath.

After a minute he became impatient and whistled more loudly, and detaching himself from the sundial looked round. "Hi, Mary!" he cried. "Hallo, my lass!" He caught sight at last of her dark dress among the lilacs, and turned round with a loud snap of his fingers. "Oh, there you are!" he cried, "and by Jove right you are, Mary, my girl. It's too open here."

He strolled across the grass towards her with a swing and a lurch of his great person more triumphant than ever. "Right you are," he said, with a laugh, "it's a deal too open. I like your sense, Mary, my dear."

Mary hurried forward, feeling herself crimson with shame, and met him in the middle of the glade. "It can't be too open for what I have to say to you," she said; then added most inconsiderately, "We had surely better go back to the house. We shall be less remarked there."

"I don't think you know what you mean," he said, thrusting his arm through hers, and holding it as though to lean upon her. "That's a woman all over. Gives you a meeting and then's frightened to keep it. I've been a rover,

I don't deny it, and I know their ways. You like me all the better now, don't you, for knowing all your little ways?"

He held her arm, drawing her close to him, and bending over her, surrounding the prim and gentle Mary, fastidious old maid as she was, with that atmosphere of stale tobacco and half-exhausted spirits which breathes from some men. He reminded her of the sensations she had experienced in passing the village public-house—but she was not passing it, she was involved in it now, surrounded by its sickening breath. Every kind of humiliation and horror was in that contact to Mary. She tried in vain to draw herself out of his hold.

"Ralph, oh, please let me go. I have got a message for you. That was why I asked you to come here."

He laughed and leaned over her more than ever, disgusting more than words could say this shrinking woman, whom he believed in his heart he was treating as women love best to be treated. "Come, now," he said, "Mary, my love, don't go on pretending: as if I wasn't up to all these dodges. Say honest you wanted a word with your old sweetheart without Tisch

spying on you with them sharp eyes of hers. And how she's gone off. She's as ugly as a toad—and stuck-up! I dare say she'd think her brother was demeaning himself to the governess —eh? You're the governess, ain't you?" Mr. Ravelstone said.

"I am not the governess; and if either you or she thinks *I* would demean myself——" Mary's habitual gentleness made her all the more fiery and impassioned now—the fierceness of a dove. She disengaged herself from his hold with the vehemence of her sudden movement. She stood panting beyond his reach and addressed him. "Don't come a step nearer! I have a message to you from Tisch. Can't you see, if you have any sense at all, that she cannot want you here?"

He gave her a strange and angry look. "What do you mean? Tisch—my own sister: you've gone out of your mind, Mary Hill."

"It is you that have gone out of your mind. Look at her house, and the way she lives. Look at her husband, a gentleman. Mr. Parke may be stupid, but he is a gentleman. Didn't you understand last night how she was feeling? What has a man like you to do here? Why,

at Grocombe—even at Grocombe they would feel it; and fancy what it must be here."

"What would they feel at Grocombe?" said Ralph, growing doubly red, and looking at her with a threatening air.

Mary paused. To hurt any one was impossible to her—she could not do it. She looked at him; at the droop of his features, from which the jaunty air of complacence had gone, and at his debasement and deterioration, which were so evident in her eyes, not to be mistaken; and her courage failed her. "Oh! Ralph," she said, "there is a difference. It's not only money, or the want of money. You know there is a difference. She wants you to go away."

"Who wants me to go away?"

His countenance grew darker and darker. He looked at her as if he would have struck her. It was she—his old playfellow—who was thus humiliating him to the earth.

Mary grew more and more compunctious. "It is her way of looking at things," she said, faltering. "She is not like you, or me. She thinks so much of what people say. You came to dinner," said Mary suddenly, thinking of

something that might break the blow, "in your velveteen coat."

An air of relief came over Ralph's face. He laughed loudly, yet with evident ease. "So that's what it is!" he said. "You're ashamed of my clo'es, you two young women. Well, I must say women are the meanest beggars I ever saw, and I've met all sorts. Ashamed of my clo'es!"

Mary was relieved beyond measure that he should so take it. She drew a long breath. "It's so much thought of in this kind of house," she said; "and they are expecting Lord Frogmore. Oh, Ralph, don't take it amiss. Letitia is not very strong. She has, perhaps, been spoilt a little, always getting her own way; and she has no room to give her brother-in-law. They get everything from him," she added hurriedly. "He is so rich. Oh! Ralph, how can I say it? I would not for the world hurt your feelings. She wants you to go—while Lord Frogmore is here."

"She has no room to give her brother-in-law, and she prefers my room to my company, eh?" he said, with a harsh laugh. "I'm not good enough to meet that old fogey in my

velvet coat. Why, I thought velvet was all the fashion. They said so in the papers, Mary."

"Not in the evening, Ralph," said Mary, with a sense of duplicity which made her turn away her face.

"Not in the evening, eh? I suppose this fellow must have swallow-tails? Well, it's a poor thing to snub your brother for, ain't it, Mary? You wouldn't do that to a brother of yours."

"I don't think I should, Ralph; but then Letitia has married into a—grand family, and she has her husband's people to think of."

"By George!" he cried, "her husband's people! and me her own brother!" Mary could not refrain from one glance of sympathy —which he caught in the momentary raising of her eyes, and which was so kind yet timid that he burst into a sudden laugh.

"Mary," he said, endeavouring again to put his arm through hers, "you've never got a husband, my lass. Tell me how it is: for you were always a great deal prettier than Tisch, with nice little ways."

"Don't, Ralph—I prefer to walk alone, if you please."

"You're afraid to be seen, you little goose!" he said. "I know your dodges. Come, tell us how it was. If there was one lass in Grocombe that was sure to get a husband I should have said it was you. Come, Mary, tell! I think I know the reason why."

Mary looked at him with a little air which she intended to check impertinence, but which had no effect on Ralph. "I should think it was enough—that I preferred to stay as I am —without any other reason," she said.

"Oh, tell that to—any one that will believe it," cried Ralph. "I know women a little better than that. I'll tell you what it was, and deny it, Mary, if you can. You were waiting for an old sweetheart to come home. Ah, now I've made you jump. That's your little secret. As if I didn't know it the moment I set eyes on you, my dear."

"You are quite, quite wrong — whatever you mean—and I don't know what you mean," said Mary, very angry. It was not true; and yet yesterday, before he had shown himself, there was just so much possibility in the supposition that it might have been true.

He laughed in his triumph over her, and

sense of manly superiority, the sweetheart for whom she had waited, but who had no immediate intention of rewarding her for her constancy.

"We haven't a chance, you know," he said, "my dear, for being as faithful as that; for you see a man has women after him wherever he goes. Oh, I've been a rover, Mary, I'll not deny it. A fellow like me can't help himself. I've never married, and you may think if you like it is because I hadn't forgotten you; but I've had plenty more ready to fling themselves at my head; so you mustn't be surprised if I can't make up my mind to buy the ring all at once."

"Will you tell me your answer for Letitia?" cried Mary, with a crimson countenance, looking him as steadily as she could in the face.

"An answer for Tisch—bother Tisch! if you want an answer for yourself, my dear——"

"Will you leave Greenpark to-day?" cried Mary, with lamblike fury. "Will you go away directly—this moment? I'll go and tell the footman to put up your things for you, Mr. Ravelstone. Mrs. Parke wishes you to go—directly. Do you hear what I say?"

"Why, then, what a little hussy you are—as bad as Tisch herself. And what have I done? You could not expect me to have the ring in my pocket——"

"It doesn't matter," said Mary, "if she does kill herself or if they all kill themselves. I will not stand to be insulted one moment longer. Stay if you please in a place where they hate you and scorn you, and will not speak a word to you. Oh, stay if you please and shame them! But you can't shame me, for I have nothing to do with you; only I hope I shall never see you or hear your horrid name again."

She turned from him and fled across the grass and along the garden paths with the swiftness of a girl of sixteen, and with an energy of scorn which the most complacent of men could not have mistaken. Ralph Ravelstone stood looking after her with a face full of amazement. He did not understand it. A woman of Mary's age is supposed by men of his class to be very open to any overture and not too fastidious as to the terms of it. Besides, he had meant to be an amiable conqueror; not to be disrespectful at all. He

turned slowly after her with his countenance a great deal longer than when he had first approached. The reality of this repulse struck him more than anything she could have said. He was in a way an *homme à bonnes fortunes*, not used to be repulsed by the kind of women he had known. Mary was something different, something finer, though she was only an old maid. His self-confidence was not very deep, and in the bottom of his heart perhaps he suspected that he was not the most creditable of suitors or of brothers. He stood pulling his big beard and looking after the hurrying figure, which never slackened pace nor looked back till it had disappeared into the house. And then he walked slowly after her, with certain words coming back to his ears. "Stay in a place where they hate you and scorn you!" He remembered how his sister had jumped out of his arms, how she had looked at him with staring eyes. "By Jove!" he said to himself, quickening his pace, and strode into the house and rang the bell in his room (he was not much accustomed to bells) till he pulled it down, filling the house with the furious tinkling, and bringing the footman and a stray housemaid

from different corners of the house, stumbling up the unaccustomed stairs—for Mary's room was in a remote corner of the house, and Miss Hill's bell did not ring three times in a year.

CHAPTER IX

"My mistress, sir, is too poorly to see any one."

"Do you know who I am?" said Ralph.

He stood swelling out his big chest in front of the polite imperturbable figure in black, which made the bushman's large check still more emphatic.

"Well, sir," said Saunders, with a deprecating smile, "I am sorry to say as I did not catch the name."

"I am her brother, you fool," said Ralph. "Go back and say that it's her brother, and I must see her before I go. What do you stand there for, gaping? Go back and tell her I can't go without seeing her. Don't you hear?"

"I hear very well, sir," said Saunders, "but I make no doubt, sir, my mistress knew who you was, though I didn't quite catch the name."

"Where's Mr. Parke?" said Ralph.

"He has gone out, sir, with the other gentlemen. I understand his lordship is expected this evening," said Mr. Saunders, with the importance such an intimation deserved.

"And who's his lordship?" thundered Ralph.

"His lordship, sir, is master's brother, Viscount Frogmore. He is an old gentleman, and we're the heirs presumptive in this house."

Ralph was considerably struck by this intimation, which had not affected him when Mary conveyed the news. An old viscount to whom his sister was heir presumptive must be an important person. He was not very learned in, or else he had forgotten the terms and conditions of English rank. He had heard indeed that Tisch had made a great marriage, but not much more about it, and indeed it had sincerely been more a natural desire to see his sister than any hope of allying himself to the exalted personages to whom she belonged which had moved the bushman. He stood stroking down his big beard in all the majesty of his large checks and burly person, but with a look of great perplexity on his countenance. What should he do? As a matter of fact his irrup-

tion into the drawing-room on the night before, and the sudden sight of Tisch in all her glory, had startled him greatly. His confusion had turned into noise and bravado, as confusion and a sense of inappropriateness often do. And then he had been excited and his head turned by the attention his odd stories had received, and the civility of the gentlemen who drew him out. Altogether there had been a whirl of events, which, in conjunction with the case of bottles in the smoking-room, and other potations which had led the way, had dazed Ralph. But now he came to himself. He realised that he was not wanted, with an acuteness which wounded the poor fellow more than such a rash personage could be supposed to be capable of being wounded. He stood and stared at the butler while this process was going on in his mind. He was very nearly taking that functionary into his confidence, telling him what a trick Letitia had played him, and what a strange reception this was for a man newly come home. He ended his musing, however, by a sudden burst of his big laughter in the face of Saunders.

"Don't stand and stare like a stuck pig,"

he said, "but go and order the dog-cart, or whatever you've got—for I'm going off. You didn't suppose I'd stay where I'm not wanted, did you? You're used to sending fellows off when they're not wanted — ain't you, old Tuppeny?" he added, giving Saunders a poke in his ribs.

The laughter and the roughness which made Saunders think Missis' brother an affable, if not very fine gentleman, were both the product of the confusion in Ralph's mind, rather than of any desire to expend high spirits in a joke. He took out a sovereign from his pocket and twanged it through the air into the astonished butler's palm, which somehow, surprised though Saunders was, found itself open to receive the unimportant gift. Ralph intended to show his solemn antagonist that a man who could toss about sovereigns like that was not a man who was in want of anything from Mrs. Parke. But it is doubtful how far he succeeded. Saunders had a profound acquaintance with the ways of men about the world, and his judgment was not that it was rich men who threw their sovereigns about. But he did not in the least object to have

pieces of gold flung at him, and, indeed, liked the sound of them twanging through the air.

Ralph, however, was in no hurry to go. He watched the footman strapping up his much-used portmanteau, and intimated that he thought he might as well have some lunch before he left: and he went out and displayed himself in front of the house, making a promenade up and down with his chest thrown well out, and his big footsteps making the gravel fly. He was not aware that Letitia watched him from her window, but he hoped as much, and that it was gall to her to see him in the way of every visitor who might arrive. The first who arrived, indeed, was no visitor, but the representative of the house in the person of Master Marmaduke, a little fellow of five, dressed in one of those childish suits which make a child look as if it had gone to seed in the upper parts of its person, and was supported by the most incomplete thin stalks below. He was not so firmly planted upon his little legs as he ought to have been, but his shoulders had thus the air of being broad and strong. He returned from his walk with his nurse, while Ralph was taking this little stroll

in preparation for the luncheon, which was being prepared for him in the dining-room. Little Duke went up to the intruder, whom he had not seen, with the air of the master of the house, seven times doubled in dignity and consequence. "Were you wanting anything here?" he asked, as if he had been his own father; but John Parke never filled the rôle so well.

"Oh, Master Duke," said the nurse, dismayed, "the gentleman is staying in the house!"

Duke surveyed the bushman from head to foot with a child's disapproval of a type unknown.

"Hold your tongue," he said, "and let me alone. He's not staying in the house! Why, I've never seen him till this moment, and he's not like anybody I know."

"What's your name, little man?" said Ralph. "Come here and shake hands, and I'll give you a bit of Australian gold, my boy, to know your uncle by."

Duke planted his thin little legs very wide apart and stared. He liked the idea of that bit of gold without any special certainty as to

what it was, but he did not approach too close to a man whose appearance did not satisfy his perceptions. "I don't know you," he said, "I don't know you a bit. I never saw any one the least like you. Do you mean that you're my uncle? What are bits of Australian gold like?"

"They are very much like sovereigns," said Ralph.

Duke's legs involuntarily brought him a little nearer. "You are not like the rest of the gentlemen," said Duke. "You are very queerly dressed. I don't think you can be my uncle. But I should like to see the Australian gold."

Australian was a big mouthful for such a small boy. He got over it in syllables and with an effort.

"Look here," said Ralph, repeating the manœuvre which he had tried with Saunders. Only he twanged the sovereign into the air with his thumb and caught it this time in the palm of his own hand. Duke watched the coin with the greatest interest and drew near to look at it, but did not put forth his own little hand.

"It's just money," he said, in a tone of half disappointment, half contempt. Then he added, "Should I have that to spend if—if you gave it me, you know?"

"Oh yes, you should have it to spend. You shall have it when you come and shake hands with your uncle," said Ralph.

The boy came nearer. Then paused again and said, "I'm sure you can't be Lord Frogmore."

"Why not?" said Ralph, with his big laugh.

Duke looked at him critically and seriously. "Because you don't look like a ——, because I don't think you're a ——." What he wanted to say was that his new acquaintance was not a gentleman. Duke thought he was like the keepers. One of the grooms in his Sunday clothes had very much the air of this strange person who caught the sovereign in his hand in that clever way. But little Duke did not like to suggest, looking up into a big man's face, that he was not a gentleman. So he stopped and stared, almost forgetting the Australian gold in this perplexity which was an experience not at all familiar to him.

"Not like a lord?" said Ralph. "How do you know? I don't suppose you know many lords, do you, little man? I might be a duke for aught you know."

The little boy stared again, less assured. He had not been used to think of lords as a different species, but he had never known a duke. It was well within the limits of possibility that a duke might be like a gamekeeper. The species was unknown to little Marmaduke Parke.

"Are you a duke?" he asked with much seriousness, and eyes very keen and sharp in the study of the new species. Ralph burst into a big laugh.

"No," he said, "my little man, but I'm your uncle. Not Lord Frogmore, but one of the other side. I'm your Uncle Ralph. Come and shake hands."

Duke advanced slowly as it were under protest, and at last ventured to place a little soft hand in the comparatively monstrous palm of Ralph, who squeezed the sovereign into it with such energy that the little boy cried out, and unaccustomed to such gratuities let the coin drop upon the path. But Duke picked

it up with a practical sense which did him credit, and turned it over with eyes in which awe and eagerness were combined. He recognised the Queen's head—but there was something about it which struck him as unusual. Unfortunately he could not yet read. He began to spell A—u—s——

"That's Australia," cried the newly recognised uncle.

Duke, somewhat suspicious, handed the coin to nurse. "Oh, Master Duke, how can you?" cried that anxious woman. "A beautiful sovereign; and you've never thanked the kind gentleman. I don't know, sir," she said, curtseying to Ralph, "if his mamma would let him take it, for my mistress is very particular—but——"

"Not take it from his uncle?" roared Ralph.

The discussion was interrupted by the sound of a step upon the gravel which made them all look round. The new-comer was an old gentleman with snow-white hair, but a ruddy wholesome complexion and the round ripe face which reminds one of a winter apple. "Frosty but kindly" was the look of the small twinkling eyes, the carefully trimmed whisker, the

smoothly shaven chin and upper lip. The old gentleman was of short stature compared with Ralph; his neatness, his perfect cleanness, his well-brushed, well-dressed, carefully preserved look, all showing to greater advantage beside the big figure of the bushman in his big checks. He walked with great activity and alertness—like a young man, people said—but there was indeed a special energy almost demonstrative in his activity which betrayed the fact that it was something of a wonder that he should be so active. He flourished his stick perhaps a little to make it apparent that he had no need of it. He eyed the group very curiously as he walked past them to the door—and then it was that he heard Ralph's cry, "Not from his uncle?" At the sound of those words he turned round quickly and came back.

"Eh," he said, "his uncle? Who is this little fellow, my good woman? Marmaduke Parke? Then, my boy, I'm your uncle too."

Duke looked at this new claimant without the hesitation which he had shown to Ralph. There was no doubt on the most superficial examination that this was a gentleman. He

took off his little hat and held out his little hand.

"How do you do?" said the little boy. "Mamma is poorly and papa is out, and I'm just come back from my walk; but if you will come in, please, Saunders will know what to do."

When Ralph gave vent to the great roar of a laugh which seemed to make a sort of storm in the air above the heads at once of Lord Frogmore and of little Marmaduke, there was more than merriment in that outburst. The bushman felt the distinction which the little boy had made, though it was only a very little boy that had made it. He assumed an additional swagger in consequence. "I'm on the other side, my lord," he said, "for I presume you're Lord Frogmore. I'm Ralph Ravelstone, the brother of the missus—but we're on different tacks, you and me. She ain't at all proud of her brother, I'm sorry to say, though I want nothing from them—not a brass farthing. So I'm clearing out of the way."

"Ah!" said Lord Frogmore. He added after a moment, "You will not, of course, expect me to interfere—people know their own concerns best."

"Interfere!" said Ralph. "I never thought of that. Tisch knows her own mind, and there's nobody I ever heard of could make her change it. Oh, I'm going. It's not good enough to hang on here in a bit of a country place like this, for anything I'll get from Tisch. Besides, I want nothing from them. I've just come from the bush with dollars enough once in a way. I came out of kindness. If she don't want me I can do without her, and that's all I've got to say."

To this Lord Frogmore made no reply, save by bowing his head politely, as to a conclusion of which he might approve indeed, but which left nothing to be said. But Ralph stood swaying his big person about, not knowing how to get himself off the scene—and indeed with a sentiment of elation in the unexpected and unaccustomed felicity of talking to a lord.

"You see, my lord," he said, "through her," and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, "we are a kind of connections, you and me."

"Oh!" said Lord Frogmore gravely. "We are—a kind of connections?"

"Yes," said Ralph. "I'm very glad to make your acquaintance. This little beggar

here is nephew to us both. It's droll if you think of it," added Ralph, stopping to laugh, "that he should be nephew to you—and also to me."

"Perhaps it is a little—droll, as you say," said Lord Frogmore. Fortunately he did not think it was his own age that Ralph referred to. He thought it was indeed a wonderful thing that he and this wild bushranger, or whoever he was, should stand in the same relationship to any one. At this moment the footman appeared at the hall door, with a look of intelligence addressed to Ralph. The bushman started and changed into a tone of almost ostentatious hospitality. "My lunch is ready," he said, "there's sure to be enough for two. I hope, my lord, you'll come and have a share."

Lord Frogmore had left the railway at a different station from that which the Parkes ordinarily used. He was proud of his walking powers, and liked to show that he was as able for exertion as much younger men. Indeed it was his delight to surprise people who sent carriages for him and were anxious to save such an old gentleman fatigue, by appearing suddenly at their door as he had done now. But so

much exercise required exceptional support—and he felt the want of a glass of wine. He received Ralph's invitation with amusement but not without pleasure. "Don't you think," he said, "that we had better wait for some of the people of the house?"

"Don't be shy, my lord," said Ralph. "Why, we're all people of the house."

Little Duke then stood forth, feeling the call of duty. "Mamma's poorly upstairs—and papa is out shooting," he said. "But I'm here. And it's me the next after papa."

"Oh, it's you the next, little man?"

"Yes," said Duke, without guile—"first there's you, don't you know, if you're Uncle Frogmore—and when you're dead, papa—and when papa's dead, me—I'll be Lord Frogmore some day," said the boy. "And then I shan't want your Australian sovereign, you, uncle—man—for I don't know your name."

"Oh," said the old gentleman gravely, "so you'll be Lord Frogmore."

CHAPTER X

LETITIA was in her room, by the open window, wrapped in a warm dressing-gown. It was rather cold, though the day was bright, to sit by an open window; but she was watching for her brother's departure, and very eager, thinking he would never go. She had been an unseen witness, behind the curtain, of his meeting with her boy, and had partially overheard the conversation that had passed; that is to say, she had heard all Ralph's part of it, but not Duke's little voice in reply. Letitia was more impatient than words can say of this encounter, and trembled with nervous anxiety and helpless eagerness. But she said to herself that Frogmore at least would not come till the afternoon, and all the other gentlemen were out, and the coast clear. No one arriving at a country house to pay a visit ever came before

the afternoon—five o'clock, that was the earliest moment possible for an arrival. She said this to herself with a presentiment which she could not overcome, but for which she reproached herself, declaring that it was nonsense audibly in the turmoil of her excitement. Why should Frogmore arrive at an hour when nobody arrived, merely to distract her, Letitia? Things are very perverse sometimes, but not so perverse as that. She said to herself that she was a fool for dwelling upon such a thought, and that her nervousness about Ralph was absurd. She dared not show herself at the window, lest he should see her and insist upon an interview; and from where she sat she could see only by a hurried glance now and then, so that she remained unaware of the full horror of what was happening until she heard a third voice, not familiar, but which after a moment she recognised, and which was to her as the clap of doom. Frogmore! She pulled the curtain aside, forgetting her precautions in the excess of her excitement; but no one of the group saw her, they were too much occupied with themselves.

Lord Frogmore had not appeared much

in his brother's domestic circle. Since her marriage Letitia had seen him only during the three or four days' visit which John and she paid once a year to the head of the house. He went abroad every winter, taking care of himself, as if his life were of so much importance! and had visits to pay in the visiting season which no doubt he liked better than going to see his brother; at all events they had met very little, and Letitia was not so very familiar with his voice that she should recognise it at once. But even before she recognised she divined. Of course it was Frogmore; who should it be but the one person in the world whom she was the least desirous to see? She was so overwhelmed by the thought that the meeting which she so much wished to avoid had taken place, that the heart which seemed to beat in her throat and the fluttering of all her nerves prevented her from hearing what they said, until the sound of steps made her again pull back the curtain, and she watched the group moving leisurely towards the dining-room. Ralph was doing the honours, he was inviting Lord Frogmore in to luncheon, and little Duke, whom she would have liked to

whip, had abandoned his nurse and was walking solemnly between the big bushman and the little old gentleman. Oh! how she would have liked to whip Duke! It was the one possible outlet for her feelings which Letitia could think of in the immense irritation that possessed her, in view of this insufferable combination, Ralph doing the honours of John Parke's house to Lord Frogmore. If she had only been wise enough to prevent it — to listen to her own presentiment, to have been on the spot herself and prepared for whatever might happen. Sometimes it is highly advantageous to adopt the female expedient of a headache; to find yourself unable to come downstairs on some particular morning when there may happen to be any embarrassing business. But sometimes this expedient is not so successful. Letitia repented bitterly the employment of it. She had been determined not to see her brother—to show him in the most decided way that her house was a place to which he was not to come. But how could she ever have anticipated that Lord Frogmore would appear at such an unlikely hour, and that it should be Ralph—Ralph of all people in the world—that would receive

him, and do the honours of the house to him? After a pause of rage and perplexity, Letitia rang the bell, and when her maid appeared sent her somewhat imperiously for Mary Hill. "Go and tell Miss Hill I want to see her. Tell her—I mean ask her," said Letitia, with a civility born of necessity, "to come directly, please." Mrs. Parke paused again to think which would be most impressive; whether to begin to dress with the air of being quite unable for the exertion, or to fling herself down upon the sofa in the lassitude of the dressing-gown, unable to move. She decided for the first of these processes. It would touch Mary more to see her preparing to do her duty at any price, than merely to witness the collapse which perhaps she would not have such complete faith in as was desirable. Accordingly Letitia rose. She pulled out the first dress that came to hand in her wardrobe. Not to diminish the effect, she waited until Mary might be supposed to be approaching. She then hurried out of her dressing-gown, and began to put on her usual clothes, and was found by Mary, on her hurried entry, half fallen upon the sofa, panting and breathless, fastening, with

hands that trembled and seemed hardly capable of performing their functions, her under-garments. Mary made an outcry of surprise when she entered the room, and the maid who followed made a dart at her mistress with a scream—"Madame, you're not fit to dress or go downstairs."

"What can I do?" said Letitia, with little pants between each two words, "when I am so much wanted—when I must—I must."

"Oh! what is the matter, Letitia? Can't I do it for you?" said Mary, in her impulsive way.

"You may go away, Felicie. Miss Hill will help me if I want any help. Oh, Mary, don't you know what is the matter? Shut the door after that prying woman. They all want to have their noses in everything. It's Ralph," said Mrs. Parke, throwing herself back on the sofa as in despair. "He has not gone away after all, and Frogmore has come. Oh, Mary! when I begged and implored you upon my knees to get him away, and not to let him meet Frogmore."

Letitia threw herself back on her sofa while in the act of tying a pair of necessary strings.

Her hands were trembling very perceptibly. She dropped the strings and flung her arms over her head in an outburst of tragical distress. Mary, on her part, had retired in tears from her interview with Ralph, and had shut herself into the little back room, which was all, in the present crowded state of the house, that she could call her own, with much real agitation and distress. But when she saw Letitia press those conspicuously trembling fingers on her face, the sight of her friend's trouble was more than she could bear.

"Oh, Letitia," she said, "I am so sorry for you—what can I do? If there is anything I can do, tell me. I did speak to him. I begged him to go away, and he said he would. Oh, if there is anything more I can do I will do it. But don't kill yourself, don't take on so dreadfully. Don't, oh don't think so much of it, Letitia; Ralph——"

"Don't mention his name," cried Mrs. Parke, "never shall I think of him as a brother. Do you think I've no pride and no feeling for my family? How would you like if your black sheep—if the one that was no credit—turned up just when you wanted to put your best foot

foremost? Oh, Mary Hill! I don't blame you, but he never would have come but for you."

"You are quite mistaken, there," said Mary, with a dignity in which there was some touch of irritation, too. "And I am glad to say there is no black sheep in my——" Her voice sank as she added this—and a compunction seized her and broke the sentence short—for to be sure the black sheep in the family is the misfortune and not the fault of the rest, and Mary felt it was ungenerous to remind Letitia of her own better fortune. She went on, with a little eagerness to conceal this error. "If I can do anything, Letitia—but I don't know what I can do."

"No, nor I," said Letitia, but then she said with a softened voice, "you might go down and see what they're doing. I can't be ready in a moment, it takes some time to get into one's dress when one is all of a tremble as I am. You might go down and stand between Frogmore and Ralph. Oh, I know you could do it. And there is Duke, the little wretch, listening to all Ralph's stories. Send him up to me straight off."

"I—go down! But I don't know Lord Frogmore—and Ralph."

"I hope you know Ralph at least. Mary Hill! You told me this moment you would do anything—but the moment I name the one thing, the only thing I ask of you——"

Mary wrung her hands but turned away and went downstairs. She had never been used to resist when anything was asked of her. It had been her part in the world always to do what was insisted upon, what it was necessary to do. She went downstairs, almost counting the steps in her reluctance, hoping that Letitia might relent and call her back, yet knowing very well that nothing would make Letitia relent. After her conversation this morning with Ralph to go back as it seemed voluntarily into the room where he was, to go as he would think on purpose to have a last word with him, was intolerable to her. Her natural modesty and reticence was intensified by primness, old-maidenly scruples which had come upon her with advancing years and made her pride more sensitive and her fear of compromising herself more great. And before Lord Frogmore, who would think—what might he not think? Poor

Mary went slowly across the hall. Oh, if Letitia only knew what it was to put such a commission upon her—but Letitia had such different ways of thinking—Letitia might perhaps have found it no trial at all.

When Mary went into the dining-room where Ralph was making an excellent meal, and telling stories of the bush which delighted his little audience, her colour was heightened, her dove's eyes were clear and humid, almost with tears in them. She had seldom in her life looked so well, though of this she was quite unconscious. Her great reluctance gave her an air of dignity as well as that of duty painfully fulfilled. She went in very slowly, holding her head higher than usual, though it was a sense of humiliation and not pride that so moved her. Lord Frogmore had been persuaded to join the bushman in his luncheon, having evidently been assured that this was the luncheon of the house, Letitia not being well enough to be out of her room. Ralph was seated at his meal with his mouth full, talking as he munched, and praising the excellent cold beef as he talked. Cold beef for Lord Frogmore! Saunders indeed had endeavoured to

interfere, to explain that the family lunch was an hour later, that this was only for Mr. Ravelstone because of his train, and that to set cold beef before the distinguished guest was the last thing in the world that could have been contemplated. But Lord Frogmore had paid no attention, and sat quite pleased, mincing his cold beef into small morsels, and laughing at Ralph's stories. Little Duke had clambered up upon his high chair and sat between the two men, turning his small head from one to another as they talked with great attention, with the precocious civility of a host paying solemn attention to his guests. Duke did not laugh at the Australian's jokes because he did not understand them, but he gazed at Lord Frogmore who did, and looked from one to another with a curious consciousness of the inferiority of those mysteriously excited persons who gesticulated, and declaimed, and laughed, and applauded, to his own small gravity and dignity, something like that which we can imagine rising in the consciousness of an intelligent animal at sight of human eccentricities. Duke thought it very funny that they should laugh so much. What was there to laugh about?

Ralph sprang up from the table, making a great noise, with his knife and fork in his hands, when Mary appeared. "Hallo!" he cried. "Here we have begun like a couple of ill-bred pigs without thinking of Miss Hill. A plate and napkin for Miss Hill, and look sharp, you there! What can you think of us to begin without you? I give you my word I never gave it a thought."

"Please sit down," said Mary. "I want nothing. I only came—that is, Letitia sent me — to see that you had everything you want. To see that there was a proper lunch——"

"Letitia's very kind, but she might have come herself. There's excellent cold beef—isn't it excellent, my Lord Frogmore? They think it's not good enough for you, evidently, but it's plenty good enough for me. I prefer it to all the kickshaws in the world. Sit down and try a bit, Mary, it'll do you good."

"Oh, thank you," said Mary, drawing nervously away. "Duke, you are to go upstairs to your mother. Oh, please don't disturb yourself. I would rather not sit down, please. Letitia was afraid that you were not

served in time—that you might be kept too late for your train."

"Letitia's very anxious about my train," cried Ralph, with a big laugh, but he caught Mary's alarmed look at Saunders, who stood very demurely behind Lord Frogmore with his ears wide open to everything. Saunders scented a mystery, and was very anxious to fathom it. He scented something much more mysterious, as was natural, than anything that existed. "But sit down, Mary, and join the festive board," continued the bushman, "a meal's twice a meal when there's a lady present. Don't you think so, Lord Frogmore?"

Lord Frogmore had risen up with old-fashioned courtesy when he saw Mary, and stood without taking any part in the invitation, awaiting what she intended to do, with his hand on the back of his chair. Lord Frogmore, as ill-fortune would have it, was seeing the house of the Parkes, which was indeed the most orderly and well-governed of houses, in the strangest light—a light that was not at all a true one, though he had no means of knowing it. The wild, bearded brother from the back-woods, the gentle, somewhat prim dependent

lady puzzled him very much. Miss Hill he thought a much pleasanter type of woman than his sister-in-law, but who was she? Probably the governess; but then the governess would not be on such familiar terms with the brother. The old gentleman stood with true civility, doing nothing to increase the embarrassment of the poor lady, poor thing, who did not know what to do.

"The dog-cart, sir, is at the door," said Saunders solemnly, "and if I might make so bold, there is just twenty minutes to catch the train."

Ralph put down his knife and fork. "I should have liked another bit of that nice cold beef," he said; "but since you're all in such a hurry—— Little 'un, you can go and tell your mother I'm off. It'll be a satisfaction to her. And, Mary, don't forget what I said."

"I don't remember," said Mary, "that you said anything particular. Ra—Mr. Ravelstone —I will tell Letitia—anything you wish me to say."

"Then tell her," cried Ralph, "I don't care that!" with a snap of his big fingers. He paused, however, with a thought of Saunders

and the proprieties, and burst into another laugh. "You can tell Tisch that the cold beef's capital, and that I've enjoyed my luncheon—and the best of company," he said. "Good-bye, my lord, and good-bye, little 'un. Mary, is this how we're to part, you and me?"

Mary wrung her fingers out of his grasp. "I will give Letitia your message," she said.

"You'll come and see me off at least. Poor Mary, don't be so down because there's strangers here. Come out and see me go."

She looked involuntarily in her distress towards the courteous old gentleman who stood quietly observant with his hand on the back of his chair. Lord Frogmore did not understand the meaning of the appeal in her eyes—whether she wished him to go away; whether she looked to him for protection. He took out his watch, however, on the chance that it was the latter, and held it up to the departing guest.

"Well, good-bye to you all!" shouted Ralph, thus driven by moral force to the door.

"I fear the gentleman will be late," said Lord Frogmore, in his precise voice.

"Oh, I hope not!" cried Mary, clasping

her hands. She listened while the dash of the dog-cart from the door, as Ralph sprang into it, was audible. "He has been long absent from home," she said. "He has got out of the ways of—English life. Mrs. Parke was rather afraid—— She was so sorry not to be down-stairs to receive you. She is dressing now to be ready for luncheon, and begged me——"

"It was quite unnecessary; I found him very amusing. And I was glad to make acquaintance with this little fellow." Lord Frogmore put his hand on Duke's head, who had not obeyed the call to his mother. "He is—your charge, perhaps?"

"Oh, no," cried Mary, with a blush. "I am only a friend staying in the house."

"I beg you a thousand pardons," said Lord Frogmore.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Mrs. Parke came downstairs she exhausted herself in civilities to her old brother-in-law, and in apologies that she had not been there to receive him. She had been much upset, she allowed, by the appearance of her long-lost brother quite unexpectedly on the previous night. A brother who had given the family great anxiety, and whom it was most necessary to send home at once for family reasons. The explanation was very well given and very plausible, but there was one thing upon which Letitia insisted too much, and that was the fact that she had not expected Lord Frogmore until the afternoon. Her imperfect breeding and still more imperfect taste made her insist upon this with an emphasis which conveyed a reproach to Lord Frogmore for his premature arrival. He made her a very

serious apology, though with a twinkle in his keen old eyes which Letitia (though so clever) was not clever enough to detect.

"It was very thoughtless on my part," said Lord Frogmore. "I will be more considerate on future occasions. It is of course ridiculous to arrive in the morning, when the mistress of the house has of course a thousand engagements. I will remember the hint you give me to regulate my future conduct." Mary, who was present, was very uneasy at this covert satire, but Letitia did not perceive it.

"I am sure I did not mean that you were not most welcome—at any time, Frogmore. I hope neither John nor I need to say that—but only that it is more usual later, and that I was not prepared. Nothing would have prevented me from being down in time, not if I had died for it, had I been prepared."

"I can only be most happy that you were not prepared—for what would I have said for myself, or what would John have said to me, had a life so precious been placed in danger by my indiscretion?" said Lord Frogmore with a bow. He was a little formal in his modes of speech and in his civilities, which had an old

school deference about them quite unknown to the new generation. There is nothing easier than to give a dangerous scratch under the cover of that velvet glove of supreme good manners, but it takes a delicate perception to perceive sarcasm, and Letitia did not find it out.

Lord Frogmore on his side was much more amused than he had expected by the reception he had met with. He belonged to a class perhaps more frequent nowadays than in former times; the class to which the follies of its fellow-creatures is more amusing than anything else that can be met with in the world. The old lord expected to pay a very dull duty visit to his brother, whom he esteemed as a good-hearted blockhead, and the sharp little underbred woman who was his wife. He had scarcely hoped to be amused, even by Letitia, whose little pretensions he believed himself to have fully fathomed and seen through, and he did not expect to find amusement in the society to be found in their house. It was a quite unexpected felicity to be received by the big bushman with his stories of adventure, and the unexplained family complication

coincident with his presence and the evident desire to get rid of him shown by all the house. Mary, too, who was not the governess, and who under her little middle-aged primness was an observer like himself, and saw what he meant when Mrs. John remained quite impervious, interested the old lord. There was something to see and note where he had expected nothing, something to find out in the perfectly *banal* household. The old gentleman's little keen eyes quickened and sparkled, and that wonderful interest in human life which is nowhere so strong as among those who have reached its furthest limit, awoke in him with a grateful hope of satisfaction. In the midst of this, which was on the whole agreeable, there was one little prick which had been given quite unintentionally by the most innocent hand, yet which he could not forget, notwithstanding all his philosophy. It was what little Duke had said when he had welcomed his uncle with immediate recognition of what was due to him. "First, there's you," Duke had said, "and when you're dead, papa, and when papa's dead, me—I'll be Lord Frogmore some day." This was quite true and

quite innocent, and meant no harm; but Lord Frogmore could not get it out of his mind. He had of course been aware since John Parke was born that he was to be his successor, heir presumptive, as the peerage said: and of course little Marmaduke was John's heir — heir apparent, the undoubted hope of the illustrious race of the Parkes. But, still, all the same, it jarred upon the old gentleman. He did not like to be put away in his coffin in the family vault in this summary way, not even the chief figure there, but followed by John after him, in order that this cocksparrow should become Lord Frogmore. He knew it was absurd, and he was able to laugh a little at John's dismissal too, thus accomplished by his little son. But with all the alleviations to be procured in this way, and the evident simplicity of the child who meant no harm, it was still not pleasant to contemplate. "First, there's you, and when you're dead, papa, and when papa's dead, me." Lord Frogmore laughed to himself and wondered how John would like it; but John was young, and probably would not mind a reference to such a remote possibility, and then it was John's son, not an unknown

little boy, who was the speaker. He wondered if that was the sting of it—an unknown little boy—his nephew, indeed, but young enough to be his great-grandchild—a mite of a boy! To realise a long life like Lord Frogmore's, an important life, so much in it, so many people dependent upon it, a life which had lasted so long, an institution in the country—and then to think that it was to be swept away to make room for that imp in knickerbockers! It was ludicrous, it was laughable — but the thing which put a sting in it and made it so disagreeable, thrusting itself in among other thoughts of far more importance, was that it was true. "I'll be Lord Frogmore some day." It was so. Uncle and father must give way to him. They would be put away into their niches and he would reign. This kept coming back into Lord Frogmore's mind as he walked about the place and inspected the gardens and shrubberies. It flew in upon his thoughts when they were occupied with matters quite different—little Duke's look and his childish confidence. "I'll be Lord Frogmore some day." It came back to him with a persistency which he disliked very much but could not get

rid of. It was quite true—unless in any way Providence should interpose.

There were only two ways in which Providence, even Providence, could interpose. One was a very sad way, that little Duke should die; that he should never come to the heritage which he was quite right in thinking certain. The little fellow might die. This was an alternative that Lord Frogmore, though distinctly irritated by Duke, and resentful of his self-confidence, did not like to contemplate. Die—oh, no! He would not have the little fellow die—a creature so full of hope and promise—oh, no! Let him say what childish follies he pleased, he must not die. But if not, then he must succeed and be Lord Frogmore. Was it absolutely certain that he must be Lord Frogmore?

Frogmore turned this over in his mind as he took his walk—the walk which he never intermitted, and which had done so much to keep him in health. Needless to say that the dearest wish of this old gentleman was to keep in health. The young people may be indifferent to it; they may commit all sorts of rashness, and run all manner of risks; but when a man

is drawing near seventy he knows he must not be guilty of any of these follies. Frogmore thought a good deal about his health, avoided everything that could injure it, denied himself even things that he liked, ate sparely, rested often, and avoided all subjects that were disagreeable, on principle, that nothing might affect his precious health. But he could not get this childish brag—this little boy's chatter out of his mind. It was very annoying; it was not worth troubling about; but he could not get it out of his mind. Nevertheless, for some reason or other, he stayed longer at Greenpark than he had any intention of doing. He remained on from day to day, to Mrs. Parke's annoyance yet pleasure.

"It is clear that Frogmore likes being here," she said to her husband with some pride.

"Yes," said John, "but it's a bore."

"It *is* a bore," said Letitia, "but it always looks well to be on such good terms with the head of your family; and most likely he will do something for the children."

"I don't see what he can do for the children; it will all come to us naturally," her husband said.

"Oh, John, *naturally!* How can you talk such nonsense? Naturally he will leave everything he can away from us; but if he takes a liking to the children!" John was obliged, as he usually was, to allow that there was a great deal in what Letitia said.

One afternoon, however, she received disagreeable letters, which had a disastrous influence on Letitia's temper. They were letters about Ralph. She had not very much communication nowadays with her old home. Mr. Ravelstone of Grocombe and his sons had no habit of writing. There was not a woman in the family save the wife of the second brother, who had married a housemaid, and naturally she did not attempt to correspond with her sister-in-law. But on this occasion old Mr. Ravelstone wrote, and Willie Ravelstone wrote, and there was a letter from Ralph. Why did you send him here? the father and brother asked in tones of despair. Why didn't you make him go back? While Ralph himself wrote with jaunty familiarity and sent his love to Frogmore, who he said was a jolly old cock, and to whom he meant to write very soon. Letitia was irritated beyond description by these

letters. Her sense of superiority to her own family was great, and to be thus called to account by them was intolerable. And Ralph's boisterous nonsense and his bravado about Lord Frogmore drove her to a kind of frenzy. She turned, as was natural, upon the only person she could assail with the most perfect impunity, upon Mary, at whose head she had almost flung Ralph's letter. The letters came to Greenpark in the afternoon. The gentlemen were all out, or so she thought, and there was no restraint upon the mistress of the house. The drawing-room was a double room, one within the other. And as ill luck would have it, Lord Frogmore had retired to the inner portion with the newspaper before his sister-in-law came in. She had taken back Ralph's letter from Mary, who followed her into the drawing-room, and now flung it on the table with an exclamation of disgust.

"I do not believe," she said, "that he would ever have come here at all, Mary Hill, but for you. It was you who took him in, and instead of telling him, which was the best possible excuse, that the house was full, though you knew it was, to the door; and I had to get

up a story about the covers to make room for Frogmore, whom it's of so much importance to keep well with ; instead of getting rid of him in this way with just a simple story—*and true*—you gave him your own room — your own room ! determined at any risk you'd have him here. What for, in the name of goodness? For you couldn't marry him—though, indeed, one can never tell what a woman will be silly enough to do."

"You know, Letitia," said Mary, deeply wounded, and with some vehemence, "I would not marry your brother—not if he had everything the world could give."

"You say so now—when you know that he is not in that mind ; but you were not of the same opinion then. You gave him your own room that you mightn't have to send him away."

"Oh, Letitia," said Mary, "you have always put people in my room when there was any crowding. You have done it twenty times. It seemed so rational ; and how was I to know? Your own brother——"

"Oh yes," cried Mrs. Parke, "the sort of brother to bring forward among the gentlemen and exhibit to Frogmore ! Oh, you knew very

well how I should hate it. You did it to be revenged upon me. You wouldn't take the trouble to get him out of the house when I sent you to do it. And now here's father abusing me for sending him home — as if it were any doing of mine. I don't understand you, Mary Hill, after all I've done for you. You know you have not cost your father a sixpence all this year. I gave you the very gown on your back that you might look nice, and brought you into the best society; but you'll not take any trouble or do a single thing for me."

"Oh, Letitia," said poor Mary, and there was the sound of tears in her voice; presently she added tremulously: "There's nothing I would not do—if I could only be the housemaid to have my proper work and know what was expected of me."

"Oh, yes," cried Letitia sarcastically. "I think I see you at the housemaid's work. You like a great deal better to look nice and play the lady and make up to the gentlemen."

Mary rose hastily to her feet. "If that is your opinion of me," she said hurriedly, "I had much better go away."

"Oh, yes," cried Letitia again, "that is the only other way with people like you—go away! That is the first cry as soon as you are crossed —when you know I have nobody to help me, not a creature I can trust to. But what do *you* care? What does it matter how worried I may be? I can't go away if things go wrong; but you can threaten me—it is nothing to you——!"

"What do you want me to do?" cried poor Mary. "You know it is not true that I make up to the gentlemen. I never did at my youngest—and it would be a strange thing if I were to begin now."

"Mary Hill," said Letitia with solemnity, "you know you thought Ralph was your sweetheart when he went away——"

"If I ever was such a fool," cried Mary with spirit. "I saw well what a fool I was the first words I exchanged with him. You could not wish so much that he should go away as I did—and you cannot wish so much as I do never to see him again!"

"Well! I hope Ralph Ravelstone is as good as any Hill at all events!" Letitia cried. Her brother might be odious to herself, but as

is usual in such circumstances she resented disapprobation from others. "If you hadn't thought so you would never have let him in—and Frogmore would never have seen him—and I shouldn't have been ashamed in this way; and now you pretend you never want to see him again! It is just the way with—with—people like you. You pull yourselves up by other people's hands and then you turn upon them. And here you have been currying favour with old Frogmore."

"I—with Lord Frogmore!"

"Yes, you—finding his gloves for him, cutting up the books for him—showing him the way about the grounds—or whatever he wants. And what do you expect you are to make by that? Do you think he will put you in his will? But all he has is ours by right. It ought to go to the children, every penny. And do you think he minds what you do—an old maid? Not a bit. If there is a thing that men despise, it is an old maid."

"Letitia," said Mary, with a trembling voice, "it will do no good for you and me to quarrel. If you ever say anything like this again I will go away from your house that very

day. Lord Frogmore is a kind, good man; he is nicer to me than any one in this house. Perhaps the gentlemen here do despise old maids. If they do, I think it shows that they are very silly to despise anybody for such a cause. And it is not very pretty of you to say it. But if ever you speak to me of making up to any one again——"

"Oh, you are just a fool, Mary Hill. Of course, I say whatever comes into my head when I am just mad with everybody; and everybody is against me—you too."

And it became audible in the next room that Letitia in her turn had burst into angry tears. Lord Frogmore had remained quite still in his seat while this conversation was going on. He had not thought it any harm. He listened and sometimes a smile flitted across his face, sometimes a frown—at one point he started slightly—but no sense of guilt in his eavesdropping was in the mind of this depraved old gentleman. When, however, there occurred this outburst of tears, and it became evident that Mary was occupied in soothing her friend, and that Mrs. Parke was being laid down on the sofa and propped with pillows, that a

cup of tea was spoken of as likely to do her good, and every sign was given of a permanent occupation of the other room, Lord Frogmore began to feel much confused as to how he was to escape. There was a glass door which led into the garden, but it was no longer in use as the weather was growing cold — and to get through a window even from a room on the ground floor was a perilous attempt for a person of his age. It was, however, the only thing to be done. He opened the window as softly as possible and slipped out — leaving as few traces as he could of his escape. But the sounds, however softened, could not but produce a great effect on the ladies in the outer room. Mrs. Parke sat bolt upright on the sofa, stopped sobbing as if by a miracle, and shivered to the very tips of her toes. Who was it—who could it be?

"Run round and see," she whispered hoarsely to Mary, pushing her off as she stood beside the sofa. "For goodness sake, don't stand and stare, but run round outside and see."

CHAPTER XII

LORD FROGMORE had divined the course that would be taken by the ladies, and as soon as he escaped he hurried off in the opposite direction, from which, when Mary reached the door, he was visible tranquilly sauntering towards the house. He called to Mary as soon as he saw her at the door. "Miss Hill! I have been trying in vain to find my way to Marsham Ponds. Have you time to show me how to go?"

Mary begged him to wait a moment and returned to reassure Letitia. "Whoever it was it was not Lord Frogmore. He is out in the West shrubbery trying to find the way to Marsham, and he wants me to show him. Whoever it was it could not be he."

Letitia drew a long breath of relief. "Well," she said, "no one else matters much; but for

goodness sake never let us begin to talk again without seeing if there's anybody there."

"Do you want me," said Mary, "or can I go? I will tell Felicie to come down and give you your tea."

"Oh, you can go—it's better there should be some one to amuse Frogmore; but don't you think you'll get anything out of him, for every penny he has should come to the children. Now remember what I say."

"I want none of his pennies," said Mary indignantly—but it was with a sense of relief that she got her hat and went out to Lord Frogmore, who was more kind and understanding than any other visitor at Greenpark had ever been. They had all taken her undisguisedly for a dependent, all treated her in the easy and unguarded way which unfortunately is the common way of treating a governess or companion, with that manner of contempt—or perhaps it would be most kind to say indifference—which an old maid who is poor and modest is apt to meet with. Her remarks were not noted—her opinions elicited no response; if she was silent, as she most frequently was, nobody cared. But Lord Frog-

more always heard her when she said anything, and asked her what she thought of this thing and that. It pleased poor Mary to be considered like other people, on the same level as the rest—whom inevitably in her own mind she had begun to regard with an involuntary responsive scorn as stupid and without feeling. She thought better of her neighbours because she herself was placed in her right position by the sense, the appreciation, or—as she called it—the kindness of old Lord Frogmore.

They went along together through the copsewood which surrounded the trim clearing of garden and tiny park in which the house was enclosed. It was brown and red with autumnal colour and shining in the sun with autumn damp, the heavy dews of the morning which had settled down in the afternoon to a sort of suspended wateriness which made the bushes and the grass glisten. But it was not cold, the afternoon sun diffused a ruddy glow through the air, to which the red and yellow trees added each their suggestion of a contributed light. They had talked about the house, about the weather, so fine for the time of the year, and about Marsham Ponds, which made a pic-

turesque point in the landscape, as they went along, and it was after a little pause that Lord Frogmore began.

"I am going to say something to you, Miss Hill, which perhaps you will consider I have no right to say—but you must remember that I am an old man."

"You may say what you please, Lord Frogmore. I know it will be kind," said Mary; and she added after a moment with a smile, "but I think it is a mistake to suppose that age can be counted merely by years."

"I am glad you are of that opinion," said the old lord. "I sometimes think so myself; but one is never a good judge in one's own case. Don't you think, however, my dear young lady, that you are yourself in rather a false position here?"

Mary looked at him with a quick change of colour and a glance of interrogation.

"You know," he said, "I took you for the governess. I have never ceased to be ashamed——"

"There was nothing to be ashamed about, Lord Frogmore. I wish I were the governess

—then I should not be in a false position—but I don't know enough to teach any one."

"Not even Duke?" he said with a smile. "You are too humble-minded, Miss Hill; but that would not suit Mrs. Parke so well as having all the advantage of you as you are. May I ask, is there any relationship to give her such a claim upon you?"

"Oh, no! But we are very old friends. My father is the vicar of Grocombe, where all the Ravelstones live."

"Ah," said Lord Frogmore, with a look of satisfaction, "that explains the familiarity of that big fellow—that Australian; not so bad a fellow as his sister seems to think."

"Oh," cried Mary, with a shudder, "he is very rough and very coarse. He has always been the trouble of the family. I am afraid of Ralph, too; but I knew him very well as I knew them all when we were children. Letitia used to come a great deal to the vicarage——"

"I will be bound she came for help for herself, not for you?"

"Oh, don't say so, please. I am sure she was fond of mamma. She had no mother of her own; and she is very kind now. Lord

Frogmore, I need not conceal," said Mary, with a sudden flush, "that we are poor. It is quite a poor living, and my father has had to send all the boys out into the world. Unfortunately, we girls have not any education or we might have helped."

"So much the better, Miss Hill."

"Oh, don't say so!" said Mary, "if you knew what it was to feel so helpless, not to be able to do anything, and just to have to live on and on dependent on your father, good for nothing, with nothing to look forward to. I am saying a great deal more to you than I ever said to any one, Lord Frogmore. Letitia has been very kind. She asked me to come for a long visit so that I might be no expense at home."

"And reminds you of it every day," said the old gentleman.

"Oh," said Mary, off her guard, "how should you know?—not every day—oh, no, no! Sometimes I need to be reminded, for a thing that becomes familiar one is apt to forget. They are very kind at home, and say they miss me more than the good it does them. But I know it is an ease to my father's mind. He thinks it is one at least provided for."

"Do you think you are provided for, Miss Hill?"

Mary hung her head. "I am for the moment. I am sure Letitia is very kind; but if there was any change, or when she really has to get a governess——"

"Should you be sorry to go away?"

"Oh, never sorry to go home," said Mary, with a gleam of light in her face. "I'd rather starve with them than feast with others—but so long as it is an ease to poor papa's mind. He is not so strong as he was—he is getting old."

"About my age, I suppose?" said Lord Frogmore.

"Oh, a great deal more, certainly a great deal more!" cried Mary. She gave, however, a sidelong glance at Lord Frogmore's face to make quite sure. "And he has had a hard life. That makes a man old more than years."

"You were good enough to say the same thing before," said the old lord, "that age cannot be counted by years. That is always a pleasant thing to be said by the young to the old."

"But I am not young," said Mary, with a little, frank laugh. "I am middle-aged, which many people think is the worst of all."

"In that case I must borrow your formula, and say age is not counted by years," said the old gentleman. "You have a face on which peace is written. You have not had much trouble, I think, in your life."

Mary grew very serious, for this is an imputation which few people can accept without a protest. But as she was very sincere she assented, after a moment. "No; only being poor. And what is that when all the boys, thank God, have done so well?"

"Is that the only trouble you can think of?" said Lord Frogmore.

"The chief—the greatest. When you have to be ashamed of a brother, or to watch him going wrong, and able to do nothing, and never to trust him. There is nothing in the world so dreadful as that. I can forgive Letitia anything," cried Mary, almost with vehemence, "when I think how well all our boys have done, and that two of the Ravelstones—— That is the most dreadful of all."

"I don't think it will interfere with Mrs.

Parke's rest," said Lord Frogmore calmly. "And I saw no harm in the Australian. Will you tell me what the boys are doing who have done so well?"

He listened with great interest while Mary, with a brightened countenance and many smiles, made him aware of the successes of "the boys." They were not very great successes from Lord Frogmore's point of view, but he listened as if he had been hearing of bishoprics and woolsacks, while Mary told of the prosperity of John, who was in New Zealand, and George, who was farming in Canada, and the missionary who had won golden opinions, if not joys, in Africa, and the soldier, who was in India with his regiment, but could not afford to come home because of the lessened pay. They were all "abroad," for it was so difficult to get anything to do at home, but all so approved, so well spoken of, so thoroughly satisfactory! It went to the old lord's heart to see her face of exultation, her happy pride in her family. "Perhaps you will think it is nasty of me to rejoice so over them when there is poor Ralph so different," said Mary, "but of course there was a great, a very great, difference in their up-

bringing: though that doesn't always tell, as perhaps you know, Lord Frogmore."

"Indeed I do know; sometimes the most carefully trained go astray. I have known many instances."

"And the most neglected," cried Mary, "whom nobody could have expected anything from, sometimes turn out so well! So that shows it is individual—it is in them, whatever may be their education. Ah, here we are," she said suddenly, calming down from the fervour of her previous tone, "at Marsham Ponds." One would have said Mary was disappointed to find herself so soon at the end of her walk.

Marsham Ponds were a series of fishponds, a trace of the old time, when a great abbey had stood near, and the supply of fish for Lenten fare was a pressing necessity which had to be provided for. "I think I must turn back now," said Mary, "you will find your way quite easily, Lord Frogmore."

"Stop a little; we may as well return together. I wanted the walk, not to see the ponds. I have seen them often before," said Lord Frogmore. "We lived at Greenpark in the old days when I was a child — if you can

suppose I ever was a child." He laughed and paused a little, then resumed, "I remember—it must be about a hundred years ago—my father bringing me here when he came to the title. He succeeded his grandfather, you may have heard. He brought me here, and lifted me up to see the view. It's not much of a view," said Lord Frogmore, in a parenthesis, "but seen in one particular light it is not without interest. He said to me, 'Look there, Duke, that's all ours——'" Here he paused again, looked over the wide landscape, which was flat and fell away into long blue depths of distance, and then burst into a laugh. "That is what John will be saying to another little Duke one of these days. They are both quite primed for it," he said.

"Oh, Lord Frogmore, not Mr. Parke—that is not in his thoughts."

The old lord turned round upon her with a little moisture in the corner of his eye. He put out his hand to her hastily. "Thank you, Miss Hill. I think you are right. My brother is free from such thoughts."

"Nobody has any such thoughts," said Mary, but not in the same assured tone.

He shook his head and looked at her smiling. "Not after what your friend said—that all I had belonged to the children, every penny—that it was their right. Mrs. Parke was very explicit, Miss Hill."

"Oh," said Mary, in a tone of horror, "then it was you after all, and you heard what we said."

"I heard you say nothing that did not do you honour. The other did not surprise me at all. It may be a little premature. Things may not be so certain." He paused a little as if he would have said something more. He was a very neat, well-preserved model of an old gentleman, not so old as the Parkes concluded; with a good colour, a good figure, a firm light footstep; active and lively notwithstanding his age. The thought of little Duke, who was to be Lord Frogmore some day, and of all his property and possessions, which were being discounted by Mrs. John as belonging to the children, made him not sad but angry. He had never been disposed to be a passive person, to be managed by those about him; and no one could be less likely to consent to being powerless or helpless now. No one thing of

all the many things they calculated upon was certain. His property was still in his own hands—even his title. Many things surged up in the old gentleman's head. Suggestions which disturbed and excited him, but not unpleasantly. What if they might be disappointed altogether, the scheming woman, the silly little boy? John —Ah! John! Lord Frogmore turned upon Mary Hill, who was walking by his side, much agitated and in a great tremor, and put his hand upon her arm. "Miss Hill," he said, "I can't tell you how much I am obliged to you for doing justice to my brother John."

"Oh, Lord Frogmore, Letitia is like all mothers, she thinks only of her children. She did not mean what you think. She is not without heart. She is——"

"We'll say nothing about Letitia," said the old lord. "But I am thankful to you for doing justice, and making me do justice, to my brother John."

CHAPTER XIII

Lord Frogmore stayed for some days longer at Greenpark. He caught cold—quite a slight cold, not worth making any fuss about, if he had not taken such tremendous care of his health, Letitia said scornfully. She said to her husband that she really could not pretend to coddle and take care of him for such a nothing —it would look as if she had a mercenary motive—as if she meant to wheedle him out of something for the children. John did not quite like this tone, for Frogmore was his own brother after all, and Letitia was only a Parke by marriage. But he said, "I don't know why you should trouble when Miss Hill is here." So this was how it ended. Mary was made over permanently to Lord Frogmore to amuse him. He did not want nursing. Rogers, his man, who knew exactly what to do in any emergency, took care

of that. Rogers was so clever that he was half a doctor, having studied all his master's ailments, and knowing in every possible combination of circumstances the right thing to administer. It filled Mrs. Parke with mingled consternation and awe to see all the precautions that were taken.

"Why, he will never die," she said to Mary. "His exercise and his food and every habit he has are like a doctor's book. Felicie tells me such stories about his clothes; he is dressed by the thermometer, if you will believe me—and things put into his bath to strengthen him and brighten him up; and all kinds of preparations of food. It is Rogers' whole work looking after him, day and night. What a cooking up of the poor body, Mary Hill! It's against Scripture, and every law."

"But there's nothing wrong in keeping one's self well."

"Oh, well! it is not that—it is trying to get the better of Providence, not to speak of poor John and the children. What he means is never to die."

Mrs. Parke was really alarmed by this determination on the part of the man to whom

her husband was heir. All those precautions (which, if not positively sinful, were so little consistent with the desire to be at rest, which ought to be the prevailing sentiment of old people) were intended to keep John out of his inheritance—to prevent herself from becoming Lady Frogmore. If the old lord succeeded in his wicked plan of living on to an indefinite time, John and she might be old people before they came to their kingdom—nay, more horrible still, John (who took very little care of himself) might die first and leave Letitia only Mrs. Parke for ever, even though little Duke might come to the title. This was a contingency which filled her with horror. She felt that she would willingly have seized the old gentleman and shaken him—but then reflected again with dismay upon his trim, steady figure, his alert walk, his rosy countenance. He looked, when she came to think of it, stronger than John! He had Rogers to watch over him night and day. He had Valentine's Meat Juice and Brand's Essence (if these concentrated comforts were then invented) administered to him whenever he felt a sinking — he had some sort of elixir of life put into his bath. What he

intended was never to die. Mrs. John Parke became pale with the horror of this thought, and she felt that she could not endure the old egotist, the selfish, self-absorbed old man. "It is all I can do to be civil to him at dinner, and ask after his cold in the morning. Do for goodness sake amuse him a little, Mary Hill. You don't feel it as I do—you've no cares to distract your mind, and it's far easier for you to put on a face and sympathise with people about nothing than for me. I'm too sincere for that sort of thing," Letitia said.

"But don't you think it might be better to pay him a little attention? Just to show that you are interested. If it were only for half-an-hour, Letitia."

"Oh, what is the good of having you in the house with nothing to do if you can't manage a little thing like that for me, Mary Hill!"

Mary was silenced, and had no reply to make. She had, herself, no objection whatever to read the papers and talk to Lord Frogmore. He was very kind. His nice old ways, which were very precise and regular, almost, she said to herself, like a lady's ways, suited Mary, who was a little prim in her middle-aged decorum.

She had no objection to the entrance of Rogers with his little cough mixture, or digestive pill, or cup of soup. On the whole, perhaps, she liked the little fuss of invalidism, the cares, which a little ailment or any amusing little illness which meant nothing demanded. To draw out the screen so as to shield the old gentleman from an imaginary draught, to change for him the arrangement of his cushion and his footstool, to put book and paper-cutter ready upon the little table when she herself was called away, was really pleasant to her. And when he declared that a slight cold was quite an agreeable thing in pleasant company, and that it was delightful to have a right to so many little attentions, it gave Mary a serene pleasure to find herself so useful. Another part of her duty was not perhaps so justifiable, but she discharged it with devotion. She accounted for the absence of Letitia in an unvarying round of praiseworthy ways. She made a fancy portrait of Mrs. Parke, which was beautiful to behold. She was so devoted a wife, taking every trouble from John, leaving him free for his shooting and all his amusements. She was so excellent a housekeeper, making it

possible by her good management to entertain a great deal, which was so good for her husband. She was the best of mothers, giving so much of her attention to her children.

"I am coming to believe that my sister-in-law is not a woman at all, but a bundle of virtues," said Lord Frogmore.

"Oh not that!" cried Mary with a blush, "not that at all. She has her faults, of course —but her whole heart is in her own family, to do everything for them——"

"At all events she has one great quality—she has the art of making a devoted friend," said Lord Frogmore with a smile which made Mary blush again.

"Oh," she cried, "I am of so little account. I can never do anything for her—except the smallest things."

"Such as taking care of an old bore with a cold," said the old gentleman. Mary felt that she had not been warm enough in Letitia's praises, for he never shook off that cynical look, while certainly Letitia might have shown him a little more attention. Mary wondered sometimes if it was true that she herself found it easy to make up a face and sympathise with

people, and if Letitia was, as she said, too sincere. She found herself sympathising with Lord Frogmore in a way which perhaps was absurd, for he was not ill; he was really enjoying his cold and all the attentions it procured him. It was bad weather, and there was no temptation to go out. It was not as if he were really ill, and it was an act of devotion to nurse him. Was she making up a face? Mary said to herself, "No," with a little indignation. She did not feel herself to be insincere. Still, perhaps, it was easier for her than for Letitia to show sympathy with other people's troubles, whether they were small or great.

Lord Frogmore got better and went away, having considerably outstayed the original limits of his visit. And to tell the truth his going was a great relief to the household, except to Mary, who missed him very much. The Parkes by this time had got rid of their visitors, and were themselves setting out upon a little round of visits to taste other people's dinners and shoot other people's covers. On such occasions, which occurred periodically, Mary was left in charge of the house. She had to keep the servants in hand, which was

not an easy task, for they all knew that she was a dependent without wages, and naturally held her authority very light; and she had to watch over the children, to send for the doctor when he was wanted, to superintend the nurses, to keep everything in the established routine. It was not a pleasant office, for nobody in the house chose to be subordinate to a poor lady who was not even the governess — who was only a friend and of no account personally, living on the kindness of the mistress of the house. This did not account, however, for the excitement with which she rushed into Letitia's boudoir on the morning of their departure, looking alternately very red and very white, and scarcely able to speak for an agitation which took away her breath.

"Oh, Letitia, can I speak to you?" she cried, bursting into the room in a manner quite unlike her usual soft movements. Letitia was at the moment superintending the shutting up of her box, in which all her best dresses were, and which was reluctant to close.

"Well, my dear, you can speak as much as you like; but as for expecting me to pay any attention just at this moment when I am in the

agonies of packing! Kneel on the lid, Felicie, and I'll try and turn the key."

"Letitia, please, just a moment. There's something which I want to tell you—to consult you about."

"You are the oddest creature in the world, Mary Hill. Consult me! when the carriage is nearly at the door, and all my things to pack. *C'est fini* at last, Felicie—*Fermez le* bonnet-box, too, and give me my keys. Well, what is it, Mary? You don't speak."

"I can't tell you before anybody," said Mary, in a low voice. "I've got a letter——"

"Oh, you've got a letter! I can't send Felicie away, because there are so many little things to do—but she doesn't count. I say all sorts of things before her. Is it from one of the boys?"

"No, Letitia. Oh, please, a moment—it's very important."

"It's from Ralph, and he's asked you to marry him? I never thought he was such a fool. And I hope you're not going to be a fool to snap at him—with not a penny between you," Letitia added, growing red. "That's all the advice I am going to give. You're old

enough to judge for yourself—but neither you nor he must look for anything from us. Neither money nor influence — we shall do nothing for you—nothing! You may as well know that from the first."

Mary had been white and trembling with agitation; now she turned red with one of those sudden fits of exasperation which attack even the mildest. To have this said to her before the waiting maid, who concealed a smile and a look of intelligence which had flashed into her eyes under a demure gravity, was enough to have upset the temper of a saint.

"It is not from Ralph," she said very quietly.

"Oh, it's not from Ralph. Well, that's a very good thing. Felicie, *attachez les* straps—or leave them for Robert to do, if you like—and bring me my cloak. Well, so it is not from Ralph, Mary? Then who is it from? It's a proposal, one can see from your face. Take it whoever it comes from, Mary. You haven't time, my dear, to pick and choose."

"You will let me speak to you in your room, Letitia?"

"There's no time," said Mrs. Parke.

"Felicie, *mon chapeau*, and my gloves. There's the carriage. I've only one piece of advice, Mary—take it if it's a decent offer. You can't expect to get many more at your age."

"It is more than a decent offer. Oh, Letitia, it is from an old gentleman, one much older, and far above me."

"Did you expect a young one?" said Mrs. Parke. "I think you would be very, very silly to stand upon that. I know who it is. It is old Dr. Hilton; and just an excellent match—an admirable match—the very thing I should have wished for you. Old! I hope you are not such a fool as to think of that! Think of your father and mother, and the use you might be to them. And as for far above you, why, you're a clergyman's daughter, you are in the same rank in life. Mary, mind what I say to you. Don't be a fool."

"But it's not Dr. Hilton. Oh, Letitia, only a moment! I must speak to you."

"There is John calling," said Mrs. Parke composedly. "Good-bye, Mary, I can't stop a moment longer. Take care of the boy, and mind you don't let Saunders and the rest get the upper hand. Who can it be if it's not Dr.

Hilton? But whoever it is, mind what I say. What does age matter? If he can support you, and leave you something when he dies, take him, take him, Mary Hill — at your age what could you expect more?"

Mary followed her friend downstairs. It was of no use saying any more. Mrs. Parke had many directions to give as she went away. She had to say good-bye to the children who were in the hall to see the last of mamma. She had to silence John who was calling to her, to quicken Felicie, who lagged behind. "Mind you take care of the boy," she said, looking back, waving her hand to Mary. "Mind you keep everything going; and you can write and tell me all about it. Nurse, if there is anything the matter call Miss Hill at once, and she will know what to do. Ta-ta, baby; good-bye, Duke. Mind you're good till I come back; and good-bye, Letty and Johnny, be good children all of you. Felicie, what on earth keeps you always behind?"

Then the carriage rolled away, followed by the cab with Felicie and the boxes, and stillness fell upon the abandoned house; stillness at least so far as the sitting-rooms were con-

cerned; but a louder note than usual from the nurseries, and a jovial hum in the servants' hall, where everybody felt their holiday had begun.

Mary went back into the house from the doorsteps, on which she had been standing dazed, contemplating the carriage and Felicie's cab as they rolled away. She came in like a ghost, her face very pale, her limbs trembling with an agitation which was only increased by the fact that Letitia was now permanently out of hearing, and that there was nobody left from whom she could ask any advice. She wandered up and down the different rooms for some time, seating herself here and there for a moment, then springing up again to try another chair and another position. At last she went into the library and sat down upon a low chair before the fireplace. There was no fire in that room, which was not a room ordinarily much frequented by the ladies of the house, and the first to fall into the neglect which characterises a house from which the masters are absent. The fire had not been lighted, though it was November and a dull cold day. Mary sat down upon this little chair by the cold hearth,

and she covered her face with her hands and leaned her head against the arm of the great chair which stood close to her. Here for a moment she could rest and think. She sat quite still for a long time in the absolute solitude of the place, and covered her eyes from all external distractions — but it would scarcely be just to say that Mary was thinking, much less that she was wisely balancing the good against the evil, and making up her mind what she should do.

It would be more just to say that her mind went whirling round and round like the scientific toy which represents processions of moving figures flying past, steeple-chases, hunting-fields, negro contortionists, Christy minstrels. Everything was going round and round with Mary. She herself seemed only to be looking on, seeing the whirl which was going through her brain. It settled down a little after a time and solidified into the neat little figure which for so many days had occupied the chair on which she was leaning. Her thoughts all paused, stopped short in the whirl of them, and standing aside like so many country attendants allowed Lord Frogmore

to reveal himself in the silence. There he stood, active, small, alert—with his short white curling locks and ruddy colour. There he sat with his precise little ways, his cup of soup, his cough mixtures, Rogers, his man, taking such care of him. Mary's heart jumped up and began to throb in her ears and jump in her throat like the piston of a steam-engine. Lord Frogmore! And she had his letter in her pocket, a nice letter, a letter full of respect and honour, setting her in so high a place, doing her justice and far more than justice, Mary thought. No sign in all he said of the old maid at whom Letitia had assured her, and she herself had found, men laugh. Lord Frogmore showed no consciousness that she was an old maid, that she was past her bloom, that she was poor and he was doing her a great honour—oh, not a sign of that! If she had been a duke's daughter and a creature beautiful as the day, the old gentleman could not have written with more tender respect. Mary was not without pride, humble woman though she was, and she had received many a wound among Letitia's careless friends and visitors, wounds of which she was too proud to say

anything and too good to resent, but of which she had deeply felt the sting. But out of Lord Frogmore's letter there seemed to have come a balm which soothed and healed her very soul. She felt herself put in her right place, respected, honoured, approved. If it did no more than this for her, it had done what words could not express. She sat hiding her face and felt this balm steal over and heal her wounds.

And it was only after this, after a long interval, after the first whirl of agitation and the hush of gratified and soothed sensation, the charm and sweetness of being at length appreciated and understood, that Mary began to think what answer was she to make?—what was she to do?

CHAPTER XIV

It is a great wonder in morals that the chances of matrimonial elevation which may occur in the life of an unmarried woman, absolutely at any moment, should not exercise a more demoralising effect than they do upon the feminine mind. It is always possible, not only for a girl, but even for a woman who has reached the middle of life, to have her position and prospects changed in a moment as by the waving of a magician's hand—and that probably not by any virtue or by any exertion of her own, fortuitously, accidentally, by what seems mere chance and good fortune. A poor girl, the daughter of a fallen family, with very little natural prospect of advancement in any direction, will suddenly wake to find herself a duchess, placed on the very highest pinnacle of fortune; a poor woman who has passed half

of her life in a struggle with poverty will be lifted into sudden enjoyment of wealth and all that it brings. Why? By the merest chance. By pleasing some one, possibly unawares, without any intention—possibly, it is true, by the exercise of all her gifts for the purpose. And it by no means follows that these extraordinary chances involve any revolting bargain, any sale or barter of an odious kind. The girl may love her duke and the woman her millionaire just as much as if the duke was a lieutenant in a marching regiment or the millionaire a banker's clerk. It is astonishing that women should be so little demoralised by the possibility of such an accident. It may be said that it happens rarely. Still it does happen, and everybody knows one instance at least.

Such an accident had now happened to Mary Hill. Such a thing as marriage had long passed out of her thoughts. She had gone through the ordinary process in such matters, having had her youthful dreams, her maidenly fancies, her conviction that some time, some day, the hero would come round the turn of the road, and life would change into enchantment.

For a certain period in life that is to a girl the one certainty. Perhaps not to-day or to-morrow, yet possibly at any moment—a thing as sure as the rising of the sun, yet veiled in delightful mysteries and unknowableness — a vague anticipation, the poem of existence. After a time, if Prince Charming does not appear, the expectation begins to flag—a curious question, the strangest discouraging doubt creeps into the mind. Is she perhaps to be the one left out—the one to whom the enchanter is not to come? To trace the process from that first doubt, which is so startling, which gives a sudden check to life, to the calm certainty that no such thing would ever happen to her, which had long filled the gentle bosom of Mary Hill, would take too much time and space. It need only be said that Mary had accepted the position years ago. Her sister Agnes and she had long given up any thoughts of the kind. Their hearts fluttered no longer when they gazed along the blank road by which no hero had ever come. They had settled down as middle-aged women. No doubt they had both known what it was to struggle and rebel in their hearts against the strait bondage of life

that confined them, the situation of girls in their father's house which is so sweet at twenty, so little adapted to the maiden mind at forty. They had gone through all that, but had never said anything about it even to each other. Most probably they would have thought it sinful, horrible, unwomanly to rebel thus against their lot. All that they permitted themselves to say was, with a sigh, that they had no education, and could not be governesses, nor do anything. Sometimes it would come over them with a shiver that their father was old, growing older every day, and that the time must come when that dear old bare house at the vicarage would be theirs no more; but so helpless were they that it was tacitly understood between them nothing should be said of this. It would be dreadful even between themselves to put it into words that the vicar must die, to seem to calculate on the end of his existence. It lay between them, a dark point in the future at which their human life seemed to stop, but that was all. As for any piece of good fortune that might happen—above all, any proposals of marriage, that was a thing as far over and passed away as the frocks of their childhood.

They had both accepted the rôle of old maid without rebellion, if, at the beginning, with a faint sigh.

And now here had fallen at Mary's feet not that thunderbolt out of a clear sky, of which people speak as the most startling image of a sudden catastrophe, but a sudden blaze of impossible light through the afternoon dulness. It was no catastrophe; and yet it gave a shock almost as great. To be suddenly made rich beyond the brightest dreams, though indeed Mary had never dreamt of being rich at all; to be introduced into what seemed to the vicar's daughter the loftiest society in the world; to be able to help everybody belonging to her; to shed a glory upon the vicarage; to cause a thrill of pride to all the most distant of her kin; to impress the distant sisters-in-law whom Mary suspected of not being very respectful of the unmarried sisters, and of entertaining fears lest some time those unprovided women should expect something from John and George—all these suggestions played upon her, shining in her eyes like the afternoon sunshine, blinding her with unexpected light. Her heart jumped up to think of these things, then dropped down.

again with a sinking fall when her mind turned to the other side, and she thought of Letitia. Oh, it was needless to try to persuade herself that when Letitia said, "Don't be a fool, Mary Hill," and bade her certainly to accept the old gentleman who had proposed to her, Mrs. Parke had any perception of the real state of the case. Had Letitia guessed that it was Lord Frogmore; had she for an instant suspected that her humble friend was to be elevated over her own head, no doubt she would have given a very different verdict. Mary remembered all she had said. Her warning that nothing must be expected from Frogmore, that all he had must come to the children, her resentment with his care of his own health as keeping her out of her kingdom. Her heart sank lower and lower as she thought of this. What would Letitia say *if she knew?* Mary immediately realised that Letitia would not only say, but do everything a desperate woman could to stop it. She would be mad with fury and passion. She would publish her wrong, her version of the story, her account of how Mary Hill had "made up" to the old lord. And yet in her heedlessness she had

bidden her dependent to accept the old gentleman, of course, whoever he was, so long as he could provide for her.

Mary sat and thought over all these things till her head ached and her brain grew dizzy. She was stiff with cold and agitation and excitement when she got up at last and crept away to the dying fire in the morning-room, which was the only room where any comfort was. She knew already that to be left in charge of the house when the Parkes were away was no pleasant office. The fire in the morning-room was the only fire in that part of the house inhabited by its masters. All the rest had fallen into gloom and emptiness. Mary met the housemaids with their pails as she went upstairs — a thing, it need scarcely be said, never visible when Mrs. Parke was at home. She saw Saunders as she crossed the hall lounging in his shirt-sleeves, and smelt the footman's tobacco. Nobody cared to keep up the decorum of the household for Miss Hill. Who was Miss Hill? Less, a great deal, than an upper servant, who was well paid and knew his place. Nobody had the least intention of putting himself or herself to any restraint or in-

convenience to please Miss Hill. Mary knew this very well, and knew it would be necessary to ask as little as possible in order to avoid impertinence. She knew that she was not wanted, that she was considered a spy, left to report upon their doings and limit their freedom. She mended the fire with economy, hoping to be able to keep herself warm all day with the contents of the coal scuttle, not to have to appeal to Saunders for more. And if they only knew! To think that she had so much in her power lying at her feet, waiting her compliance. She laughed unconsciously as she thought of it, and how those impudent servants would abase themselves, and people of far more importance bow before her and put on their best smiles, and all for no virtue of hers, for no change in her, for nothing but because she had it in her power to become Lady Frogmore.

The reader may think that in all this there was but little question of the chief matter involved, of Lord Frogmore himself, the old gentleman who had it in his power to do so much for Mary. But this did not involve the injury to him that might be supposed, for, as a

matter of fact, the idea of accepting Lord Frogmore, and living with him and taking care of him was in no way disagreeable to Mary. She liked the old lord. He had never been anything but kind, respectful, sympathetic to her; he had greatly comforted her *amour propre*, which was often touched in Letitia's house and by Letitia's friends. He had even raised her own opinion of herself, which had been sadly broken down by continual snubbing. In every way his society, his friendship, his kindness had been good for Mary. Love was not a thing to be thought of, it was out of date, it was scarcely modest even to suggest it; but that she could and did feel affectionately towards Lord Frogmore, Mary had no doubt, and he asked for no more. There was no drawback on that side. She could have married him had he been the clergyman in the next parish. The difficulties in fact rose chiefly from those tremendous advantages which it was impossible to over-calculate, which seemed on the face of them too good to be true. And yet who could be injured by it? Mary asked herself. She would not have any one despoiled for her. The children could not lose much, and what

they lost would only be till she died. She was forty and Duke was five. Perhaps she might not live long enough to see Duke come of age. She would not keep the children long out of their money, and it would be very little. That was the only harm that could happen to them if she married Lord Frogmore.

It is needless to say that Mary thought of nothing else all day. She did not answer the letter, but put it carefully into her desk after having read it over three or four times, and if she hesitated as to what reply she should make, it was not because of any objection she had to Lord Frogmore.

In the afternoon she went to the nursery, where the nurse, a very fine person who considered herself much above supervision even from the mother, received her with scant courtesy. She stood over the children while Mary talked to them, and when little Letty pulled off a bit of old glove to show Mary a little sore finger, nurse made a step forward and pushed the little girl away. "I must ask you, Miss Hill, not to interfere with Miss Letty's finger. I am treating it in the proper way, and I won't have any meddling."

"But I have no desire to meddle," said Mary, surprised.

"Oh, we all know what it means when a lady is left to spy about," said the woman, turning little Letty, who began to cry, out of the room.

This was a very unpromising beginning, and nurse would not allow that the children should go downstairs in the evening to hear Mary play, and to sing their little songs about the piano.

"When their mamma is here she can do as she pleases—but I don't hold with such things," said the nurse.

Mary was all the more lonely in consequence in the twilight hour, which she was used to employ in amusing the children, and when she went downstairs later to see whether it was the design of the authorities downstairs to give her any dinner, she found Saunders in the dining-room with his elbows on the table and a bottle of wine before him, reading the paper. He looked up at the sound of the door opening, and by instinct started up, but recollecting himself, fell back in his chair and confronted her.

"I consider," said Saunders, "as this room is not in the ladies' part of the 'ouse—but was you wanting anything, Miss 'Ill?"

"You surprise me very much, Saunders," said Mary, with a little quickening of the breath.

"Mister Saunders, if you please—I don't think would be out o' place, miss. I am the head man when master is away."

"I think you are very much out of place where you are, Saunders—and that Mr. Parke would not be at all pleased——"

"If he knew," said Saunders. "I don't say as 'e would. I'm a-consulting of my own convenience, not thinking of him; and he'll never know."

"How can you tell that? It will be my duty to tell him at once."

"It's a duty as you'll never do. We know you well, all of us, in this 'ouse. And if you're sensible you'll take my advice. You'll be seen to, and kept comfortable, if you don't give no trouble. Cook is a-sending you up a bit of dinner. You'll be waited on as good, or better, as you were ever used to—but, Lord bless you, what's the good of pretending? You was never

used to a man like me waiting upon you—and why should you now? John, he says the same thing. We're very hard worked when they're at 'ome, and we're going to have a 'oliday. It won't make no difference what you say."

"I don't care at all," cried Mary, "whether you wait upon me or not—but you will be so good as to retire from here."

"And what if I don't, miss?"

If this was a romantic tale I should recount how the man was subdued, how he hesitated and finally withdrew in obedience to the influence of her presence and the dignity of her look. But I am obliged to say that no such result followed. Saunders, who had been drinking and was just at the point when audacity is paramount, sat leaning with both his elbows on the table, staring across it at the poor lady for whom he would have had no respect whatever had she looked like a queen, and it was Mary who was frightened. She repeated, "I must ask you to retire from this room," but with a faltering voice, for she knew that she had no authority to enforce her request, and so did he.

"Sorry to disoblige you, miss, if you think

it ain't becoming. But I'm very comfortable, thank ye, here."

She stood a moment irresolute, not knowing what to do, and then it was she who retired. She said, "I will write to Mr. Parke," but Saunders replied only with an insolent laugh. And Mary hurried upstairs again with something like terror. She found the footman without his coat on the stairs, carrying down the hunting clothes which John Parke had worn on the previous day, and accompanied by one of the housemaids, who was by way of helping him, with jocular snatchings and droppings of the burden. They scarcely paused in their flirtation when Mary appeared. She said, in her mildest tones: "You forget, John, that your mistress likes you to use the back stairs."

"My missis ain't here," said the man; "it's all one the front stairs or the back stairs when they're away."

"I do not think Mrs. Parke would be pleased to hear you say so," said Mary.

"Well, she don't hear me say so," replied the man, with an insolent air.

"Oh, John!" said the housemaid, "don't

answer Miss 'Ill like that. Don't you know as she's set over us to see as we does our duties, and tell everything as goes wrong?"

"I don't hold with no spies, I don't," said John, "whether they's ladies, or whether they's Irish fellows. I don't say things behind folks' backs as I wouldn't say to their faces; and I says, Miss 'Ill——"

"Be so good as not to speak at all," said Mary, quickly hurrying past. They burst into a great noise of laughter when she was gone—a shrill celebration of triumph. She got back to the morning-room with a sensation of dismay, for which she had no words. She was all alone, with the household in mutiny behind her. She was startled, however, to see that some one was before her arranging neatly enough, and with quiet care, the tray with Mary's dinner, which, according to Saunders' instruction, had been sent up there. The maid was an under housemaid—a quiet and good girl, whom Mary had been kind to. But even she had her part in the revolt. When she had arranged everything, she came up to Mary, who had thrown herself into a chair by the fire.

"I think everything's here, miss," she said.

"Perhaps you will just look and see if there's anything more you will want."

"It will do very well, I am sure, Jane."

"I want to know, if you please," said Jane, "whether you will want anything more to-night: for we're going to have a party in the servants' hall; and I'd rather get it now than be called after, if you please."

"You are going to have a party in the servants' hall?"

"Yes, miss. Mr. Saunders and John is going to do some acting, and there's going to be a dance. If you'll excuse me, I shouldn't like to be called away."

"I shall not want you any more," said Mary.

She tried to smile at the festivity which had turned all their heads. But when, a little later, the sounds of the downstairs merriment came pealing up the great staircase, Mary felt like a prisoner abandoned among enemies. She had never felt so much alone as in the dreary silence of the house, with the distant revels going on. A genteel dependent scoffed at by all the conspirators downstairs—and all the while Lord Frogmore's letter in her desk.

CHAPTER XV

THIS strange state of things continued for some days. Mary found herself living as in a state of siege. She was permitted to visit the children in the nursery, and nurse was quite polite. She was also supplied with what she required, her little meals sent to her, the morning-room prepared for her inhabitation, and the housemaid who attended to her civil—but otherwise she was made to understand that her position was one of sufferance, and her presence exceedingly undesirable. This was all the more strange that she had already been left alone in the house on more than one occasion with no such result, the servants, if not very anxious to please her, being always at least observant of civility, and making no stand against her. She reflected, however, that her previous experience had been only of a few days, and that a fort-

night was a long time for such a community to be put under the sway of a stranger like herself, whom they had no right to obey, and whom with the spirit of their class they despised as at once better and not so good as themselves — an inferior with the appearance of a superior — far below themselves in independence, while apparently placed over them. Mary being obliged to think upon the subject by the strange circumstances in which she found herself, made all these excuses and explanations of the conduct of the conspirators, and ended by thinking that on the whole it was natural though very uncomfortable, and that she could quite understand their way of thinking. But there was no doubt that it was very unpleasant. Sounds of revelry reached her from the servants' hall every night; the men lounged about all day and smoked where they pleased; the rooms were locked up and nothing done. Jane, the housemaid, informed her that they all thought they had a right to a rest. "There's a deal to do in this house. Them hunting and fishing things, if it was nothing else, keeps Mr. Saunders and John in a continual worrit, special when there's gentlemen coming that don't bring

a vally — and half the gentlemen here don't. We've all made up our minds as we'll have a good rest."

"They might have done that, Jane, without behaving as they have done, in other ways."

"Oh, I don't know," said Jane, tossing her head. "Men don't stand being put upon."

"You do it," said Mary. "I know that you are not doing any work, and perhaps it is not necessary; but you are civil to me."

"You was always civil to me, miss," said Jane. "I don't like to see you put upon no more than the rest. But you'll allow as it's hard upon the men, with their spirits, to have somebody left behind to spy upon them, and that not one of the family. Not quite a—one as isn't no better, perhaps—oh, I'm sure I beg your pardon, miss!"

"Well," said Mary, doing what she could to suppress her indignation, "supposing all that was true; how are they to meet Mrs. Parke when she comes home?"

"Oh, miss," said Jane, "they say you'll never tell her. Mr. Saunders says as you'll never throw us all out of our places, and put the family to such inconvenience. It would be

dreadful troublesome to get new servants just in the middle of winter. If we all got our month's warning, it would throw it just before Christmas as we left. Mr. Saunders says if you did do it, Mrs. Parke would just pay no attention. It would be inconvenient. And he says he's sure you'd have more consideration than to make us all lose our places. And Mrs. Cook she says——"

"I don't want to hear what they say. I think they have neither hearts nor consciences," said Mary indignantly.

"Oh, as for that, miss," said Jane, "we're just the same as other folks, I suppose. We think of what's pleasing to ourselves first."

And Mary had to admit that if they had neither hearts nor consciences they had heads, and judged the position fairly enough. For though she was very indignant and might have denounced the conspirators on the spur of the moment had she had the opportunity, she knew that her courage would have failed her when it came to the point, and that to deprive the servants of their living was what she never could have done. Saunders had a wife and family. John had a mother whom he was

supposed to help. The saucy housemaid was a widow with a child. And it was also true that Letitia would think twice before she dismissed all her servants so near Christmas. The calculation was very close all round. And then the nurse, whose verbal impertinence vexed Mary most, was all the time exceedingly careful of the children. There was nothing to find fault with in that respect. Mary thus felt herself caught in the meshes of the conspiracy, and did not know what to do.

And all the time Lord Frogmore's letter was locked up in her desk; and she had as yet made no reply to it. It was the thing, perhaps, on the whole, which made the persecution in the house least important to her. What did it matter what Saunders and his kind might do? The humiliation which they inflicted made her smart for the moment, but it was not so bad even now as the careless civility which she had borne from their masters, or the no-account which was generally made of such a person as herself in the world. She was well used to all that. And to think that by a word at any moment she could put a stop to it all and change everything! She did not answer the

letter, she could scarcely tell why. Not that it did not occupy her day and night. She thought of it in all ways, turning it over and over. It was a sort of occupation to her which obliterated everything else to think what she should say. What should she say? And then the long round of questioning, of balancing one side against the other, would begin.

There was this advance, however, that Mary had come to a perfect conviction that were she unhampered by others, she herself could be happy with Lord Frogmore. To marry at all and enter upon a mode of life so entirely new is a shock to a middle-aged woman. The old maid has hindrances in her way in this particular which do not affect the girl. She has formed all her habits often with a certain rigidity, and to be brought into relations so close as those of matrimonial life, to give up her seclusion, her privacy, to share everything with another, has a sort of horror in it. Mary too had something of the primness which in some natures accompanies that modest withdrawal from the mysteries of life. To a girl it is all romance, to a woman other reflections come in. She had moments of panic in which

she asked herself how she could bear such a revolution of existence. It is, however, so deeply impressed upon the feminine mind that to be married is the better and higher state, a doctrine largely emphasized by the contempt of the foolish, that she was half ashamed of her own shrinking, and knew that everybody would consider it fantastical even if for sheer modesty she had ever breathed to any one the confession that she felt this panic and shrinking—which was very unlikely. This was a sentiment never to be disclosed, to be got over as best she could, to be ignored altogether. But putting aside that shock to all her habits, both of mind and life, there was nothing in her which objected to Lord Frogmore. He was kind, he was old, he would need her care, her help, her services. He was the least alarming companion that could be thought of; he was sympathetic and understood her — and she thought she understood him.

But Letitia! There the struggle began. Letitia would not like it! Mary could not salve her conscience by the hasty advice given with such frankness by Mrs. Parke. To marry any old gentleman who might present himself

with money enough to support her, and provide for her when he died, was one thing—to marry Lord Frogmore was another. The mere idea that Mary might be Lady Anything while Letitia was Mrs. Parke would be an offence —but Lady Frogmore! What would Letitia say? How would she like it? She would never forgive that promotion. The thought of Mary walking out of a room before her, placed at table before her, would drive her frantic. If that were all, how gladly would Mary give up to her any such distinction! But that was not all. There were the children who would, as Letitia thought, be defrauded by their uncle's marriage. That was a matter which it was not so easy to get over. She tried to represent to herself that Lord Frogmore was rich, that it was not certain he would leave all he had to the children, that in any case he would be just; and that whatever he appropriated to herself would at least go back to the children on her death. She had taken out her paper, seated herself at the table, prepared her pen (with little anxious cares that it should be a good one) to write half-a-dozen times at least—and had been stopped by that

thought of the children. That was a thought that could not be got over. To take this away from the children, how could she do it? If she were to endeavour to make the condition that no money should be given to her (which crossed her mind for a moment), Mary had too much good sense not to see that this would be impossible, and also foolish and unjust. And then she had laid down her pen again, and put by her paper, and returned to herself to think out that problem — with equal failure. Defraud the children — take from them their inheritance—how could she do it—she who had been like their aunt, like a second mother? She retired before that thought with continued affright. It was a barrier she could not get over. And so the letter was put off day after day.

She had met the children in their walk one morning, and gone on with them, glad of the companionship, pleased that little Letty should abandon the group to cling to her hand and rub against her with a way the child had, like an affectionate dog, and that Duke in his little imperious way should place himself exactly before her, walking a step in advance, so

that Mary had to restrain her own movements not to tread on him, one of those little inconveniences which, to people who love children, are pleasant, as signs of the liking of the little tyrant. She had begun in her usual way to tell them a story when the nurse, who walked majestically in the rear of the party, interfered.

"If you don't mind me saying it, miss," said nurse, who was too well-bred herself not to know that this mode of address was particularly offensive to a person of Mary's age, "I'd much rather you did not tell them stories."

"But," cried Mary, with astonishment, "I have always told them stories—it's what they expect whenever they see me."

"That may be," said the nurse, "but I don't myself hold with working up their little brains like that. When their mamma is here she can judge for herself; but I can't have them put off their sleep, and excited, and not able to get their proper rest——"

"But that has never happened," cried Mary.

"It's quite soon enough then if it happens now."

"Well, no doubt that is unanswerable," said Mary, with a laugh, and she added half playfully, half vexed, "I think you want to keep me from saying anything to the children at all."

"I don't want to be any way disagreeable, miss," said nurse, "but so long as my mistress is away and I've all the responsibility, that is just what I'd like best."

"Why," cried Mary inadvertently, "I stayed here on purpose."

"To spy upon us and watch all we did," said the woman, red and angry. "We all know that; and that is just what I will never put up with if there wasn't another situation in the world."

Mary had for the moment forgotten the humiliation of her present position, which made this sudden assault almost more than she could bear. She disengaged herself with a little difficulty from the children and hurried in, feeling that she must take some immediate resolution and free herself from these insults. Saunders and the footman were playing a game of billiards in the hall when she entered hastily, the great door being open. In the

extreme freedom of this new regime, Saunders, so proper and correct in the presence of his master, had fallen into habits of self-indulgence, and was, indeed, most generally under an exhilarating influence, which made him very ready to exhibit his wit at the expense of any butt that might present itself, secure of the admiration and applause of his subordinates in the house. Mary had become rather afraid of an encounter with the butler in these circumstances, and started a little as she came suddenly upon him in her hurried passage indoors. He came forward to meet her with his cue in his hand.

"Well, Miss 'Ill," he said, "I hope I see you well this fine mornin'. Been to the post to send off your report, eh; and tell how the servants is going on?"

"Let me pass," Mary said.

"We hope you've given us a good report, miss. We're nothing but poor servants a-strivin' to do our dooties," said Saunders, with an air of mock humility, which sent the footman into such screams of obsequious laughter that he had to throw down his cue and hold his sides with exclamations of "Oh, Lord, don't, Mr.

Saunders! You'll kill me with laughing afore you've done."

"And if you was to give us a bad report what 'ud become of us?" said Saunders. "But we hopes you won't say nothing more than you can prove, Miss 'Ill. And what are *you?*" he added, changing his tone, "but a servant yourself, and worse off than any of us —currying favour with bringing other folks into trouble, or tryin' to bring folks into trouble; but you'll not succeed this time, miss, I'll promise you. We knows what to expect, and we're on our guard. Hi, old man! what are you wanting? The bosses ain't at home; can't you see that with half an eye? Stop a bit, miss, I ain't done with you yet."

"Oh, good Lord, Mr. Saunders!" cried the footman, in a tone of alarm.

"Let me pass, please," said Mary, trembling, and quite unaware what strong succour had arrived behind.

The next sound was a firm foot upon the floor coming in—the next a voice which made Mary's heart jump up to her throat.

"Where is my brother, sir—where is your

master? and how dare you speak to a lady like that?" said Lord Frogmore.

Lord Frogmore! Saunders himself—whose countenance was a wonder to behold as he dropped the cue and backed against the table limp and helpless, his mouth open, his eyes bursting from their sockets with wonder and fright—was scarcely more discomposed than Mary, who felt herself in a moment vindicated, restored to her proper place, protected and avenged—yet at the same time more agitated and shaken than she had ever been in her life. She turned round and saw him before her, his eyes sparkling with anger, his neat small person towering, as it seemed, over the discomfited servants driven back by the first glance of him into servile humiliation. Lord Frogmore's voice, which generally was a mild and rather small voice, thundered through the hall. "You disrespectful rascal! How dare you speak to a lady in that tone?"

"My lord!" Saunders cried, faltering. At first he could not even think of a word to say for himself. The footman discreetly stole away.

"My brother is absent, I suppose, and Mrs.

Parke; and you cowardly scamp, you wretched snob, you take this opportunity——"

"Oh, Lord Frogmore, don't be severe upon the man. He thought I had written about him to his mistress. Please don't say any more."

"I shall write about him to his mistress," said Lord Frogmore, "or to his master, which will be more effectual. John Parke is no brother of mine if he does not turn such a fellow neck and crop out of the house. Get out of my sight, you brute, if you don't want to be kicked out." Saunders was twice Lord Frogmore's size and half his age, but the old gentleman made him cower like a whipped dog. He made a faint effort to bluster.

"I'm responsible to my own master, my lord; I'll answer to him."

"By Jove," said the old lord. "You shall answer to a sound thrashing if you stay here a moment longer. Out of my sight! Miss Hill," he said, turning round and offering Mary his arm, "I suppose there is some room where I can say a word to you. It is clear that you cannot remain an hour longer in this house."

CHAPTER XVI

She took him upstairs to the morning-room, in which she had been living, and which was full of traces of her habitation and ways—the book on the table, the work, even the writing-paper and the new pen which all this time she had been trying to use to answer his letter. Her heart was beating as wildly as if she had been a young girl—beating with pride, with pleasure, with gratitude, and with that satisfaction in being vindicated and re-established which it is impossible for human nature not to feel. It was no doubt a very poor foe who had thus been flung under her feet; but he had been able to humiliate and insult her. And Mary felt as proud of her deliverer as if he had faced the dragon. His very age and physical unimportance made her only the more conscious of the force and mastery he had shown—a man

accustomed to command, accustomed to hold a foremost place. What a difference it had made to everything the moment he had appeared! The very atmosphere had changed. It had become impossible for any one in the world to show her anything but respect and reverence as soon as Lord Frogmore had come. What a difference! What a difference! Mary had never filled that imposing place, never had it made evident as a matter of certainty that wherever she appeared respect must necessarily attend her. She had been respected in her modesty by those who knew her. But no one had ever thought it necessary to give to Mary the first place. What a difference! The first inarticulate feeling in her mind was this which brought her up as upon a stream of new life. Everything had been different from the moment he had appeared. No more insult, no further call for self-assertion, no need to take any trouble. His presence did it all. Where he was there would always be honour, observance, regard.

These thoughts surged through her mind as she went upstairs with him through the empty house, in which all at once instinctively, without

anything said, she had become as a queen. There was no longer any question in her mind as to what she should say. All was said, it seemed to Mary. Could the lady who had been delivered from the dragon think what she should say to her Redcross Knight? It was ridiculous to be so highflown—and yet it was the only simile she could think of. Dragons are different in different cases—sometimes they mean only poverty, humiliation, the spurns which patient merit of the unworthy takes, and not any great heroic danger, which the champion can make an end of; her champion had ended for her in a moment the fear of all these things. He had made her see what would be her fate henceforward if she trusted herself to him. He was a little gentleman, of short stature, of appearance rather neat than fine, resembling anything in the world rather than St. George. He was old—was he old? surely not so old as was thought—surely not as Letitia made him out, an antediluvian, a person out of date, whom only his own egotism and the care of Rogers kept alive to keep other people out of their rights. To look at him with his active step, his eyes that grew quite bright and blue

in his anger, the colour as of a winter apple in his cheek, his neat, well-cared-for person—it was almost absurd, Mary thought, to call him an old man at all.

Lord Frogmore put her in a chair when they reached the morning-room, and bade her rest a little. "I came to see if there was not an answer to my letter," he said, "but there are other things more important to be thought of first. How long have you been here alone exposed to these impertinences? You can't be left to run such a risk again."

"Oh, it doesn't really matter now—it is all over now," said Mary, with a faint smile.

"You are trembling still," said the old lord. "I have a thousand minds yet to go and thrash the fellow."

"Oh, no," she said, putting out her hand as if to detain him. "I am not afraid of anything now."

The old gentleman took the hand which she held out.

"Do you mean to give me this, Mary?" he said.

Upon this she roused herself, and with a changing colour made her last stand. "Oh,

Lord Frogmore, I could do nothing that would be injurious to the children," she said.

"The children—what children? There are no children," said the old lord, thinking of himself only and his own concerns. Then he perceived her meaning with a sudden, quick start, letting her hand drop in his impatience. "What," he said, "is it John's children you are bringing up in this ridiculous way? My dear, when John succeeds me he will be quite rich enough to provide for his own children. I have nothing to do with them. If you put the children in my way and in the way of my happiness in my old age, they shall never get a penny from me. I shall leave everything I can away from them. Be sure you will do them harm and not good, by bringing them up between you and me."

"Lord Frogmore—I would not do them harm for anything in the world."

"Well," he said, with a smile, "you will do them a great deal of harm if you bring them in between us. I remember now what Mrs. John told you. That all I had belonged to them. She is an odious woman."

"Lord Frogmore!"

"Don't say anything more, my dear. She is an odious woman. You have not found it out, because you think everybody as good as yourself. She it is who is the cause of the impudence of her servants as well as of many other wrong things. No, my dear, let Mrs. John and her brats go by. I am an old man, Mary, that is the worst of it. I can't hope to stand by you very long. Do you think you can like me well enough to give me the best chance of living to be a Methuselah? I'll live as long as ever I can if you'll share my life with me, Mary, my dear."

"Oh, Lord Frogmore!" she said.

And, as a matter of fact, Mary said very little more. They came to understand each other very thoroughly without many words on her part. When the hour of luncheon arrived it produced no tray carried by the under-housemaid, as was usual, but John, the footman, in his best livery to announce that my lord was served in the dining-room. "You mean Miss Hill is served," said the old gentleman sternly. And John humbly begged his lordship's pardon. Saunders kept out of sight, not trusting himself in Lord Frogmore's pre-

sence. And the way in which Lord Frogmore talked at lunch was soon reported all over the house, and carried an universal shudder. "I shall lose no time in letting my brother know what has been going on," he said. "And I don't think you should stay here any longer. Mrs. John would be unhappy if she knew to what you are exposed."

"Oh," said Mary, "they will be kinder now."

"Kinder! I could not let any lady run such a risk. I suppose they know that you would not say anything as long as you could help it. That is the penalty of being too good."

"They did not think at all," said Mary. "They supposed I was to be a spy and tell everything. But don't please take much notice, Lord Frogmore. In another week Mr. Parke and Letitia will be back again."

"You must not remain another night," said the old gentleman. "Allow me to have the pleasure of taking you home. I cannot consent to your remaining here."

John went downstairs much and deeply impressed. He told the assembled company

in the servants' hall that his lordship had said nothing to him personally. "But the rest of you may just get ready to go. Mr. Saunders won't get even his month's warning. That much I can tell you, and you'll have to clear out—but there's nothing against me."

"Nobody can say," said cook, "as I've shown any incivility to Miss 'Ill. I'm one as likes Miss 'Ill. I always did say as you was going too far."

"I've never said a word good, bad, or indifferent," said the housemaid, "since the first day: and then it was John as sauced her, and I only looked on."

"I never sauced her," cried John.

Saunders alone was silent. His confederates had all given him up, as is inevitable in such circumstances, and it was very evident that there was no help possible for him. There was dismay also in the nursery, but in those regions the authorities held apart and did not compromise themselves in the servants' hall.

Mary, however, felt herself taken hold of as by a little beneficent providence when she was taken in hand by Lord Frogmore. He

arranged at once a little programme for her. It was too late now to go up so far as Yorkshire that afternoon, so he permitted her to remain for the night at Greenpark, to pack and arrange for her journey. He himself in the meanwhile would remain at the railway hotel near the station, and in the morning he would come for her and take her home. It was very startling to Mary to be thus swept away. She had herself, strongly developed, the instinct of putting up with what was disagreeable — with the certainty that there were many things in life which it was impossible to mend, and which had to be borne as cheerfully as possible. But Lord Frogmore had no mind to put up with anything. The idea of enduring a moment's annoyance which could be prevented seemed folly to the imperative old gentleman. The difference was that he had always had it in his power to prevent the greater part at least of the annoyances of life, whereas Mary never had possessed that power. He whirled her away next day in a reserved carriage with all the luxury with which it was possible to surround a railway journey—she who had been accustomed to a humble corner in the second

class!—and deposited her that evening in the vicarage in a tumult of joy and excitement which it would be impossible to describe. The old people, the vicar and his wife, were indeed full of alarm, terrified by the telegram that announced Mary's immediate return, and troubled to think that something must have happened to account for so sudden a journey. They had comforted each other by the reflection that it could not be Mary's fault — Mary who was always so good and patient. But an event so sudden is always alarming, and it took them a long time to understand the rights of the matter, and what Lord Frogmore had to do with it and what they had to do with him. Old Mr. Hill was not very much older than Lord Frogmore, but he was not nearly so lively either in intelligence or in physique, and it required a great deal of explanation to make him understand the real state of the case. Mary going to marry—that old gentleman! This was the first thought of the unsophisticated household. The thought that Mary was to become Lady Frogmore did not penetrate their minds till some time after.

As for Mary herself the process was quite

different. She had actually forgotten that Lord Frogmore was an old gentleman nearly as old as her father, and the idea of being Lady Frogmore had become quite familiar, and caused her no excitement. She was still troubled about Letitia, and the possible money for the children, but otherwise she had begun to regard her own prospects with a satisfied calm. It is astonishing how quickly the mind accustoms itself to a new resolution even when it entails a revolution in life. Mary was surprised, and even a little offended, that her family should have so much difficulty in understanding her position. "My dear," her mother said, "I hope you have well considered what you are going to do. Lord Frogmore is a very nice gentleman, but he is only five years younger than your father. I looked him up in the peerage. Mary, he is sixty-six."

"Is that all?" said Mary. "Letitia speaks as if he were a hundred; but, mother, for a woman, forty is almost as old."

"Oh, what nonsense!" said Mrs. Hill; "more than a quarter of a century of difference. It is a great temptation in a worldly point of view, my dear, but Mary——!"

Mr. Hill was a venerable person of large bulk, whose voice came out of the depths of his throat, and who was, Mary said to herself with energy, a hundred years older than Lord Frogmore. He had a large head, with heavy white hair, and always a solemn aspect. This big white head he shook slowly at his daughter and said, mumbling, "You must think it well over. My child, you must think it well over — we mustn't do anything rashly." As if it were possible to deliberate further when everything was settled. Then Mary had brought her old lover home and accepted his escort, and allowed him to disentangle her from her troubles! She felt vexed and angry with the objections, which proved what excellent people, how unworldly, and how simple-minded her parents were.

"What I think of is Tisch—and what a fuss she will be in," said Agnes, Mary's sister, in whose voice there was perhaps a note of exultation over the discomfiture of Letitia. This it was that made Mary falter and grow pale. Her first duty was to write to Letitia, and how, oh, how, was this to be done? The other remarks of her family only made her

impatient with their futility—as if she did not like Lord Frogmore as well, nay better, for being old and having need of her! But Letitia! She put it off for three days, pleading to herself that she was tired, that she must have a rest; that until Lord Frogmore went away she could do nothing. To tell the truth it was a relief when Lord Frogmore went away. The shabby little vicarage on the edge of the moors was not congenial to him. He did not know what to say to the mumbling old vicar, who was so very conscious of being only five years older than his intending son-in-law, but who was a hundred years older as Mary truly felt. And there was but one spare room at the vicarage, the chimney of which, being very little used, smoked when a fire was lit (the Hills themselves had no fires in their bedrooms on the theory that it was a piece of self-indulgence and extravagance, though coal was cheap enough), and there was not a corner for Rogers, without whom Lord Frogmore was not at his ease, nor taken care of as he required to be. These drawbacks a bride-groom of twenty-six or thirty-six might have made a jest of, but at sixty-six it is another

matter. And Mary was very glad when he went away. He was to return in a fortnight for the marriage with a special license, though there was just time for the banns to be proclaimed in Grocombe church three Sundays, a formula which the vicar would not dispense with. Mary saw the old lord away with a sense of satisfaction. But she went back to the vicarage with a cold trembling all over her. The letter to Letitia could be put off no longer.

Truth compels us to say that it was a most specious letter — a letter in which innocence was made to look like guilt, a letter full of excuses, of explanations, of deprecations, trying to show how she could have done nothing else, how no harm could follow, and yet that the culprit was conscious of a thousand dreadful consequences. The effort of writing it made Mary ill. She kept her bed in a fever of anxiety and excitement, counting the hours till Letitia should receive it, thinking, with her heart in her mouth, "Now she has got it, what will she say? What will she do?"

It did not take a very long time to show what Letitia meant to say and do. Mary

thought the world had come to an end when she heard by return of post, as it were, a carriage, that is a cab from the nearest station, rattle up to the door with every crazy spring and buckle jingling as if in fury, and heard a whirlwind in the passage, and, rising up, trembling, beheld her mother's little sitting-room fill, as by an excited crowd, with two impetuous figures—Letitia, pale with passion, and behind her the imposing form of the Dowager Lady Frogmore.

CHAPTER XVII

THE parlour at Grocombe Vicarage was but a small room and a shabby one. There was a drawing-room which was the admiration of the parish into which all visitors were shown, but Mrs. Hill and her daughters had too much respect for it to use it commonly; and the centre of their domestic life was the parlour, where all their makings and mendings were done, and where Agnes did not disdain to boil the eggs in the morning and make the toast for tea, both of which operations were so much better done, she thought, when "you did them yourself." She had been making a dress for her mother; indeed, the very dress in which Mrs. Hill intended to appear "at the ceremony," and the large old sofa which stood between the door and the window was rendered unavailable for all the ordinary uses of

a sofa by having the materials of this dress stretched out upon it. Mary was in a chair by the fire with a white knitted shawl wrapped round her, much oppressed with her cold. There was a little tea-kettle upon the old-fashioned hob of the grate. It may be supposed with what a start of discomposure and vexation the invalid of the moment started up when the door of this sanctuary was flung open and the visitors appeared. Fearful under any circumstances would have been the sight of Letitia to Mary at this moment, but in the drawing-room she might at least have been kept at arm's length. She stumbled to her feet with a cry; her nose was red, her eyes were streaming, and the feverish misery of her cold depressed any spirit with which she might have met this invasion. Letitia on the other hand swept in like an army, her head high, her hazel eyes blazing like fire, full of the energy of wrath. She was a small woman, but she might have been a giantess for the effect she produced. After her there came a personage really large enough to fill the little parlour, but who produced no such effect as Letitia, notwithstanding that she swept down

a rickety table with the wind of her going as she hobbled and halted in. But Mary recognised with another thrill of alarm the Dowager Lady Frogmore, and felt as if her last day had come.

Letitia swept in and did not say a word till she had reached the chair which Mary had hurriedly vacated. She had the air of bearing down upon her unfortunate friend, who retreated towards the only window which filled the little room with cold wintry light. "Well!" Mrs. Parke cried, as she came to a sudden pause, facing Mary with a threatening look. "Well!" But it was ill she meant.

"Well—Letitia," cried poor Mary faintly.

"I have come to know if it was you that wrote me that disgraceful letter. Could it be you? Tell me, Mary, it's all some terrible mistake, and that I have not lost my friend."

"Oh, Letitia! You have lost no friend. I —I hope—we shall always be friends."

"Did you write that letter?" said Letitia, coming a step nearer. "You—that I trusted in with my whole heart—that I took out of this wretched place where you were starving, and made you as happy as the day is long. Was

it you — that wrote to me like that, Mary Hill?"

Mary was capable of no response. She fell back upon the window, and stood leaning against it, nervously twisting and untwisting her shawl.

"Letitia," said the dowager, from behind, "don't agitate yourself — and me; tell this person that it can't go any further; we won't allow it, and that's enough. We've come here to put a stop to it." Lady Frogmore emphasized what she said with the stamp of a large foot upon the floor. Her voice was husky and hoarse by nature, and she was out of breath either with fretting or with the unusual rapidity of motion, which had brought her in like a heavy barge tugged in the wake of a little bustling steamboat. She cast a glance round to see if there was a comfortable chair, and dropped heavily into that which was sacred to the vicar on the other side of the fire, from which she looked round, contemplating the shabby parlour and the figure of Mary in her shawl against the window. "We've come—— to put a stop to it," she repeated in her deep voice.

Now Mary, though held by many bonds to Letitia, had at the bottom of her mild nature a spark of spirit—and it flashed through her mind involuntarily that it was she who would soon be Lady Frogmore, and that this large disagreeable woman was only the dowager. *She* put a stop to it! So impudent a threat gave Mary courage. "I don't know," she said, "who has any business to interfere; and I don't think there is any one who has any right. I don't say that to you, Letitia. You are not like any one else. I very much wish—oh, if you would only let me!—to explain everything to you."

"She has every right," said Mrs. Parke; "and so has my husband. I suppose you don't know that this is Lady Frogmore?"

"I know—that it is the dowager," said Mary. She was aware, quite aware of what was in her heart, the meaning underneath, which Letitia understood with an access of fury. In Mary's mild voice there was a distinct consciousness that this title was hers—hers! the poor dependent, the less than governess! Mrs. Parke made a step forward as if she would have fallen upon her antagonist.

"You think that's what you'll be! Oh, you Judas, taking advantage of all I've done for you. Oh, you wicked, treacherous, designing woman! You wouldn't have had enough to eat if I hadn't taken you in. Look at this wretched hole of a place and think what rooms you've had to live in the last year—and pretending to care for the children, and bringing them to ruin! I've heard of such treachery, but I never, never thought I'd ever live to see it—and see it in you. I trusted you like a sister; you know I did. It was all I could do to keep the children from calling you Aunt Mary, as if you belonged to them; and you nobody, nobody at all! I got into trouble with my husband about you, for he couldn't bear to see you always there. Oh, Mary, Mary Hill! where would you have been but for me—and to turn upon me like this—and ruin me! I that was always so good to you!"

This address melted Mary into tears and helplessness. "Letitia," she said, with a sob, "I never, never denied you had been kind; and I love the children, as if—as if—they were my own. It will be no worse for the children. Oh, if you only would believe what I say! I

asked him before I would give him any answer, and he said, no, no, it would make no difference to the children. I would rather die than hurt them; but he said no, no, that it would hurt them if I refused. Letitia!"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Parke. "So you're our benefactor, it appears. Grandmamma, this lady is going to patronise us, you'll be glad to hear. She has taken care of the children before she would accept her beautiful lover. Oh!" cried Letitia, in her desperation, clenching the hand which was out of her muff as if she would have knocked down her former friend. She drew a long breath of fury, and then she said, "You think nobody can interfere! You think a noble family can be played upon by any wicked treacherous thing that likes to try, and that no one can do anything to stop it! But you're mistaken there: you're mistaken there!"

Foam flew from Letitia's lips. In her excitement she began to cry—hot tears of rage gathering in her eyes, and a spasm in her throat breaking the words. She sat down in the chair which Mary had so hurriedly vacated, overcome by passion, but carrying on her angry protest with mingled sobs and threats

only half articulate. Poor Mary could not stand against the storm. A cold shiver of alarm lest this might turn out to be true, mingled with the shiver of her cold, which answered to the draughts from the window. Hunted out of her warm corner by the fire, exposed to the chill, her heart sinking, her cough coming on, there is no telling to what depth of dejection poor Mary might have fallen. She was saved for the moment at least by the rush at the door of her mother and sister, who, after a pause of wonder and many consultations, had at last decided that it was their duty to be present to support Mary—however grand and exalted her visitors might be. They came in one after the other a little awed but eager, not knowing what to expect. But they both in the same moment recognised Letitia and rushed toward her with open arms and a cry of "Oh, Tisch!" in the full intention of embracing and rejoicing over such an old friend. "Why didn't you send for me, Mary?" cried Mrs. Hill. "I thought it was some grand stranger, and it's Tisch, our dear old Tisch! What a pleasure to see you here again, my dear!"

Mrs. Parke put on a visage of stone. She could not avoid the touch of the mistress of the house who seized upon her hand with friendly eagerness, but she drew back from the kiss which was about to follow, and ignored Agnes altogether with a stony stare. "I'm sorry I can't meet you in the old way," she said. "I was a child then, and everything's changed now. We have come here upon business, and unpleasant business too. I'm glad to see you, however, for you will have sense enough to know what I mean."

"Sense enough to know what she means!" cried the vicar's wife. "I am sure I don't know what that means to begin with, Tisch Ravelstone! You were never so wonderfully clever that it wanted sense to understand you —so far as I know."

"I am the Honourable Mrs. Parke and this is Lady Frogmore," said Letitia with angry dignity. "Now perhaps you understand."

"Not in the least, unless it's congratulations you mean, and that sort of thing; but you do not look much like congratulators," said Mrs. Hill. She drew a chair to the table, and sat down and confronted the visitors firmly. "It

looks as if you did not like the match," she said.

"The match—shall never be," said Lady Frogmore, in that voice which proceeded out of her boots, waving her arm, which was made majestic by the lace and jet of her cloak.

"It shall never be!" cried Letitia. "Never! My husband has already taken steps——"

"My son—has taken steps: the family will not allow it They will never allow it."

"Never!" said Letitia, raising her voice until it was almost a scream. "Never! if we should carry it into every court in the land."

The ladies of the vicarage were very much startled. They lived out of the world. They did not know what privileges might remain with the nobility, for whom such excellent people have an almost superstitious regard, and the boldness of an assertion, whatever it was, had at all times a great effect upon them. For the moment Mrs. Hill could only stare, and did not know what to reply. She reflected that she might do harm if she spoke too boldly, and that it might be wiser to temporise. And she also reflected that the sight of a man was apt to daunt feminine visitors who might be going

too far. She said, therefore, after that stare of consternation, "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Tisch, nor how you can put a stop to a marriage; but perhaps the vicar may understand. Agnes, tell your father to come here. I am sorry you did not take this lady to the drawing-room, Tisch, you who know the house so well. This is the room we sit in in the morning, where we do all our little household jobs. Agnes is making me my dress for the ceremony, and everything is in confusion. Dress-making always does make a mess," said Mrs. Hill, rising with dignity to arrange, yet with a quick fling of the long breadths of the silk spread out on the sofa to dazzle the spectators with a glimpse of the dress which she was to wear at the ceremony. She then addressed herself to Mary, who still stood shivering in the window. "My dear," she said, "you'll get your cold a great deal worse, standing there. Yes, I see Tisch has got your chair—but come here to the corner of the fire—she'll make a little room for you. It's a pity she should have such a bad cold just on the eve—— Oh, here is the vicar. This is Lady Frogmore, my dear. What did you say, Mary? The

Dowager Lady Frogmore? Yes, to be sure. And this is my husband, Mr. Hill. As for the other lady, you know very well, my dear, who she is."

"Why, it's Tisch!" said the vicar, "my little Tisch! Who would have thought it? Why, we ought to have the bells ringing—for you haven't been here, have you, since you were married, Tisch? and cheated me out of that too, which was unkind. Anyhow, you are very welcome, my dear." He took her hand in both of his and swung her by it, which was the vicar's way. He was a large, flabby old man, with much *bonhomie* of manner, and ended off everything he said with a laugh. Letitia had not been able to avoid the paternal greeting. But she pulled her hand away as soon as that was possible. All these references to her absence and to her marriage were gall and wormwood to Mrs. Parke.

The vicar looked around after this, much discomfited by finding himself ousted from his usual chair. He wavered for a moment not knowing where to go, but finally planted himself in front of the fire, leaning his shoulders against the mantelpiece. He had an old coat on,

very much glazed and shabby, and a large limp white neckcloth, fully deserving of that name, loosely tied. He looked round him amiable and a little unctuous, not perceiving, for his faculties were not very alert, the storm in the air. "Well, ladies," he said, "I suppose you've come to talk things over, and all the fal-lals and things for the wedding, eh? It's astonishing what interest ladies always take in anything of this kind, though they can't be called, can they, on this occasion, the young couple?" He chuckled in his limp good-humour, as he stood and warmed himself. "Only six years, I'll give you my word for it, younger than myself—and going to be my son-in-law—but Mary there doesn't seem to mind."

His laugh had the most curious effect in that atmosphere charged with fiery elements. It was so easy, so devoid of any alarm or possibility of disturbance. Tisch, who knew very well that all that could be done was to frighten these simple people if possible, had too much sense not to see that her mission would be a failure, furious as she was — but the dowager had not this saving salt. She held out her arm again with all the lace and

jet. "We've come to put a stop to it," she said.

"Eh?" said the vicar. His chuckle was a little different now, and he repeated it at the end of his ejaculation, which was scarcely a question.

"They've come," said Mrs. Hill, raising her voice, "to put a stop to Mary's marriage. Don't you know? They won't have it, they won't allow it—they say a noble family—Mr. Hill, don't you hear?"

For he went on chuckling, which was exasperating, and made his wife and daughters long to seize him by the shoulders and shake him. "Oh," he said, "they're going to put a stop to Mary's marriage. How are they going to do that, my dear? Has he got another wife living?" And the vicar chuckled more than ever at such a good joke.

"Father!" and "My dear!" cried daughter and wife simultaneously, in indignation. But the vicar went on laughing unmoved.

"Well?" he said. "We don't know much about his life. He might have had several other wives living, he's old enough. And that's the only way I know."

"It shall be put a stop to," cried the dowager, "my son has taken steps. My son has been heir presumptive ever since he was born. It shall be put a stop to. If no one else will do it, I'll do it. I'll have him shut up. I'll have him put in an asylum. He can't be allowed to ruin the family. Letitia, can't you speak?"

"My good lady," said the vicar, carried out of himself and out of his natural respect for a peeress by his amusement and elation in being sent for and looked up to as the arbiter, which was a new and unusual position for this good man. "My good lady, is it Frogmore you are speaking of?" He laughed all the time so that all the women could have murdered him. "Frogmore! I'd like to see any one shut up Frogmore in an asylum, or dictate to him what he is to do." He stopped to laugh again with the most profound enjoyment of the joke. "I think I never heard anything so good. Frogmore! Why, he's only in his sixties—six years younger than I am. Do you think you could put me in an asylum, or make me give up anything I wanted to do, my dear?" He looked up at his wife and rippled over with laughter,

while she, almost put upon the other side by this appeal, gave him a glance which might have slain the vicar on the spot. The ladies of his house habitually dictated to the vicar; they put no faith in his power of acting for himself. What he proposed to do they generally found fault with, and considered him to require constant guidance. But now for once he had his revenge. He went on chuckling over it till their nerves could scarcely sustain the irritation; but for the moment the vicar was master of the situation, and no one dared say him nay.

Letitia had taken no part in this, such sense as she had showing her that it was vain to maintain that altogether hopeless struggle. She had her own undertaking ready to her hand, and a much more hopeful one. Mary, who had been placed by her mother in a low chair close to the corner of the fire, was so near to her as to be at her mercy. The vicar's large person standing in front of the fire shut them off from the rest, throwing a shadow over this pair; and while he occupied the entire space over them with his voice and his laugh, Letitia caught at Mary's shoulder and began

another argument in her ear. "Mary Hill," she said, "you know you daren't look me in the face."

"I have done you no harm, Letitia," said Mary, trembling.

"You are going to take my children's bread out of their mouths. They'll have nothing—nothing! For how can we save off our allowance? The little things will be ruined, and all through you."

"Letitia, oh, for goodness sake, listen to me for a minute. He says it will make no difference. They will not be the worse. I told him I would do nothing against them—and he says if I refuse he will cut them off altogether—Letitia——"

"Don't talk nonsense to me, Mary Hill! Do you think he will not rather leave his money to his own children than to ours?"

"He has no children," said Mary.

"No, not now; but when a man is going to get married——"

"Letitia!"

"Oh, don't be a fool, Mary Hill! You're not a baby not to know. When a man marries—if he were Methuselah—one knows what he

looks for. John and I would scorn to ask anything from you, though you will ruin us too. But the children! A mother must fight for her children. Poor little Duke, whom you always pretended to be so fond of—he's fond of you, poor child—he sent his love to his Aunt Mary, little thinking they will all be ruined—because of you——"

"Letitia, oh, what can I do?"

"You can give him up," said Mrs. Parke, "in a moment. It will not give you much trouble to do that. An old fool like Frogmore, an old precise, wearisome old——. Why, he's older than your father; and you who are engaged to my poor brother Ralph, such a fine man."

"I never was engaged to your brother Ralph!" cried Mary, with indignation.

"You say so now; but if one had asked you ten years ago. We might make up a little something for him even now—a little goes a long way in Australia; and with some one whom he was fond of to keep him right, Mary!"

"Letitia! It is all a mistake. I never, never was fond of him."

"And now, when you might save him if

you liked! This has been such a blow to him. He would marry you to-morrow and take you away out of everybody's reach. The man that was really, really—oh, you won't deny it—the man of your heart."

"I do deny it! Never, never! I would not marry your brother Ralph if—if there was not another. I would marry nobody," said Mary, raising her head, "nobody—except the man I am going to marry!"

"You will say you are in love with him next. A man that is older than your father—that has lived such a life, oh, such a life! all to humble us and bring us down to the ground—that have been so kind to you, treated you like a sister—and trusted you with everything, Mary."

Mary knew very well that this was not true—but it is so difficult to contradict any one who asserts thus boldly that she has been kind. Perhaps Letitia meant to be kind. She could not have had any other notion—at least at first. But Mary could not be warm in her response. She said, "It is misery to me to think of doing you any harm. I would not harm—a hair of one of their heads—not for the world!"

"No—you wouldn't stab them or give them poison — but you would do far worse, take everything from them — their whole living. You would change everything for us. I," cried Letitia, tears coming into her voice as she realised the emancipation of her once slave, "would not mind—for myself. I'm used to—putting up with things — for the sake of my family; but there is John — and little Duke; their inheritance taken from them that came from their ancestors—that they've always been brought up to—everything changed for them. And all because a friend—one we've been so kind to—my oldest friend, Mary, one brought into the family by me; oh, that is the worst of it! If it had not been for me you would never, never have known that there was such a person as Lord Frogmore. They've a right to say it's all my doing. Oh, Mary Hill, it was a fine thing for me to marry John Parke, and then to bring my friends with me into the family and ruin them all!"

Mary felt herself as obdurate and hard as the nether millstone. She folded her shoulders in her shawl and her mind in what she felt to be a determined ingratitude. Yes, she was

ungrateful. They had been kind to her, but she would not give up her life for that. It was not fair to ask her. And how could she change when everything was settled? She turned her shoulder to her friend. "He said it should do them no harm—I told him I would not consent to do them any harm."

"Oh, as for that!" Letitia cried. She leaned down close, near to Mary's ear, with her hand upon her shoulder. "Mary," she said, "you're my oldest friend. We used to play together, don't you recollect? It was you who was kind to me in those days. Sometimes I've seemed to forget, but I don't forget, Mary. It wouldn't have mattered if we had cut each other out as girls — that's natural; but now! You might win the day and welcome. Get the title and go out of the room before me and all that——" Letitia's labouring bosom gave forth a sob at the dreadful possibility, but she went on. "But it is the others I am thinking of. It isn't me, Mary. And we that were always such friends."

There came from Mary's bosom an answering sob of excitement and misery, but she made no reply.

"I can understand, dear," said Letitia, putting her arm around the arched shoulders, "that now you have made up your mind to marry you don't feel as if you could give it up. I don't ask you to give it up—but oh, think how far better than an old man like that it would be to have one that was really fond of you, one of your own age, a person that was natural! Oh, Mary, hear me out. Father has settled to give him something, and we could make out between us what would be quite a fortune in Australia. And he worships the very ground you tread on — and you were always very fond of him, you know, you know——Oh, Mary!"

"Don't you know that you're insulting me?" cried Mary, so miserable that to be angry was a relief to her. "Oh! take away your hand. Oh! go away and leave me. I won't listen to you any more."

"Mary — John told me to tell you that he had turned that insolent Saunders and all those horrid servants out of the house. He never even consulted me, and it's a dreadful inconvenience, every servant we had. But he turned them every one out of the

house. You might be satisfied after that, to see how much we think of you. He said no one should ever be suffered to be insolent to you in our house. We have all esteemed you above everything, Mary. Insulting! Is it insulting to want you to marry my own brother—my favourite—and to make sacrifices that you should have something to marry on?"

"Letitia," said Mary, in her passion springing up from her seat, "so long as you talk of the children my heart's ready to break, and I don't know what to do—but you shall not put this scandal upon me. Oh! no, no. I won't bear it. It is an insult! Mother, don't let her come after me. I won't have it. I won't hear another word."

For Letitia, too, had risen to her feet. She stood staring for a moment while Mary pushed past her flying. But the fugitive had no more than reached the door when she was caught by the shriek of Mrs. Parke's valediction. "Mary Hill! If you go and do it after all I've said—oh! I hope you'll be miserable! I hope you'll be cursed for it—you and all belonging to you. I'll never

forgive you—never, never, never! I hope if you have a child it'll be an idiot and kill you. I wish you were dead. I wish you would go mad. I wish the lightning might strike you. I wish——"

Letitia fell back in her chair, choking with rage and hatred; and Mary, like a hunted creature, with a cry of pain flew sobbing upstairs. The others looked on aghast, not knowing what to think or say.

END OF VOL. I.

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