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THE TWO MRS SCUDAMORES.—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

SCUDAMORE PARK is in Berkshire, in the heart of one of the leafiest and greenest of English counties. There is nothing very beautiful in the house itself. It is of the time of Queen Anne, with red brick gables and gleaming lines of windows straight and many. The centre of the *corps du logis* is crowned with a pediment, and the house stands upon a broad green terrace, broken by flights of white stone steps. The garden surrounding one wing has been kept up in the old-fashioned trim which belonged to the period in which it was made. There are clipped yews and formal parterres—parterres, however, which can scarcely be called more formal than the ribbon-beds of the modern flower-garden at the other end of the house. The park has always been kept up in the very best style; and the newest and most fashionable kind of gardening, as of everything else, is to be found there. Whatever the Scudamores may have sacrificed, however they may have wasted their goods, they have never been indifferent to their "place;" and on the summer day when this story begins it was in its full beauty. The lovely green lawn stretched from the foot of the terrace till it disappeared in the woodland greenery of the park. On the terrace great rustic baskets of flowers were standing, all ablaze with red and yellow. The windows were open, the white curtains moving softly in the breeze. The air was sweet with the delicate fragrance of the limes and with the sound of bees. Except that sound, everything was still in the languid afternoon. The prospect from those open windows was of nothing but greenness and luxuriance. The lines of trees thickened and deepened from the feathery-footed limes close at hand, to the great oak standing with "knotted knees," "muffled deep in fern" in the distance. Afternoon was in all the languid sounds and sights, and it is in such a place that the languor of the afternoon is most sweet.

But the last novelty which had been erected at Scudamore was one which hung suspended on the front of the house—a doleful decoration—the hatchment which announced to all the world that the lord of the place had betaken himself to another; and the family in the great drawing-room were all in deep mourning. There were but three of them—the mother, a handsome woman about forty, a son of twenty, and a daughter of eighteen — all in mournful black, weighted with the still more sombre darkness of crape. The white cap which marked Mrs Scudamore's widowhood was the most cheerful article of toilette among them. They were very still, for the man whom they mourned had not been more than a fortnight in his grave, and Mrs Scudamore, who had been ill of exhaustion after his death, had resumed the old habits of her life only that day. She was seated with a book in her hand in a great chair; but the book was a pretence, and her looks wandered far away from it. With eyes which saw nothing, she gazed into the park among the great trees. In that still way she was going over her life.

But there was not much in this widow's look of the prostration and despondency common to most women when they face existence for the first time by themselves, after a

long life spent in conjunction with another. Mrs Scudamore had a vague sense of exhaustion hanging about her—the exhaustion of great and long-continued fatigue and endurance. Nobody quite knew how much she had borne during that last illness. The dead Scudamore had not been a good man, and he was not a good husband. During all the earlier years of her married life he had neglected her; more than this, he had outraged her in the way women feel most deeply. She had acted like a Stoic or a heroine throughout. Having once made up her mind that it was not for her children's advantage or her own that she should leave him, she had remained at Scudamore making no complaints, guarding her children from the contamination of his habits, and overawing him into decency. His extravagance and wickednesses after a while were confined to his expeditions to town, in which she did not accompany him; but at home, as he grew older and his son approached manhood, Mr Scudamore was understood to have sown his wild oats and to have become a respectable member of society. People even blamed his wife, when a passing rumour of his dissipations in London was brought down to the country, for not going with him and "keeping him straight." And nobody realised that *that* had happened to Mrs Scudamore which does happen much oftener than the world wots of—she had become disgusted with her husband. Love can support a great deal, but love in the mind of a woman can rarely support that vast contempt of love which lies at the bottom of systematic immorality. In this case the man had disgusted the woman, and he suspected it. This is the last offence of which a woman is capable towards a man. That she should find him otherwise than agreeable whenever he chooses to come back, from whatever scenes he comes, is a sin which the best-tempered of sinners could scarcely be expected to put up with. And Mr Scudamore was not good-tempered. His wife did all that a high-spirited woman could do to conceal the impression he had made upon her; but he divined it, and though not a word was said between them on the subject, it filled him with a secret fury. His temper, everybody said, grew worse and worse before he died, especially to her; yet he would not suffer her to be absent from him, and made incessant demands upon her with the most fretful irritability. He thus deprived her even of the softening impression which a long illness often brings. He would not allow her to forget the troubles he had brought her by his sick-bed, but carried on the struggle to the very edge of the grave. Her strength had been so strained that, when the necessity for exertion was over, she had fallen like one dead; and for days after had lain in a strange dreamy peacefulness, in which something that was not quite sorrow, but sufficiently like it to answer the requirements of her position, mingled. She was sad, not for his loss, but for him—profoundly sad to think that the man was over and ended for this world, and that nothing better had come of him; and self-reproachful, as every sensitive spirit is, wondering wistfully, could she have done more for him? had she fulfilled her duty?

But underneath this sadness was that sense of relief which breathed like balm over her, for which she blamed herself, and which she tried to ignore, but which was there notwithstanding, dwelling like peace itself. Her struggle was over: she had her life and her children's lives, as it were, in her hands to mould to better things. This was what she

was thinking, with a faint exquisite sense of deliverance as she sat gazing out dreamily over the park. Mrs Scudamore had been an heiress, and all through her married life had felt the additional pang of inability to perform the duties she owed to her own people. Now that was removed, and in some rare fit of better judgment, her husband had left all his disposable property to her, and made her guardian of the children, and his executrix. Her partner in this responsibility was the family lawyer, who had known her all his life, and who had never yet got over his astonishment that the girl whom he recollected so well should have grown so clever, and so able to understand business. In his hands she was very safe. She had real power for the first time in her life. True, as far as part of the Scudamore estate went, that could only last till Charlie was twenty-one, an event not much more than a year off. But even then she had the Park and some of the lands, besides her own property, to manage, and her younger children to care for. It would be hard to say that it was happiness that was stealing into her heart, as she sat there in her crape and widow's cap; and yet it was strangely like happiness, notwithstanding that the gravity of her face and the subdued stillness of her thoughts made it possible for her to receive condolences without any apparent breach of the ordinary proprieties. "Mrs Scudamore looks exactly as a person in her position ought to do," was what Mr Pilgrim, her fellow-executor, said. "We cannot expect her to be overwhelmed with grief." And yet in its heart the world objected to her that she was not overwhelmed by grief, and offered her scraps of consolation, such as it offers to the broken-hearted. They said to her, "It is sad for you; but oh, think what a blessed change for him!" They adjured her to remember that such partings were not for ever (which made the poor woman shudder); and when they had left her they shook their heads, and said: "She is very composed; I don't think she feels it very much." "Feels it! She feels nothing. I always said she had not a bit of heart." "But then she always was a quiet sort of woman." This was what the world said, half condemning; and nobody, except old Miss Ridley in the village, who was eccentric, ventured to say, "What a blessed riddance for her, poor soul!"

While she sat thus dreamily looking out, with her new life floating as it were about her, Charlie and Amy went out without disturbing their mother. There were only these two, and two very small girls in the nursery. The long gap between meant much to Mrs Scudamore, but to no one else; for the little hillocks in the churchyard bore little meaning to the children. The brother and sister were great companions—more so than brothers and sisters usually are; and the delight of having Charlie home from Oxford had soon dried up the few facile youthful tears which Amy wept for her father. They strolled out arm in arm by the great open window upon the green terrace. Charlie had a book in his hand, the last new poem he had fallen into enthusiasm with, and Amy read it over his shoulder, with both her arms clasped through his. It would have been difficult to find a prettier picture. The boy was very slight and tall, not athletic as his father wished, but fond of poetry and full of enthusiasm, after a fashion which has almost died out — the fashion of a time before athletics had begun to reign. The girl was slim and straight too, as a girl ought to be, but more devel-

oped than her brother, though she was two years younger. Her hair was lighter than his, her complexion brighter. She was an out-of-door girl, and he had been an indoor young man, but yet the likeness was great between them. Amy leant half over him, hanging with all her weight upon his arm, her bright gaze bent upon the book, which he was reading aloud. "Is not that glorious—is not that fine?" he asked, his cheek flushing and his eye sparkling; while Amy, intent with her eyes upon the book, ran on with it while he stopped and rhapsodised. They were standing thus when they attracted the notice of some people in a carriage which was driving up the avenue. There was no door in the terrace-front of the house, but the avenue ran past it under the lime-trees, gaining a passing peep of the lawn. Two people were in the carriage—one a lady in deep mourning, the other a man with a keen sharp face. The sound of their passage did not disturb the young people; but the strangers looked out at them with deep interest. The lady was a pale little woman, between forty and fifty, wearing a widow's cap, like Mrs Scudamore. She was in a tearful condition, and leant half out of the window. "Ah, Tom, Tom! these are the children, you may be sure; and how can I do it? —how can I do it?" she cried with excitement. "Nobody wants you to do it. You must keep still, and keep your papers ready, and I'll look after the rest," said her companion. He was a man of about thirty, rather handsome than otherwise, but for the extreme sharpness of his profile. He too was in mourning, and in his hand he carried a little letter-case, which he gave to the lady as they alighted at the door. He had to give her his arm at the same time, to keep her from falling, and he pulled down her crape veil, almost roughly, to conceal the tears which were falling fast. She was very much frightened, and quite dissolved in weeping. Her poor little dim eyes were red, and so was her nose, with crying. "Oh, please, don't make me: for the last time, Tom, dear, don't make me!" she said, as she stumbled out of the carriage. He seemed to give her a little shake as he drew her hand through his arm.

"Now, Auntie," he said in her ear, "if there is any more of this nonsense I shall just go right away and leave you here; how should you like that? You foolish woman, do you care nothing for your rights?"

"Oh, Tom!" was all the answer she made, weeping. This conversation was not audible to the servant, who stood amazed, watching their descent; but he could not help seeing the little conflict. It gave him time to recover his wits, which had been confused by the novelty of this unlooked-for arrival. When he had watched the two unknown visitors' descent from the queer vehicle, which was the only hackney-carriage of the neighbourhood, he made a step in advance, and said calmly—

"Missis receives no visitors at present. Not at home, sir," and held the door as with intention to close it in the new-comers' face.

"Your mistress will receive this lady," said the stranger, pushing unceremoniously into the hall. "There, there, I understand all about it. Go and tell her that a lady wishes to see her on very particular business—must see her, in short—on business connected with the late Mr ——"

"Oh, Tom, don't say that, please."

"Your late master," said the stranger; "now come, quick!—the

lady can't wait, do you understand? and if you keep her waiting, it will be the worse for you—— Tell your mistress — your present mistress— that we must see her at once."

"Oh, Tom, don't be so—— My good man, if you will be so good as to give the message, we can wait here."

"You shall not wait here," said her companion; "show us in somewhere. Your late master would never have forgiven you for leaving this lady in the hall; neither would your present mistress, you may be sure. Show us in to some room or other. Now, look sharp! do you think that we can be kept waiting like this?"

Jasper was a young footman not long entered upon his office, and he turned from the strange man to the weeping lady with absolute bewilderment; and probably if the butler had not at this time made his solemn appearance, he would still have been standing between the two, in consternation. But Woods, who was the butler, was a very serious and indeed alarming person; and I have always thought that the sharp stranger took him for the moment for a clergyman visiting at the house, which subdued him at once. Woods received their message very gravely, and then, without a word, with only a wave of his majestic hand, he put them into a little room off the hall, and shut the door upon them. His gesture and look were so serious that the lady shook more than ever: she turned about in alarm when Woods shut the door, "Oh," she cried, with a start, "he has locked us in, Tom! what are we to do?"

"Hold your tongue," said Tom, "and take care of your papers, and keep up your courage. Well, I must say it's worth a little struggle to have such a place as this. What use you'll be able to be of to all your relations. Holla! there's the pictures of the two we saw on the lawn."

The lady turned with an exclamation of interest to two small photographs which hung over the mantelpiece. As she gazed at them the tears came hopping down her pale cheeks. "Oh, Tom!—and I never had any children—I never had any children!" she cried, looking appealingly into his face.

"So much the more reason to be spiteful at this one," said the man, roughly; "she has everything she wants—money, comfort, good reputation, and the children besides, and no right to them. By Jove, Auntie, if it was me, I'd pluck up, and pluck a spirit from the sight!"

"Oh, Tom, how little you understand!" said the poor lady; and she was standing thus, in spite of all his endeavours to seat her magisterially in a chair, gazing at the photographs with the tears upon her cheeks, when the door opened, and Mrs Scudamore, like a white ghost, enveloped in the blackness of her mourning, came into the room.

CHAPTER II.

"A lady and gentleman," Mrs Scudamore had said, starting from her reverie. "Who are they, Woods? did you say I saw no one?"

"They were positive, ma'am, as you'd see *them*," said Woods, solemnly. "I think I would see them, ma'am, if it wasn't too much. I was to tell you it was something about my master."

"Mr Scudamore, Woods?"

"My late master, ma'am. I would see 'em, ma'am, if I might dare to give an advice. Master had to do

with a many things that had best be seen to by one of the family; and Master Charlie's so young — not meaning no offence."

A momentary movement of irritation was in Mrs Scudamore's face, but it had passed away almost as quickly as it came. "I will see them," she said, "in a moment," waving him away with her hand. But when he had gone, she sat still in her chair, with a strange reluctance to move. In a moment a cloud seemed to have sprung up over all her firmament which looked so peaceful just now. What did she fear? She feared nothing — her thoughts took no shape. She only felt that some new and unforeseen calamity was coming. She had thought her troubles were over, and, with a bitterness which she could not put into words, she felt that she had been premature. This was something new, something he had left behind him for her to bear. After a while she gathered herself up painfully out of her chair; she put away the book carefully into the place it belonged to, and then she went to the window, she did not know why, and looked out upon her children. They were seated on the grass, both — Amy talking eagerly, with her animated face bent forward, her brother putting up his hands laughingly, as if to put her away; they were discussing the poem, which he held open: never was a prettier picture of the sweet idleness and fancifulness of youth. Mrs Scudamore looked at them a full minute, and then she turned and went to her visitors. When she entered the little room she was very dignified, very pale and still. She had not the least idea what she was going to meet there, but she felt that it was certainly pain and trouble; these as a matter of course; but what else she could not tell. She was tall, with a handsome colourless face, a woman of no small resolution, as it was easy to see; and there was something even about the crispness of her crape, and the spotless purity of the long white snowy pendants of tarlatan from her cap, which imposed upon the little weeping dishevelled woman to whom she addressed herself. This unhappy stranger turned with a start and a little cry from the contemplation of the photographs, wiped her tears with a crumpled handkerchief, and did her best, though she trembled, to meet the lady of the house with something like composure. But she shook so that her pretence was a very poor one indeed, and at sight of her humble little figure and deprecating looks, Mrs Scudamore revived her courage—nothing very tragical, she felt, could be involved. A faint smile came to her face.

"You wished to see me," she said, with grave politeness; "I do not receive any one at present except my old friends; but as I hear it is on business——"

"Business of the most important kind," said the man, of whom Mrs Scudamore had taken no notice. She turned now and looked at him, and somehow her very glance, the quiet grace with which she heard and accepted what he said, irritated him almost beyond bearing. He was the sort of man of whom people of Mrs Scudamore's breeding say, "He is not a gentleman." He might have been much poorer, less educated, lower in the social scale, and yet not have called forth that verdict; but he was himself so conscious of the fact, and so determined to cover it with audacity and pretension, that he saw the words on everybody's lips, and resented them, to begin with. When the lady turned from him, and with her own hand gave the insignificant little woman a chair before she herself sat down, he felt already that there

was some plot against him. "By Jove! she's begun her little game too soon; she thinks she can do anything with aunty," he said to himself. As for aunty herself, she looked more and more ready to drop as she received this simple courtesy. She sat down a very image of guilt and suffering — her eyes red, her nose red, her handkerchief, too damp to be graceful or even useful, in her hand—and from time to time lifted her weeping eyes with a deprecating glance to the stately Mrs Scudamore's face.

"Might I ask you to tell me what the business is?" said that lady, politely; "I need not say that at present—in my present circumstances—I refer to my lawyer everything that does not require my immediate attention——"

"I am quite willing to refer it to your lawyer," said the man—"perfectly willing—indeed he is the proper person. We don't come as beggars, ma'am, I assure you. Our rights are very clear indeed. It was solely, I believe, out of consideration for your feelings——"

"Oh don't, Tom—don't!"

"I must take my own way, if you please. We thought it best, and wisest, and kindest, to come to you first, feeling that there was some hardship in the circumstances, and that something might be done to soften the blow; but if you don't wish to be troubled, of course the simplest course is the solicitor—I am a solicitor myself."

Mrs Scudamore looked from him to his aunt, and then at him again. The cloud returned to her with a vague gloom, and yet it seemed impossible that any serious evil, any real harm, could come to her from the homely little personage sobbing under her breath in the chair beside her, or from this underbred man. The woman even, she felt sure, had no evil intention; and as for the man, what power could he have? It was money, no doubt—some old debt—some liability, none the less disgraceful, but which might be disposed of. She said, "Go on, please, I am ready to hear," with the faintest little tone of weariness in her voice. But the weariness disappeared from her face as he went on. The man, with his underbred air, his pretension and audacity, became to her like one of the terrible Fates. After the first flash of instinctive rage and indignation with which she refused to believe, the certainty that, horrible as it was, it was the truth, sank into her very soul, and overpowered her. She preserved her immovable, resolute face, and heard him to an end, heard the documents which he read, saw these documents carefully collected and replaced in the lettercase, saw the miserable little woman, the wretched creature who was the cause of it all, weeping over that case which she held in her hand; and then rose majestic to reply. To them she seemed the very impersonation of indignant unbelief and scorn; but the passion that inspired her, that gave force to her voice and majesty to her figure, as she towered over them, was sheer and conscious despair.

"Is that all?" she said. "Now I have heard you to an end, may I ask what you have come here for, and what you mean to do?"

"What we have come here for?" said the man with an assumption of surprise.

"Yes," Mrs Scudamore said quietly, feeling that her sight and voice began to fail her—"what have you come here for? You must feel that we cannot remain under one roof if your story is true, not even for an hour. If your story is true—I need not say that I give it no credit—that I—refuse—to believe ——"

She had got as far as this when sight and voice both failed—a hum as of a hundred rushing wheels came over her brain, and everything else died out of her consciousness. She dropped on the floor before the two who had been looking at her almost with awe, so proudly strong had she looked, up to the very moment when she fell. The woman gave a great cry and ran to her. The man sprang up with a loud exclamation. "Ring the bell, for God's sake—get water—call some one!" cried she. He, half frightened, but resolute to do nothing that was suggested to him, stood still and gazed. "She'll come round—never fear—she'll come round," he said. "By Jove, aunty, that proves she felt it more than she would allow——"

"Ring the bell—ring the bell!" cried the woman. The servants, however, outside, had heard the fall and the cry, and came rushing in without being called, Mrs Scudamore's maid, hastily called by Jasper, following the butler into the room. They lifted her on to a sofa, the visitor taking command of the situation as if it had been natural to her. This little weeping woman had been at once elevated into a rational being by the emergency. "Lay her head down flat—take away the pillow—poor dear, poor dear!" she murmured, keeping her place beside the sufferer. "Give me the water—oh, gently, gently!—give it to me."

"Aunt, come away, this is not your place, let her come to herself," said the man. She turned round upon him with a certain momentary fury in her poor red tear-worn eyes. She stamped her foot at him as she stood with the eau-de-cologne in her hand. "Go away, sir, it's all your doing," she said in a sharp high-pitched voice—"go away."

And he was so completely taken by surprise that he went away. He had not known that it was possible for his poor little aunt, whom everybody snubbed and ordered about as they would, to turn upon any one so. She had been absent from her family most of her life, and now when she came back it had been in all the excitement of a great discovery. The man was so bewildered that he went out and strayed about in the hall with his hat on, looking furiously at everything. While he was thus occupied, Charles and Amy came in and gazed at him with wondering eyes. He returned their look with a stare; but either some tradition of good-breeding, or else Amy's fresh young beauty, moved him. He took off his hat with a kind of sheepish instinct. The two young people, who did not know that anything was amiss, had a momentary consultation with each other. "Nothing of the sort," said the brother, turning his back. "Then I will," said the girl; and before either knew what she was about, she made a sudden step towards the stranger. "Did you want mamma?" she said, with her soft childlike smile, looking frankly into his face; "perhaps my brother or I would do instead? Mamma is not well—she has been very much tired and worn-out. Is it anything, please, that you could say to me?"

Anything that he could say to her! he was not sensitive, but a thrill went through the man, proving at least that he was human. Say it to her? He shrank back from her with an agitation which he could not account for. Amy's utter ignorance of any reason for this, however, made her slow to perceive the effect of her words upon him; and before she could repeat her question Jasper rushed forward with that zeal to communicate evil tidings which belongs to the do-

mestic mind. "If you please, miss, your mamma's took very bad, and swoonded in the little library——"

"Mamma — taken ill!" cried Amy; and she rushed into the little room, forgetting all about the stranger, who, however, did not forget her. He stood half bewildered looking after. He was a young man, and the sight of the girl—her sweet courtesy to the enemy she did not know—the look she had given him—her innocent question —had moved him as he never had been moved before. He was vulgar, pretentious, and mercenary, but yet he had still blood left in his veins, and something that did duty for a heart. He stood looking after her till Charlie turned round upon him, a very different antagonist.

"May I ask if you are waiting for any one?" said Charlie, with some superciliousness. He had not heard Jasper's message about his mother.

"Yes, sir, I am," said the stranger, shortly.

"Oh, you are?" said Charlie, somewhat discomfited; and then, not knowing what better to do, angry and suspicious, he knew not why, he strutted into the great library, leaving the new-comer master of the field. He smiled as the lad went away. He was neither afraid of nor affected by Charlie, who was to him simply a representative of the wealth and rank which he envied, and which he hoped he was about to grasp; but the other —the girl! To say what he had to say to her—— For the first time Mr Tom Furness faintly realised what might be the effect upon others of a matter which he had regarded solely from his own side of the question. That girl! and then he drew a long breath, and the colour flushed up on his cheeks. It was a new thought which had gone through him like an arrow, piercing his sharp commonplace brain, and the organ he supposed to be his heart.

Mrs Scudamore was recovering from her faint when Amy rushed in and ran to the side of the sofa, pushing away, without perceiving her, the little woman with the bottle of eau-de-cologne in her hand. "Oh, mamma, dear! Oh, Stevens, what is the matter?" cried Amy, appealing naturally to the maid; but to her astonishment a strange voice answered: "Don't ask any questions, my poor child; oh, my poor dear child!" said this unknown speaker; and to her wonder Amy saw a pair of unknown eyes gazing at her—poor dim eyes with a red margin round them, and tears rising, but full of kindness and pity. She had not recovered from the shock of seeing some one whom she never saw before at her mother's side at such a moment, when Mrs Scudamore herself, opening her eyes, stretched out a hand towards her. Amy tried to take her mother's hand and kiss it, but to her consternation her intended caress was rejected; the hand clutched at her dress and drew her close, turning her towards the strange woman. Looking at her mother's face, Amy saw, with inconceivable surprise, that she was not looking at her, but at the stranger, and that some dreadful meaning—a meaning which she could not divine—was in her mother's eyes. Mrs Scudamore held her, pointing her out, as it were, to this strange woman whose eyes were red with crying. Then she spoke with a voice that sounded terrible to the amazed girl: "Look at this child," she said, dragging Amy into a position to confront the stranger, who forthwith began to cry once more and wring her hands. Then Mrs Scudamore rose slowly from the sofa; she was ghastly pale, but

had perfect command of herself. She waved them all away. "Go —go," she said, imperiously; "leave me, I have some business; leave me, Amy; Stevens, go now, I have business to do."

"Let me stay with you, mamma; oh, let me stay with you!" cried Amy; but even she was frightened by her mother's look.

"No, go—go—all of you," said Mrs Scudamore, peremptorily. She even raised herself with difficulty from the sofa, and, tottering across the room, softly locked the door.

CHAPTER III.

What passed within that locked door nobody knew. Amy would have remained in the hall to wait for her mother but for the presence of the strange man outside, who gazed at her with eager and intent eyes. But for his presence I fear the servants would have listened, and but for their presence he would have listened, though in either case the attempt would have been in vain, for the two women within spoke low, and had no intention of betraying themselves. Amy joined her brother in the great library. She did not know what she was afraid of, but she trembled. "Mamma looked so strange," she said, "not like herself—and such an odd, funny woman—no, not funny. Charlie, don't laugh—quite the reverse of funny—but so strange—with red eyes, as if she had been crying. Oh, I don't know what to think——"

"Don't think at all," said Charlie, "that's the best thing for girls. My mother will tell you, I suppose—or at least she will tell me if it is anything of consequence," said the heir, with a sense of his own importance, which was beautiful to see. He was writing a letter, and he had not seen or heard anything to alarm him, so he pursued his course with much calm; but Amy stood by the windows, or roamed about the room from bookcase to bookcase with an agitation which she herself could not understand. Her mother's despair had communicated itself to her in some wonderful inexplainable way. In the same mesmeric fashion a thrill of wonder and sharp curiosity had run through the entire house. Half the servants in it made furtive expeditions through the hall to see Mr Tom Furness marching about with his hat on his head and a scowl on his face, looking at the various ornaments,—the hunting trophy hung on one wall, the pictures on another, the bits of old armour which Charlie had furbished up and arranged with his best skill, and of which he was so proud. All these things Mr Furness scowled at; and then, to the horror and excitement of the household, he strode forward to the door of the little library and knocked loudly. There was no answer. He stood waiting for about five minutes, and then he knocked again. By this time Woods was moved to interfere. He came up with a look of solemnity which again for a moment impressed the stranger with the idea that he must be a dignified clergyman residing in the house—an impression unfortunately put to flight by his words. "Sir," said Woods, "begging pardon for the liberty, but Mrs Scudamore is in that room, and I can't have my missis disturbed——"

"Your missis!" said Mr Furness. It was perhaps just as well for him that the first word was quite inaudible, and he knocked again.

This time there was an immediate reply. The door was opened slowly, and Mrs Scudamore appeared. She had been pale before, but her former paleness was rosy in comparison with the ghastly white of her countenance now. The little woman with the red eyes was clinging to her arm.

"We have left you waiting," she said, with a calmness in which there was something terrible, "which I am sorry for, but I felt faint. Woods, send the dogcart and a man to the Three-mile Station for Mrs Scudamore's luggage, and tell the housekeeper to get ready the west room. As we have both been a good deal agitated with this meeting," she went on, turning to her strange companion, "perhaps you would like to rest before dinner? It would do you good to rest——"

"O yes, please," faltered the stranger, half hiding behind Mrs Scudamore's crape, and casting glances of terror at her neighbour's face.

Mr Tom Furness looked on confounded—he gazed from one to the other with a face of consternation. "Oh!" he said, "so you have made it all up between yourselves."

"Yes," said Mrs Scudamore. She looked him full in the face, not flinching, and he regarded her with rising wonder and anger. "Sold!" he said to himself, and then he laid his hand roughly upon his aunt's arm. "Look here, this won't do," he said. "You can't keep me out of it. I go for something in this. I can tell you, aunty, you had best not try to cast me off."

"Oh, Tom—Tom!"

"This lady is under my protection," said Mrs Scudamore. "Leave her, please; she is a member of this family."

"Under *your* protection!" said Furness, with a coarse laugh, which brought the blood to the ghastly pale face of the woman he insulted. And then he added, with angry jocularity, "I should like to know, since you are so hasty to adopt her, whom you take her to be."

Mrs Scudamore made a momentary pause. It passed so instantaneously that perhaps nobody observed it except Amy, who had come to the door of the great library when she heard her mother's voice. Then she answered firmly, "She is Mrs Thomas Scudamore, my sister-in-law. I accept her on her own statement, which I have no doubt is true. We shall make all inquiries to substantiate it, of course, in which you, I am sure, can help us."

"Mrs—Thomas—Scudamore—her sister-in-law!" said the man, and then he rushed at the unhappy little woman who was his aunt and shook her violently before any one could interfere. "Do you mean to say it's a conspiracy," he cried; "or—you—have you made a mistake?"

"Oh, Tom," cried the poor woman—"oh, Tom, don't murder me. Oh, I beg your pardon. I beg you ten thousand pardons. I have made—a mistake."

"It's a lie!" he cried, with another oath.

Mrs Scudamore put out her hand imperiously and pushed him away. "You will touch her again at your peril," she cried. "There are men enough in the house to turn you out."

At this the man grew furious. "To turn you out, you mean," he said, "you impostor, you con——"

Here Amy appeared, pale and scared, with her hand held up as if to stop the words, whatever they might be. And he stopped short, struck silent as by magic. His eyes fell before the girl's bright, innocent,

indignant eyes. Say it before her! how could he? for when all was said that could be said against him, he was still a man. He stopped short, and Mrs Scudamore took that moment to lead her faltering companion away.

"You have made a mistake," she said, as she went—"what might have been a terrible mistake; but thank heaven we have found it out."

The spectators stood speechless, and watched her as she turned along the long corridor to the great drawing-room. This passage was long, paved with tiles, and had a great window at the end. The two figures were clearly outlined against the light; the one tall, straight, and full of elastic strength, as upright as an arrow, and as unwavering; the other hanging upon her, a limp heap of drapery. As under a spell, the man who was left in the lurch, the girl whose heart was wrung with a novel sense of mystery, the gaping and wondering servants, stood silent, gazing after them till they disappeared, and then——

What Mr Tom Furness might have done, or said, had he been left to himself, it is impossible to say. Mrs Scudamore, it was clear, had made up her mind to leave him to himself; but chance had provided her with a quite unsuspected auxiliary. His eyes, as he withdrew them from following the two who moved like a procession against the light, encountered those of Amy. She turned to him almost appealingly. She seemed to ask, what is it?—what do you think of it? She, except in that one moment when she had put up her hand to stop his words, had looked at him in no hostile way. Now, there was nothing but wonder and uneasiness in her look. And that look seemed to appeal to him—to him who knew himself the enemy of the house. He was vanquished,' he could not tell how. He took off simply, with a muttered apology, the hat which all this while had been on his head.

"I suppose there is nothing left for me but to go away," he said, bitterly, "and leave them to settle it their own way. By Jove! though——"

"Mamma can never mean you to—to feel that there has been no—courtesy, no—hospitality—at Scudamore," said Amy. "I am sure that must be a mistake. She has been ill, and something has agitated her. Would you mind staying here one moment till I—till I—call my brother?" said Amy, desperately. To call her brother was the last thing to do, she felt convinced; but it was the first thing that it occurred to her to say. She ran into the great library where Charlie was sitting, paying no attention to his languid "What's the row, Amy?" and went out by the window which opened on the terrace. It took her but a moment to rush round to the drawing-room window, calling softly, "Mamma! mamma!"

Amy knew very well that something was wrong, and her heart was aching with anxiety and pain. But she had forgotten that she was rushing into the heart of the secret by thus following her mother. She was suddenly recalled to herself by hearing Mrs Scudamore's voice, in such a tone as she had never heard before, say, low and passionate, almost too low to be audible, and yet with a force in it which would, it seemed to Amy, have carried the sound for miles:—

"I put myself out of the question. For myself, I can bear anything; but I have four children; and to save them from shame, look you, I will do anything—anything—lose my life, risk my soul!"

"Oh! don't say so," said the other voice.

"I would—I will. And you can save them."

Amy crept away. She could not face her mother after hearing these words. What did they, what could they mean? She stole back again, dispirited, to the hall, in which *that* man still awaited her. He knew all about it. He could clear it up to her, whatever it was—if she dared ask. But Amy felt that the secret which was her mother's, her mother only must reveal. She went up to him timidly, not knowing what excuses to make, and totally unaware that her pretty, embarrassed, troubled look was stealing to the man's very heart.

"I am so sorry," she said, "they are all so engaged. I can't get hold of any of them. You are a friend of—of that lady who is with mamma, are you not?"

"Her nephew," he said.

"And can you tell me—I have not had a chance of speaking to mamma—is she a relation of ours?"

He grinned at her with a look she did not understand. Then, catching once more her innocent, wondering gaze, grew confused and red, and faltered. Say it to her? —he could not for his life.

"Your mother says so," he answered, gloomily.

He was a young man, though in Amy's eyes he was a Methuselah. He was not bad-looking, and his natural air of audacity and assumption had vanished in her presence. He stood softened almost into a gentleman by her side. Amy looked at him doubtfully. She had thought she saw him resisting her mother. She had heard him begin to say words that he ought not to have said. But he had stopped short. And he was injured, or seemed so —had been left here alone and neglected, and looked as if he wanted some notice to be taken of him. All the natural instincts of courtesy were strong in the girl. Even if he were an enemy, he could not be allowed to leave the house with a sense of having been neglected. And then he was quite middle-aged, she was sure—thirty at least—and the nephew of some one who was a relation. When all this course of thought had passed through her mind, Amy felt that it was time for her to act. She could not advise or help her mother, but she might do the duty she had no doubt her mother would have done had her mind been sufficiently at leisure to think of it. "Mamma is occupied," she said, simply, "and so is my brother. There is only me; but if I could show you the park—or if you would take some luncheon—I will do the best I can in mamma's absence. Since you are a relation of our relation, it does not matter," she said, with her honest, sweet smile, "that we never saw each other before."

It would be impossible to describe the effect of this little girlish speech; it went through and through the person to whom it was addressed. The very different passions which had been strong in him were somehow lulled to sleep in a moment. He did not understand himself. The very purpose with which he had come to the house went out of his mind. "I will be proud if you will show me the— the grounds, Miss Scudamore," he said. In his soul he had fallen prostrate at Amy's feet.

And she went with him in her simplicity, leading him about the gardens and the conservatories, and out to the park to see the best views. She took him even to the terrace. Everywhere she led him about, half pleased after a time with the interest

he showed in everything, and which was indeed no simple sentiment, as she thought, but a maze of indescribable feeling, which subdued and yet stirred him. The child did not know what she was doing. To her own consciousness she was but occupying a weary hour or two which otherwise would have hung heavy on this visitor's hands, and making up for something like rudeness which her mother had showed him. In reality she was winding about the man a whole magic network, the first dream of his life. When they had gone over everything and returned to the house, there was still nobody to be seen, and Amy's wits were at full stretch to know what to do further with her strange guest. Should she ask him to stay to dinner? What should she do? Perhaps her mother would not like it—perhaps Charlie——

"Look here, Miss Amy; you have been very kind and nice to me," he said, suddenly; "for your sake I'll go away. Tell your mother from me that I've gone away for your sake. I'll wait till I hear from her. If I don't hear from her I shall take my own way; but, in the mean time, I am not a worse man than other men, and I am going away for your sake."

"Oh, that is very kind," Amy said, unawares; and then she recollected that what she was saying sounded uncivil—"I mean it is very kind to say you will do anything for me; but I am sure mamma would never wish——"

"Tell her I'll wait to hear from her, or if not, I'll take my own way; and warn my old fool of an aunt that she'll be sorry for her treachery. I don't believe a word of it, and I'll prove my position," he said, with growing warmth; but added, suddenly, dropping his voice, "at present I will go away for your sake."

CHAPTER IV.

The family dinner was at seven o'clock, and the three met and sat down as usual alone. The day before this had been a cheerful meal. Mrs Scudamore, in her quiet and content, had encouraged her children's talk, and all their plans what they were to do. It had been sweet to her to hear them, to feel that they were no longer to be crossed and thwarted capriciously, and that, at the same time, her own will and wish were sovereign with them for the moment at least. It had been the pleasantest meal eaten at Scudamore for a long time. To-day, so far as Charlie knew at least, everything was unchanged. He had exclaimed at his mother's paleness when she came into the drawing-room; but she had come down only at the last moment, when there was little time for remark. She was dressed as carefully as usual—studiously, Amy thought—to avoid the least trace of any difference; but she was ghastly pale. Every trace of colour had gone from her face; her very lips were blanched, as if the blood had rushed back to her heart far too fiercely to permit any return. A tremulous movement was in her fingers, and even now and then in her hand, as if her nerves had been jarred. Otherwise she showed no sign of what had passed. Amy had watched very anxiously for the appearance of the strange visitor, but Mrs Scudamore came down alone. Fortunately, Charlie's ignorance of what had occurred removed the restraint and

painful consciousness which Amy felt upon herself. They sat down as usual—the natural routine went on. And if the mother at the end of the table felt like a somnambulist walking in a dream, neither of the two divined it. Mrs Scudamore looked out of the frightful mist, which seemed to her own consciousness to envelop her, and saw Amy's wistful eyes watching her, but Charlie's face quite unconcerned, eating his soup as usual. This helped her to bear the awful weight that was upon her heart. And then the presence of the servants helped her in the story she had to tell. She began it, seizing the opportunity when Charlie paused for the third time to look at her across the flowers on the table, and ask what she had done to herself to be so pale.

"What I ought not to have done, I suppose," she answered, forcing something which did duty for a smile; "talking over—old affairs. I have not told you yet," she went on, clearing her voice, "of a visitor who arrived this afternoon—a—a relation—who will most likely stay—with us—for a long time——"

"Good heavens!" cried Charlie, "a relation! What a terrible bore!"

Amy, who was watching her mother closely, had it on her lips to check her brother's levity, but it was a help to Mrs Scudamore. She panted as if for breath as she went on, but once more that faint watery gleam of a smile covered her face.

"She is a lady, Charlie. I expect you to be very civil to her—she is—your aunt—the widow of your Uncle Tom, who—died in America. She has been there—most of her life."

"Worse luck," said the unconcerned Charlie. "My uncle Tom—my uncle Tom? who was he? I never heard of him, that I know of——"

"Don't worry your mamma, Master Charles," whispered Woods, under cover of an *entrée*. "It was your father's brother, your uncle as went to America when you was a baby—that's sure enough——"

"By Jove, Woods!" Charlie began with boyish resentment; and then a better instinct saved him, and Woods covered the exclamation by dropping a spoon, and picking it up with confusion, and begging pardon audibly. It was a pause for which Mrs Scudamore was grateful.

"I have invited Mrs—Thomas—Scudamore," she said, with a little shiver, which Amy alone perceived, "to stay—of course—— She only came home about—a month—ago—about the time—— I expect you to be very civil to her—— I don't think her own people are—perhaps—the kind of persons, but she herself—is——" then Mrs Scudamore made a pause, and then shivered again and said with a moaning sigh, "very good—oh, it is true—very good——"

"She may be as good as she pleases," said Charlie, "but, mamma, whatever you may say, such a visitor will be a dreadful bore——"

"She is a good woman," repeated Mrs Scudamore with a broken voice.

"A good woman is an appalling description," said Charlie. "One never falls back upon that, if there's anything more interesting to say. I've always noticed in my experience—— Mother, what's the matter?—you don't mean to say you are angry?"

"Another disrespectful word of—your aunt—and I will leave the table," cried Mrs Scudamore, passionately; "if I could imagine any child of mine treating her otherwise than as she deserves——"

"Good heavens!" said Charlie, under his breath; and he shot an inquiring glance at his sister. But Amy, trembling and miserable, kept

her eyes upon her plate. The girl had never seen her mother so. They seemed to have plunged back into the old days, when the fretful father put a curb on everything they said and did. Shame, distress, and terror filled Amy's heart; and silence fell upon the table — a silence which seemed to irritate Mrs Scudamore as nothing had ever irritated her before.

"You seem to have lost your tongues all at once," she said, bitterly: "if this is the consequence of so mild a claim upon your obedience, nothing more than asking you to be civil to a—near—connection—it is a bad omen for me. If you cannot accept my statement without proof——"

"Mother!" cried Charlie, "what can you mean? proof——"

"Yes, proof—— What does your grumbling mean, but an insinuation that you don't believe——"

"Mother! mother! what is the matter? — what do you take me for——"

"I take deeds, not words," she said, with feverish agitation; and then it seemed that she had nearly burst into convulsive tears; but she restrained herself. All this time the servants went softly about the table, with the stealthy deprecating consciousness of spectators at a domestic storm. They could not understand it any more than her children could. She was not herself, not like herself. They exchanged looks, as Amy and Charlie did. When dinner was over she gave orders peremptorily that the younger children were not to come down for dessert; and rose from the table almost before Woods had left the room. "I must go to my visitor," she said, sweeping out, with still that atmosphere of suppressed passion about her. She went away so hastily that Amy had not time to follow. The two sat looking after their mother equally bewildered, but with very different feelings.

"What is the matter?" cried Charlie, with undisguised astonishment. "Is my mother ill? has she been doing too much? I never saw her like this before. Amy, you must know."

"I am afraid she is ill, Charlie. Oh! don't say anything—I cannot bear to see it!" cried Amy, with tears; "it is so unlike mamma."

"I wish the doctor would call," said Charlie; "you should get her to go to bed. Don't you know something that you could make her take?—women used to know all about doctoring. And I am sure you could save her a great deal of trouble, Amy, if you were to try. She has been doing too much."

"Perhaps I could," said Amy, doubtfully; "if you thought it was that——"

"Of course it is that—you have left everything upon her," cried the young man, glad to find some one to blame. "You have left her to write all her letters and things, and do the bills, and a hundred trifles you might have spared her. Of course it is that."

"I'll run now and see what I can do," cried Amy, following her mother hastily out of the room. Innocent and young as she was, she had already learnt the lesson women learn so soon—that a masculine conclusion of this kind is beyond the reach of argument. It satisfied Charlie. It comforted his mind to throw the blame upon her, and to persuade himself that his mother's strange aspect had an easily removable cause. Amy could not so delude herself; but she said in her mind, "What is the use of arguing?" and took the ready excuse thus offered her. Poor little Amy's heart was very heavy. No—it was not writ-

ing letters, nor reckoning up bills, that had done it. It was something far more mysterious — something which she could not divine. The words she had heard at the window came back to her, and made her shiver—"To save them from shame I would give my life. I would risk my soul——" "Oh! what, what could it mean?"

There was no one in the drawing-room, of course, and Amy made her way up-stairs, wondering where her new aunt was, wondering what sort of person she was, and what she had to do with it. She had red eyes, but that was with crying; and her nose was red, and her whole person limp; but then her voice and touch were kind. The door of the west room was closed when she approached, but Stevens just then came out with a tray."

"Is the lady, is—my aunt there?"

"La! bless us, Miss, is she your aunt?" said Stevens, and went down-stairs nodding her head, and refusing further comment.

Amy paused a long time at the door. Should she go in and make acquaintance with the stranger? Should she encounter her mother there, with that changed face? With a little timid reluctance to take any decisive step, she ran to her own room first to collect herself. Amy's room communicated with her mother's. Mrs Scudamore had been glad to have her child so near, to be able to call her at any hour; but the first thing Amy saw on entering the room was that the door of communication was closed. She gave a little sharp cry involuntarily. That separation hurt her, and appalled her. "Why should she shut me out?" Amy cried to herself—"*me?*" She felt the door, it was locked; she listened even in the great perturbation of her thoughts, but nothing was audible. It was more than Amy could bear.

"Mamma, mamma!" she cried, beating on the door.

There was no answer. Amy had something of the Scudamore temper, too, and could be hasty, and even violent, when she was thwarted. She lost patience.

"I *will* come in," she cried; "I will not be shut out. Mamma, you have no right to shut me out; open the door—open the door!"

All at once the door opened wide, as if by magic, Amy thought, though it was solely the hurry of her own agitation, the tingling in her ears, the sound she was herself making, which prevented her from hearing the withdrawing of the bolt.

Her mother stood very severe and grave before her, reproving—"What is the meaning of this, Amy?" she said, coldly, and Amy's heart sank.

"Oh, mamma! don't go away; don't shut yourself up — at least don't shut *me* out—me, mamma! There may be things you cannot talk of to the rest, but, mamma, me!" cried Amy, in a transport of love and pain.

Mrs Scudamore made a violent effort of self-control. Her whole soul was full of passionate irritation. Her impulse was to thrust her daughter away from her—to shut out all the world; but that unreasoning cry went to her heart. Oh, if the child but knew! Tell it to *her!* The same thought that had moved her enemy came with a great swell and throb of pain over Mrs Scudamore's heart.

"Amy," she said, hoarsely, "child, go away. There is nothing the matter with me, or if there is anything, it is my own business alone. Go away, I cannot be disturbed now——"

Amy crept to her mother's feet and clasped her knees. "Only me," she said, laying her soft cheek against the harsh blackness of the crape.

"You can trust me, mother. Let me share the trouble, whatever it is. Oh, mamma, mamma! why should you have secrets from me?"

Mrs Scudamore trembled more than the child did, as she stooped over her. "Hush, hush," she said, "let there be an end of this. Listen, Amy. It is—papa's—secret—not yours nor mine. Now, ask me no more."

Amy shrank away with a strange look of awe. She looked wistfully into her mother's face; she acknowledged the difference. These words, which Mrs Scudamore loathed to speak, were absolutely effectual. She rose from the ground, and put her arms round her mother's neck, and clung to her, silently hiding her face. "Is it very bad?" she whispered softly, kissing her neck and her dress. Amy's whole soul was lost in pity.

"It is very bad," said the poor woman, with a groan; and she held her child close to her heart, which broke over her with a very tempest of love and anguish. Oh, if Amy but knew!—but she should never know—never, if it were at the cost of the mother's life—the peril of her soul.

When Amy had been thus dismissed, calmed down, and composed in the most magical way—for, after all, the dead father's secrets, whatever they might be, were nothing in comparison to what the very lightest veil of mystery on the part of the mother would have been—Mrs Scudamore once more closed the door. She did it very softly, that no one might hear; she drew the curtain that no one might see; and then she gave way to a misery which was beyond control. Was there any sorrow like her sorrow?—she cried to herself in her anguish. She took her dead husband's miniature out of its frame, and threw it on the ground, and crushed it to fragments. She cursed him in her heart. He had done this wantonly, cruelly, like the coward he was: he had known it all along: he had died knowing it, with his children by his bedside. O God! reward him, since man could not—the coward and villain! These were the only prayers she could say in the bitterness of her heart.

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sweeping condemnation to a system which, whatever be its faults, has merits too. What we may wisely hope for is, that present practices may cease with the cessation of the circumstances which produced them; that grave events may make taste graver though not less winning to ordinary natures; that art may drive out gewgaws; that the more delicate forms of furniture may gradually descend into common use, and carry their civilising influence everywhere. Thus far that influence applies to the upper classes only: increasing cheapness of production, coupled with increasing needs in the lower strata of society, may propagate it widely; and some day future students of the history of civilisation may recognise the real importance of the part which furniture has played in the moral progress of the nineteenth century.

THE TWO MRS SCUDAMORES.—CONCLUSION.

CHAPTER V.

After this terrible day things fell into something like their ordinary channel at Scudamore. The little woman who had brought so much trouble into the house came downstairs, and was known among the children as Aunt Thomas. It was the name they all gave her. She was a hesitating little woman, doubtful exceedingly about all her actions, prone to ask advice, and accept it gratefully, even from little Mary, who was but seven years old. Mary was Aunt Thomas's Christian name, and she took doubly to the child, who led her about everywhere like an obedient slave. Very soon even the grown-up children, even Amy and her brother, accepted the new relationship with the unquestioning matter-of-course facility of youth. They made no inquiries into it. They accepted Aunt Thomas with simplicity and sincerity; everything that was mysterious in it was explained by the fact that she had lived most of her life abroad. It was natural to believe that a woman whose days had been passed so far away should be ignorant of the kind of habits they had been brought up in, and the Scudamore "ways." And then it was not denied that Mrs Thomas Scudamore had been "raised from the ranks." The children grumbled a little at first, Charlie especially, who complained to everybody but his mother that Aunt Thomas was a bore. But by degrees this passed away, and before she had been there a fortnight Aunt Thomas was the favourite of the house. She had ceased to weep, and her funny little nose had recovered its natural colour, and her eyes were no longer muddled. When she came to her natural aspect it became apparent that she was one of those women who, without a good feature, by mere stress of youth and bloom and smiles, are often very pretty when they are young, and do not grow ugly as great beauties sometimes do, but retain a certain shadow of good looks as long as good-humour and health last them. Her eyes were kindly-smiling eyes when they were not red with crying; and though the thin little curls she wore under her cap were not pretty, yet they were old-fashioned, which of itself is a quality. It was something, Charlie said, to have an aunt who had strength of mind to

wear little curls half-way down her cheeks. As for little Alice and Mary, they took possession of Aunt Thomas with scarcely a moment of doubt. They might be seen leading her about the park, one at each hand, every day of their lives. They seated her between them on the grass when they made daisy chains, or fought each other with plantains. They called her back as if she had been a dog, when she strayed away from them. She set their little bits of worsted-work to rights for them, and dressed their dolls. In their society she was as gay as themselves, and almost as much like a child.

Mrs Scudamore, however, did not settle down to the new relationship so easily. She had never been the same since that day. She had been then a young woman, comparatively, notwithstanding all her troubles. Her cheek had been round, her hair as brown as Amy's; now, not all at once, but by stealthy imperceptible degrees, she had grown grey, her cheek had grown hollow, her eyes sunken, her temper uncertain. Sometimes a word would rouse her into irritation; sometimes she would sit for hours together, her head bent over some pretence at work, but doing nothing, finding in it only a shield and cover for her sadness. Sometimes, on the contrary, she would take wild fits of activity. The children after the first made little remark, but accepted this also, as children do accept the faults of their parents. Even Charlie was too loyal to his mother to speak openly of the change. He said, with a sigh, that the house was no longer jolly—that it was hard upon a fellow to be shut up like this—that he wished "the long" was over, and he back at Oxford. As for Amy, who had no Oxford to go to, and whose idea of duty forbade her to question whether home was or was not "jolly;" she said very little one way or another, but from the depth of her gentle heart was sorry for "poor mamma." This secret which she was carrying the weight of, which was not her own, was the thing that had done it; and a tinge of bitterness came to Amy's heart as she reflected upon this legacy which her father had left behind him. Girls who have had a hard father have two ways of regarding men—either with disgust, as the oppressors of life; or with a longing, romantic worship, an ideal and vague hope to find somewhere the man who will contradict this tradition of misery, and prove all the heart longs to believe of excellence and love. Amy was of this latter order. She was a sanguine creature, hopeful of everything; and she was sure that it remained to her to find the prince of men, as sure as if she had been nurtured upon nothing but optimism and romantic visions. With this certainty in her mind, a deeper pity still, a more melting tenderness, came over her when she thought of "poor mamma." For Amy's ideal was something more than a hope. Since her earliest recollection she had known one who in her youthful eyes appeared the very antitype of the Red-Cross Knight, and this hero had been absent for some time on his travels, thus giving the last touch of perfection. She had never said to herself that she was the Una of this reproachless gentleman; but a consciousness of some fairy link between them was very sweet at her heart—no wonder she sighed for poor mamma.

Mrs Scudamore avoided Mrs Thomas's society as much as it was possible; but when they were together she treated her with a deference which no one could understand. She deferred to her in everything; she gave up her own convenience, her own way, to hers whenever she had a

chance. That, it is true, was not often, for Mrs Thomas was very humble, very deprecating, taking nothing upon herself, and considerably frightened of her sister-in-law. She would steal away to the nursery, or to her own room, when Mrs Scudamore came down-stairs. They were rarely together; when they were, Mrs Scudamore's temper was, perhaps, more uncertain than usual. She exhorted the children to be good to their aunt and seek her society; but yet, it appeared, could not bear to see them respond to her injunctions. A shadow would cross her face when she saw little Mary dragging the kind aunt after her, demanding with unceremonious freedom everything from her. Whatever her object was in establishing Mrs Thomas in her family, she had accomplished it, and now she could not bear it. A concealed bitterness was in every word she said—a sword was in her heart. She resisted even the love of her own. Sometimes she would send her little girls angrily away, bidding them go to Aunt Thomas, "as you call her." This was done in Amy's presence; and Mrs Scudamore's bitter repentance and regret for having thus betrayed herself, was terrible to the grieved and disturbed mind of poor Amy. "She *is* Aunt Thomas, is not she, mamma?" she had cried in her first surprise. "Yes, yes," Mrs Scudamore cried, with sharp pain, which Amy did not understand. She could not even stop herself when Aunt Thomas came in. She went on in spite of herself—"She is a stranger to you," she cried, only half conscious what she was saying; "but already she takes my place, even with you."

"Oh, mamma!" said Amy, too much stunned for speech.

"Yes," said Mrs Scudamore beside herself, turning her passionate, pale face to the interloper. "Oh why, why is it? We ought to have been enemies and hated each other; that was natural—everything was natural except this——"

"But I don't hate you," said Mrs Thomas, with the restrained ghost of a sob.

What was in Mrs Scudamore's face? Was it hatred, was it enmity? This thing at least is certain, it was pain—pain like that Prometheus felt when the vultures were gnawing at his heart. She rose and hurried from the room with her heart swelling as if it would burst. And no one knew why it was. Amy, who would have felt that she was betraying her mother had she consulted even Aunt Thomas on the subject, could not help looking at her wistfully at this strange moment. The little woman put up her hands with a kind of terror.

"Oh don't ask me any questions—don't ask me!" she said. "It has been her own doing bringing me here. And I am content; I am quite happy; only ask me no questions, for I will not say a word."

"I could not ask any questions about mamma," said Amy, proudly, "except from mamma herself."

And Aunt Thomas dried her eyes and nodded and grew bright again. "I am not one of the clever ones," she said; "and I have been long out of the world, and they say I am weakminded; but if you don't do wrong, Amy, it is always my opinion things will come right at the end."

"I hope so, Aunt Thomas," said Amy in her ignorance.

"And we are not doing wrong," said the little woman. "No, thinking it all over, from every side, as I do every night of my life—No—I can't think we are wrong; but, Amy, don't ask me any questions, for I will tell you nothing, not if you were to keep on asking for ever and ever."

Once more Amy looked at her anxiously. Whatever it was, this secret which weighed on the mother was known to the stranger and not to Mrs Scudamore's own child. The thought made Amy's heart sick.

All this time she had said nothing about Mr Tom Furness; she had not given her mother his message; she had kept perfect silence as to her interview with him. This was partly because Mrs Scudamore had been out of the way at the moment, and a thing which is not told at first, gathers difficulties and embarrassments about it every hour it waits. And he had not returned. This curious fact was one of the chief causes, had Amy but known it, of her mother's anxiety. His silence looked as if some plot was brewing, and Mrs Scudamore knew, though the children did not, how precarious her position was. Aunt Thomas had been about two months in the house, and autumn had come, before there was any news of him. And then he came as suddenly as he had done at first, startling the whole house. Amy had been out with Aunt Thomas on an expedition down to the village when he made his appearance. He came upon them quite unexpectedly, appearing round the corner, with his air of swagger yet conscious imperfection. Mrs Thomas saw him first, and she gave a start, and clutched at Amy's dress for protection. "Oh, don't leave me, my dear—don't leave me," she cried; "here is Tom."

"Who is Tom?" said Amy, haughtily, feeling all the blood of all the Scudamores in her veins. But her fit of pride did not last long; and with a certain half-guilty sense of curiosity she gave her companion her arm, feeling herself on the eve of some discovery. She did not even lift the thick gauze veil over her face, and the stranger did not recognise her. This fact increased the half-painful, half-exciting certainty that something was about to be found out.

"Ah, Auntie!" Mr Tom said, jauntily flourishing his cane, "here you are again. You have given us all the slip; but natural affection is not to be balked, you know."

"I am sure I am—glad to see—any one, Tom——" faltered Mrs Thomas.

"You would be much more glad, I should think, never to see me again," he replied; "but don't flatter yourself, Auntie. I took your case in hand, and I will see you through it, whether you choose or not. I have not been idle since I was last here."

Mrs Thomas trembled more and more with every word. "I am glad to hear—you have not been idle, Tom. I hope it has been—nice work. I—I always felt sure you would make your way."

The stranger laughed an insolent laugh. "You are not clever enough for that sort of thing," he said. "You know well enough what my work has been. I have been finding out all about you."

"I am not afraid of anything that can be found out about me," she said, with a flush of indignation; and then added, faltering, "I am doing nothing wrong."

Again Mr Tom Furness laughed; and it seemed to Amy as if his laugh woke up echoes over all the country—echoes which mocked and sneered as he did—as if they, too, had some occult knowledge. "I admire your conscience, Auntie," he said: "not wrong to give yourself out for some one else—to call yourself out of your name? but you don't suppose that you take me in with your masquerade. And there are more interests than yours involved. This sort of nonsense is not going to last. I should think by this time you ought to be sick

of it yourself; and I've come to make a change."

"Sir," said Amy, interposing, as she felt Mrs Thomas quiver and shake, "you forget whom you are speaking to. You may be her relation, but you have no right to talk to my aunt so."

The man started. And as she threw back her veil and looked at him with indignation in her face, a sudden change came over him. He took off his hat: his manner altered all at once.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Scudamore," he said; "I did not know you were there."

Amy took courage from this sudden victory. It gave her—how could she help it?—a certain thrill of satisfaction to see her own power. "Indeed, I don't think it matters whether I am here or not," she said, more softly. "Aunt Thomas is very kind; you ought to be good to her all the same."

"Aunt Thomas?" he said, with a laugh, which was subdued, but still offensive to Amy's sensitive ear; and then he drew half a step nearer. "It is odd, is it not, that she should be aunt both to you and to me?"

"Yes, it is strange," said Amy, erecting her head. It was not only strange, it seemed intolerable looking at this man. "Let us go home," she said, suddenly. "Mamma will not allow Aunt Thomas to be troubled. Don't tremble; we are near home."

"I am going with you, if you will allow me," said Mr Tom Furness. "I have business with Mrs Scudamore too."

Mrs Thomas was leaning all her weight upon Amy, so that the girl could scarcely support her. At these words she let go her hold, and turning to her nephew with upraised hands, burst suddenly into tears.

"Oh, Tom, Tom, don't, please! You think you are right, but surely it is I who must know best."

"You—know best! Why, Auntie, you don't know your own mind for two minutes together," he said, with an air of levity. "Come now, take it easy. We need not trouble Miss Scudamore with this business of ours."

"Oh, Tom!" cried the poor lady, "go away, for heaven's sake! It shall be none the worse for you—it will be better for you. I shall have it in my power to do something—at once. Oh, Tom! why will you torture me? I have never been cruel to you. I will meet you anywhere you please, and talk it all over; but, for pity's sake, go now! Don't come to Scudamore;—anywhere but here."

He did not look at her. He showed no signs of being affected by her appeal. He looked at Amy—at her wondering, wistful face, and the paleness that had come over it; and, with his eye on her, he answered, slowly, "Of all places in the world, it is to Scudamore I wish to come."

Mrs Thomas drew herself apart from her young companion. She stood before him, trembling, crying, wringing her hands. "Oh, Tom! if I ever was good to you in my life—if I ever showed you any kindness—oh, Tom!—Tom!"

He kept looking at Amy, not at her; and it was either because of some regret in his look, or because she was absorbed in the question which was evidently so important, but Amy felt no offence at his gaze. She did not much notice it, in fact. She watched with a keen sense that something momentous, something more than she could judge of, was involved.

"Aunt, it is of no use speaking," he said; "I am going with you; but perhaps, if you all please, it may be for good, and not for harm."

CHAPTER VI.

That day was a memorable one at Scudamore — memorable in more ways than one, and to more than one member of the household; for when Amy entered the drawing-room she found some one there who drove Mr Tom Furness and all the rest of the world out of her head for five wonderful moments. He was sitting by her mother, but with his eyes fixed on the door, and a glad gleam in them as she appeared. He had been travelling for more than a year, and before he went away Amy had been too young to be disturbed in her tranquillity by a love-tale—so at least Rex Bayard thought. He did not know that he had any place beyond that of an old friend in Amy's heart; but she knew, in some magical way, that she was queen of his, or at least possible queen. And here he was looking for her, making a special new world for her within the other. Everything else went out of Amy's head; she had to subdue her joy, her sweet consciousness, the flush of exquisite shy feeling that came over her, to look as if she was "very glad to see him again," and no more—to behave herself, in short, as a girl trained under her mother's eyes, in all the fine decorums of womanly self-restraint, ought to behave; lest he should see that her heart was beating, and the light in her eye dancing with this sudden, warm, unlooked-for flash of delight.

She had sat down, keeping her mother between them, with a girl's shy sweet artifice, taking refuge in Mrs Scudamore's shadow, and had been listening to his voice, asking him pleasant meaningless questions, for five minutes before she bethought herself—five minutes she supposed—but time went quickly just then with Amy. Mrs Scudamore, too, was cheered and brightened by Rex's presence; she was looking almost like her former self; the cloud had lightened off her face. For a moment she had been overcast by the fear that Aunt Thomas was about to follow Amy into the room; but when no one appeared, Mrs Scudamore opened her heart to the pleasure of the moment. Poor heart! it had ached enough — this one moment it might surely take and rest. She talked as she had not talked for months. She seemed to have thrown off her burden—the shadow that hung over her. There were Rex's travels to discuss, and all he had been doing. Now he was to settle down at home, and that too had to be discussed. Mrs Scudamore thrust her own miseries away from her. The young man had grown up at her knee, as it were, yet not young enough to be a child to her, with something rather of that half-way stage between a son and a brother, which is so pleasant a relationship. He was a full-grown man, and so on her own level; and yet he was young, and was on her child's level. How Mrs Scudamore brightened up! She would not even allow herself to think of what might be coming; she took the pleasure of the moment—the only one she had allowed herself to take for so long.

"Oh!" said Amy, all at once, with a start of recollection. Her mother looked at her, and before a word had been said, felt that this good moment was at an end.

"What is it?" she asked, with the greyness of sudden pain falling in a moment over her animated face.

"Oh, mamma, I beg your pardon, I forgot! and I wish I could have forgotten still," said Amy, in a low, confused tone. "Mamma, there is some one in the library."

"I know," said Mrs Scudamore, with a voice of despair. She put her two hands together as if to hold herself up; or did she pray, sitting deadly still for one moment and no more, with her head a little lifted, her whole frame rigid? Then she drew a long heavy sigh, and then slowly, reluctantly rose from her chair. "I must leave you now—for a—few minutes," she said, and went out of the room as if she were going to her execution, with death already in her face.

"Is there anything wrong?" asked Bayard, amazed; "is Mrs Scudamore ill? what has happened? May I know?"

Upon which poor Amy, who had been obliged to restrain herself so long, and who was now for the first time, since she awakened to all those unexpected troubles, by the side of one whose sympathy was certain—poor Amy suddenly covered her face with her hands, and fell a-crying, overcome by the misery and the happiness together. One she could have borne, but the two together were more than she could bear.

"Oh, I cannot tell—I cannot tell," she said. "I think my heart will break; I don't know what it is, but it is killing mamma."

"Tell me what it is," said the young lover, drawing close to her. To make it easier he told her something else first—how he loved her, how he had thought of her wherever he went, how he had come back for her. It all came upon Amy like a sweet surprise, a delicious miracle; and yet she knew it was coming, but only some time—not now.

Thus there were two scenes going on within the agitated house, both of which penetrated down to the very depths of nature in the persons concerned. In the library Mrs Scudamore was alone with Furness. She had sent Mrs Thomas away, half in contempt, half in pity. "Let me manage it my own way," she said; "there can be nothing gained by your remaining—nothing but pain to yourself;" and she had confronted the assailer all alone. She had brought against him every weapon that was in her power. She had set her face like a rock; she had refused to believe what she knew in the depths of her heart must be true. She had not yielded, would not yield, her pretensions for a moment. She was carrying out her formula to the last letter. At the risk of her life, to the peril of her soul, she would fight this last supreme battle out.

And then Mrs Scudamore was taken by surprise all at once by an unexpected proposal he made to her—a proposal to remove his opposition altogether—to become as fast a friend as he had been an enemy, and to consent to everything she could wish. He made this proposal when she was in her fullest strain of opposition, denying and resisting everything. It had the strangest effect upon her. She had been fighting the battle of despair, though she had kept so brave a front; and here was a way of escape. A sudden extraordinary pang of relief seized her. She had been on the strain so long, that escape seemed to her the greatest, the only good which life could give. Had the man meant falsely, he would have found out her weakness by this means. She sank into a chair, her nerves relaxed, a cry came from her heart; and though the next moment she braced herself to her old sternness, it was impossible to disguise that first movement of hope. Her eyes were dazzled and blinded by the prize held out to her—safety. It was not herself she was thinking of, heaven knows; for herself she felt it would be easy to go away and hide her stricken heart, and be heard of no more. But the children

—Charlie and his birthright—the girls and their honour—oh, what a temptation it was! She would have risked her soul to buy this deliverance, she had said. But the price asked for it was not her soul, nor her life—it was her child.

"I feel as if I could worship her," said Tom Furness. "Give her to me, and I'll make her happy. I never saw any one like her. It's a folly; for if I held out, I know we could have everything; but for her sake I'll give in. I'll consent to destroy the papers. I'll even take Auntie off your hands: I can manage that—so long as you'll give *her* to me; with her just fortune, of course."

Mrs Scudamore forgot herself in this wonderful sudden opening out of the darkness. "My child is the dearest thing I have in the world. I would give all I have rather than sacrifice Amy," she said.

"How do you know it would sacrifice Amy? She was awfully civil—as civil as she could be, the first time I was here—and I'd make her a good husband. I am as fond of her as any man could be. I'd rather have her without a penny, than any girl I ever saw with a great fortune. Though, mind, I must have her fortune, too, for her own sake. Now, that's my proposal. I'm acting like a fool, for I might have everything, and most likely her too; but it's my fancy, and I mean to please my eye if I should grieve my heart. Now, this is what I propose—if you accept, we're friends for ever: we'll make a bonfire of everything, and you're my mother-in-law, whom I'm bound to defend; but if not——"

He stopped short with a tone of irritation, for Mrs Scudamore had shuddered at the title. His mother-in-law! good heavens! but, on the other side, all the results surged up upon her, all the possibilities; there was not one of the family but would suffer—Charlie most bitterly and terribly, in such a way that he would be ruined before he began life; and Amy herself would be miserably injured—it would be as good as a renunciation of all prospects for her; and even the little girls, the two innocent creatures in the nursery. It would be ruin, destruction, misery, to all. She sat silent, with this panorama passing before her—forgetting the man's very presence in the excitement of the offer he had made. What was it he asked?—a sacrifice—a sacrifice bitter and sad, but such a sacrifice as had been made before now. An Iphigenia, an Andromeda, perhaps not so bad—not so bad! and to save the rest. And Amy was the kind of girl to make a sacrifice; she could do it though it would rend her heart. Poor Mrs Scudamore had lived without love herself—it was a hideous life, and yet she had come through it, and had found a compensation in her children. She had done it without any grand motive; but Amy's motive would be the sublimest that ever woman had,—to save her family, their honour, their credit, their very life. She gave him no answer as he stood there before her, but she sat and pondered with a hot red flush upon her cheeks. Before she had half done thinking, he pressed her for an answer. How could she give an answer? How could she sacrifice her daughter? and oh, how could she, how could she give up this possible escape?

"Stay," she said, feebly, "stay over to-night; I cannot give you an answer all at once. If you will stay and—dine—with us—in the evening I will tell you. Oh, it is a hard price—a bitter price!"

"By Jove! you are complimentary," he said; "but I'll stay all the same. It is the only price I will take."

And, sighing, she went away from him, as sighing she had come. But

not so hopeless as when she had come—seeing one gleam of light through the darkness, seeing some hope. Amy had never been wooed as yet; how could any one tell what the girl's fancy might be? And the man loved her in his way. And—it was the only hope. Now that there was a hope, Mrs Scudamore seemed to become more and more sensible of the awful gulf on the brink of which she stood. It was not only ruin—it was more than that; more awful, more total destruction than anything which concerned worldly goods alone. She shuddered as she thought of it, now that it was possible to escape. She left the man with her head full of his proposal, and went back to the drawing-room. But Amy and her lover had strayed away out of the room, and therefore Mrs Scudamore's terrible hope was not brought to an end. She went and shut herself up in her own room, and brooded over it. That one should suffer to deliver many was a rule of the universe. The first and greatest who had ever borne the name of man had done it; and so many after Him had done it. To suffer vicariously for some one else that some one else might go free, why, it was nothing unusual; it was a law of the world; and Amy was the girl to do it. She would never hesitate to do it. She would accept it as natural and fit that she should suffer to save her family, as her mother felt she herself would have done had she been in her place. Amy would do it; and oh, was it possible, was there *peace* beyond this raging storm which enveloped her life? Would this hurricane pass over? and was it possible that again everything would be as it had been? But no; alas! never could these three months be obliterated; neither tears nor blood could wash out the mark; but it might be covered over, covered for ever, so that no one should guess where it had been.

Mrs Scudamore remained in her room till dinner. She did not think again about Rex Bayard. No doubt, she thought—if she thought at all—that he had gone long ago. She had imagined once—was it a hundred years ago?—that her pretty Amy was very fair and sweet in the young man's eyes. But what were such levities as a boy's or a girl's fancy to her now? She did not even think of that in the agitation and excitement of this moment. Rex Bayard passed from her mind altogether; and when Amy ran up late to dress, and would have come to her mother with her confession, Mrs Scudamore sent her away hastily.

"You are very late," she said. "I will speak to you after dinner, Amy; there is no time now. It was thoughtless, very thoughtless to be so late. How could you tell what I might have to talk to you about? But make haste; there is no time to lose."

She did not observe Amy's brilliant cheek, nor her eyes dewy and abashed with happiness. Happiness! Mrs Scudamore had forgotten how it looked. Her heart was very sore, and throbbing with feverish pain. She was in haste now to go down again to see the man who had so much in his power, and who was willing to save her—to see him again, and to persuade herself that Amy might be brought to endure him, that the child would not be wretched: he was young, he was well-looking enough, and he adored her. Surely Amy would do it. She was such a child—so yielding, so facile, so dutiful. Surely she would do it; and the bargain would be made, and safety and honour bought and paid for. Amy had seen nobody—she would have no terrible comparison to make in her mind between him and others. She

had never been wooed before; and probably the strange new gift of love thus bestowed upon her might touch the child's heart, and she would be not, at least, very unhappy. Not unhappy — pleased, perhaps, and flattered—her vanity, if not her heart, contented. Oh, if this only might be the case! For surely Amy would do it—of that there could be no doubt.

CHAPTER VII.

Mrs Scudamore was taken aback —she could scarcely have told why —by the appearance of Rex Bayard in the drawing-room when she came down to dinner. It is true he was an old friend, and sufficiently intimate in the house to stay to dinner without a very formal invitation; but still the sight of him annoyed her. She had come down late, as she generally did now, and the whole party were there, so that no immediate explanation could be offered.

"I asked him to stay, mamma," said Amy, timidly whispering in her ear.

"Oh, it is quite right," said Mrs Scudamore, coldly. She was not angry, but she was put out; for her own guest, the man she had asked to stay, was by this unexpected step put to such a disadvantage as his patroness in this terrible emergency would have done much to save him from. It does not always happen that high family and good blood stamp themselves upon either countenance or bearing of their possessors—indeed it is as common as not that the reverse is the case; and a stranger generally finds it hard to tell which is the peer and which is the plebeian. But there are cases in which the difference is as strongly marked as the highest idealism could require; and Rex Bayard was as near the typical representation of an English gentleman as it is easy to find. His ease and perfect good-breeding showed at once, as by an illumination, the awkwardness, the forced familiarity which was not easy, the pretension and vulgarity of the other. They brought each other out, as a painter would say. Tom Furness had never been so much Tom Furness the attorney, Tom Furness the would-be swell, as Rex's appearance by his side made him; and Sir Reginald Bayard had never looked so perfect a *fils de croisé* as he did with Tom's shadow bringing him into full relief. This was all Mrs Scudamore thought of for the moment; but it was enough to add a shade of additional annoyance to the bitter conflict of misery in her heart. She avoided Rex, she could not tell why, with a feeling of irritation which was uncontrollable. His mere presence did it. Why was he here, making the contrast visible, tempting Amy to vain comparisons? Comparisons every way vain; for was not Tom Furness Amy's fate? Whom else could she marry? Mrs Scudamore felt that she could not, dared not, permit her child to enter a spotless, honourable family. She could marry no one except this man. To this point her thoughts had already come. She made Rex walk into dinner with Mrs Thomas, to his wonder and dismay, and took with a shudder the arm of the other.

"It's to be a bargain, I hope," her odious companion said to her, audibly, as they went from one room to another; and Rex looked back at her over his shoulder with the most curious, wondering, wistful look. He, too, wished to speak

to her. If it had but been any night but this!

He did manage to speak to her during dinner, which terrible meal seemed to the miserable woman as if it would never end. "May I see you for two minutes in the library before I leave?" Rex whispered. "Oh yes!" she said, dully. She did not even ask herself what he could want. For the rest, Mr Tom Furness filled up all the gaps during dinner with his mere presence. He was contemptuously jocular to his aunt, admiringly familiar to Amy, and, though she awed him, took an air of *bon camarade* with Mrs Scudamore, which humbled her more than anything she had yet encountered. "You and I know better," he would say, appealing to her; "we are up to all that sort of thing, you and I," with an insufferable nod of complaisance and assurance. How dreadful it was! The dinner seemed to last a year; and even when they left, there was Amy with a little important face looking at her, as if she too knew something. What could the child know? She could not have divined, surely could not suspect, the fate which was coming on herself.

"I hope you will not judge poor Tom hardly," said Mrs Thomas, when they had got to the drawing-room. It was rarely that she addressed of her own accord the mistress of the house; but to-night her womanish sense had perceived her nephew's inappropriateness in this place, and she could not refrain from an apology. "He has not been used to it, and he was a little excited—and anxious to please—and afraid——"

"He does very well," said Mrs Scudamore. "There is nothing to make excuses for. I think he did perfectly well."

"You are very kind, I am sure," said Mrs Thomas, retreating back into a corner almost out of sight. Oh, how kind mamma is! thought Amy to herself. Though she looks a little stern at times, how good she is! for if there ever was a horrible, wretched, shocking—— And then the girl came and fluttered about her mother, watching to make sure that Aunt Thomas was out of the way, and scheming, with panting breath and beating heart, how she was to begin her tale. Her movements caught her mother's eye, and chafed her in her irritated condition. "Amy, pray sit down," she said, fretfully; "you worry one so with your restlessness." And thus poor Amy subsided too, not daring to speak.

"If you please, ma'am," said Woods, "Sir Reginald is waiting in the library," and he held the door solemnly open to admit Tom Furness, who appeared behind him. Amy sprang up and kissed her mother as she went out. She did not explain herself, and Mrs Scudamore asked no questions. But oh! to be left here with this man, while Rex was pleading his cause so near! Fortunately, however, Amy thought, with a smile in her eyes, Rex's cause would not want much pleading. Mamma was fond of him, too—mamma had known him all his life—mamma had been fond of his mother. To plead that cause would be no hard matter. But yet Amy could not but wonder what her mother would say. Would she be sorry to think that she was going to lose her child? Would she say they were both too young? Would she scold him for speaking to Amy first; or would she give him a motherly kiss, and send him to fetch her? The girl's mind was full of these thoughts when she was left alone with Mrs Thomas and her nephew, and her impatience and abstraction were evident. "My dear, I am afraid you are not well," said Aunt Thomas, putting down to her nephew's ac-

count the cloudy look which had come over the young face she was beginning to love. "Miss Amy is thinking of some one," said Mr Tom Furness, with an attempt at raillery, which he accomplished with even more awkwardness than his wont; for though he thought it gallant, and, indeed, his duty to be jocular and make innuendoes, he had too much awe of Amy to be at ease in the attempt. "Thanks; I am quite well," she said, growing red, with a hauteur which he had not yet seen in her. What she would have given to get rid of the two!—to rush away from them and await somewhere in the silence her mother's decision—or rather, as she herself put it, wait till her mother should send for her. But that was impossible. She had to remain, and to be civil to them, listening to every sound, and feeling every muffled movement or voice which was half audible in the distance going through her heart.

Mrs Scudamore went to the library to meet Rex without having once realised what it was he might have to say to her. She moved about in such a cloud of her own trouble—an atmosphere of secret, all-absorbing, personal care—that she had lost all insight into other people's feelings. She moved along dully, not roused even by the thought that it was a strange thing for Rex Bayard to seek an interview with her. Her imagination was too busy with her own affairs to have any leisure for speculation on such a subject. He came up to her eagerly when she entered the library, and took her hand in both of his. He looked into her face anxiously, trying to read its expression. "Dear Mrs Scudamore," he said, "you know what I want to say to you. I am sure you know."

"I don't know, indeed," she said, and then suddenly started like one awakened. The words were true when she said them; but by the time he had received them they had become untrue. She gave a great start—her heart began to beat—she confronted him as she might have confronted her enemy; but she did not say another word. She left it to him to speak.

"Is it so?" he said, with surprise and a shade of regret. "How stupid I must be then! how little I must have made myself known! Mrs Scudamore, I want to ask you for Amy. I have loved her ever since she was a child. She is the only one I have ever dreamt of as my wife. You know all about me, as well as I do myself. There are no explanations to make, except that I love her dearly, dearly—and she says she loves me. I am so happy I can't talk about it. Why should you turn away? I will not carry her away to the end of the world. She will always be near you—here—next house, as it were. Mother, don't turn away from me. I want a mother, too, as well as a wife. Are you angry? Have I taken you by surprise?"

Mrs Scudamore kept her face turned away. She drew from his the hand he had taken, and with the other put him away from her. "No more—no more," she cried. "Yes; I am taken by surprise—I am—angry. No; I am not angry, Sir Reginald, for you do my daughter a great honour; but it cannot be—it can never be."

He stood amazed where she had left him, while she went to the table and sat down, turning from him, leaning her head on her hands. He stood there, in the centre of the room, petrified. "*Sir* Reginald! a great honour!" he cried to himself, with an amazement which no words could express; and for the first moment he thought she was mad; nothing else seemed possible to ex-

plain it. He thought that this must be the explanation of all that had troubled his Amy—her mother must be mad. God help her! it was a terrible calamity; but yet it was not despair, as this would be could he believe her to be in her senses. He hurried after her to where she had seated herself. He laid his hand softly upon her arm.

"Dear Mrs Scudamore——" he said.

She shook him off; she waved him away from her; she seemed as though she would have risen again and left him: and then suddenly turning round, she caught his hand in her own, and wrung it with a passionate painful clasp. "Rex," she cried, two hot tears dropping out of her eyes—"Rex, don't torture me; don't ask me any more. I would give her to you sooner than to any one in the world, but I cannot—I cannot. Don't ask me again, for the love of God. Go away, and think of Amy no more."

She was so profoundly agitated that he dared not answer her. He stood by her, softly touching her shoulder, trying to soothe her, half distracted, yet not without hope still. Something was the matter with her, with her brain or her health. She could not mean this in sober earnest. The very passion of her words showed that something excited her; and what was there to excite her in his most natural love for her child? So he stood by her, soothing her, waiting till she was calm. When Mrs Scudamore perceived this she made an effort to command herself.

"Dear Rex," she said, as calmly as she could, "you think I am excited, and that I do not mean this. You must think I am mad even to turn so from my friend's son—from you whom I have loved all your life; but I am not mad. Oh, would to God that I were! Something has happened that makes your marriage with Amy impossible—impossible! You must understand that. It is not with my will I say it—it breaks my heart. But it must be said. Impossible either now or at any other time, whatever you may suffer, or even she—impossible. Rex, it is not with my will."

"But why?" he cried, still unbelieving. "This is mere madness—folly; in heaven's name, why?"

"I cannot tell you," she said.

And now it was his turn to be angry. He dropped her hand, which he had been holding. "You must tell me," he cried. "I will never agree to such a mysterious dismissal. I have a right to know what it is."

"And I say, if it should cost me my life, you shall never know."

She had risen to irritation again; it was easier to be angry than to yield to any other feeling. In the depths of her soul there lay a *sourd* irritation with everything and all the world.

"I refuse to accept your decision," he cried. "What! I am to be made miserable, and my darling's heart broken, without a reason. You tell me calmly we are to be separated—and for ever——"

"Do I tell you calmly?" she said, with a miserable smile. "But there has been enough of this. Go away, if you have any respect left for me. Leave me, and leave the house, as soon as you can. There is nothing but misery here."

But he would not leave her; he stayed, and implored, and upbraided, and implored again, till her brain was burning and her heart breaking. When he went away at last, it was in a passion of rage and misery. He was so wild in his disappointment and pain, that though he had struggled with her for leave to see Amy again, he rushed away without ask-

ing for her at last, not trusting himself to seek an interview. Mrs Scudamore went back to the drawing-room alone. She had been a long time gone, and the miserable look in poor Amy's eyes, when she lifted them at her mother's entrance and saw that no one else was coming, went to the distracted woman's heart. The other terrible candidate for Amy's favour was standing in front of the girl, talking to her, trying to make himself agreeable, with a pertinacity which made Mrs Scudamore sick with anger, but which fell dull upon Amy's abstracted senses. She was wholly absorbed in the strain of listening for sounds outside the room; and though she made wide answers, yes and no, and tried to keep a smile upon her face, she scarcely heard what Tom Furness was saying. He was horrible to her from the fact that he was there, but not from any other cause. Aunt Thomas was looking on with very vivid attention, watching, seeing in some degree what it meant; but Aunt Thomas did not know how Mrs Scudamore had been occupied, and consequently was not aware of the worst complication of all.

"Amy, I am very tired. If Mrs Thomas will excuse me," said Mrs Scudamore, "I think I shall go to bed. Come with me; I have something to say to you, dear."

"Has Sir Reginald gone?" asked Aunt Thomas, beginning to perceive the possibility of further trouble.

"Yes, he has gone," said Mrs Scudamore, with a deep sigh.

Common sight seemed to be failing her. She saw the others dimly; but without looking at Amy, she saw the misery, the wonder, the despair in her eyes. She held out her hand, and they went out of the room together. They were both beyond the reach of ordinary civilities—too much agitated, too unhappy, to think of good-nights. This was a want of decorum which their guest was very quick to note. He called out after them, "Good-night, ladies," half angry, half contemptuous. "They don't stand upon any ceremony," he said, when the door closed upon them—"they and their Sir Reginald." And he began to walk about the room, fuming. Mrs Thomas came up to him from her corner. The poor woman was keeping a very hard command over herself.

"Tom," she said, solemnly; "oh, Tom! you thought I was good to you once——"

"Bah!" said he.

"But it isn't bah! Your mother and all of them were very hard on me; they thought I had disgraced the family; and then when you found out this—— Tom, look into your own heart, and tell me. Since we began struggling for my rights, as you call them—have we ever been happy since?"

"Auntie, you're a fool. Who was talking of being happy?" he replied.

"I have not," she said, simply. "Do you think it's nice for me to be here, an interloper, poisoning the very air that poor woman breathes?"

"Then why the deuce do you do it?" cried the man. "It's your own fault. Turn them out and be done with it. You can if you like."

"And ruin the children!" she cried. "Tom, oh Tom, listen to me! Like this, we shall never have a blessing on anything we do. Let us take money and go away, and leave them at peace. She'll give money — enough to set you up; enough to make you comfortable. Oh Tom! if I ever was good to you in my life——"

"Aunt, you're a fool," he said again, sharply. "Go to bed. Leave them at peace — a likely thing! Take money? Oh yes, I'll take money, and more than money. She

knows what I will take. Auntie, hold your tongue, and go to bed."

That was the end of one appeal. Another was being made in Mrs Scudamore's room with the door locked, and Amy at her mother's knee listening to her fate. It was as fate that the sentence was pronounced. Rex was sent away never to return. It was impossible—impossible! Mrs Scudamore said. Neither now nor ever could he be allowed to come back. Amy had been kneeling anxious and unhappy by her mother's side. At this she sank down softly in her despair, which yet was more consternation than despair. And she too, with her white lips, with her eyes hollowed out, and shining as from two white caves, demanded why?

"I cannot tell you why," the mother cried. "Amy, listen to me. That has come to you which comes only to a few in this world. Oh, my darling, listen—listen! would God that it was me instead! but I can do nothing, only you can do it. Don't you think Mary would have died a thousand times, if she could, rather than her Son?"

"Oh, mother, what do you mean?"

"Amy, Amy," cried the miserable woman, with her lip at the child's ear, "you are one of those that must be a sacrifice—a whole sacrifice, what they called a burnt-offering. My best child, my dearest. Amy, I am going to kill you, and I love you best."

"Mother!"

She thought her mother had gone mad; nothing else could explain it. She thought she was about to be literally killed, there where she sat, at the feet of her natural protector. The last supreme passion of love and valour came into Amy's heart. She did not shrink a hair's-breadth, but held up her white face ready to endure all things. She looked up like Isaac, without a thought of self-defence.

"You think I am mad," said Mrs Scudamore. "Oh, if I were but mad! Amy, there is only one that can do it. You can save us all from disgrace and ruin. You can save his living to Charlie, my honour to me, an honest name to yourself and the rest. Without you we are outcasts, nameless, houseless. Amy, nothing we have is ours, unless you will pay the price. Amy, everything rests on you."

"Nameless—houseless? our honour—all we have? Oh, what do you mean?—what do you mean?" cried Amy. "Mother, if I am to do this, I ought to know, at least."

"That is the worst," she cried. "You must do it, and you must not know. Oh, if I could die and spare you! but my dying would do no good. It is only you, only you. Amy, this is what I have to ask of you, my own. To sacrifice yourself for your family—to save us at the cost of yourself—without knowing why. Oh, my child, can you do it? will you do it, without knowing why?"

Amy was little more than a child. She had all a child's sublime confidence in her natural guides; she had not begun to think of any rights of her own; and she was full of that intense submission of innocence which makes a child's deathbed, a child's martyrdom, so rapturous and so wonderful. She said, with her white lips, "I have always obeyed you, mamma. I will do whatever you say now."

But she had to be carried to her room insensible, and laid on her bed like a marble figure, like one dead, when she heard what the nature of the sacrifice was.

CHAPTER VIII.

Things went on badly enough at Scudamore that autumn. Amy consented to the sacrifice, as her mother knew she would. And Mr Tom Furness became a constant guest. It was an arrangement over which Mrs Thomas shook her head, and against which she had protested, but in vain, to both the mother and the lover; but he and she were both steadfast. Mrs Scudamore was almost more feverishly anxious than he to conclude the matter. But Charlie had not yet come home, and the whole household regarded his arrival with a certain vague apprehension. He would soon be twenty-one. He knew nothing of the mystery which oppressed all the rest of the house, and the chances were that Mr Furness would be very far from gaining his approbation. Neither had Mrs Scudamore been able to screw her courage to the point of consulting the lawyer on the subject. She had asked Mr Pilgrim to come to Scudamore at Christmas, when Charlie would be at home, and then she had said to herself the struggle would be made once for all. She lived in a painful state of excitement, able to settle to nothing, trying to shut her eyes to the look of misery on Amy's white face, trying to be unconscious of her failing health and patient suffering. The girl had been crushed all at once by the sudden weight thrown upon her. She had yielded—what could she do else? but it had crushed her altogether. She had no training in suffering, no preparation to bear it, and she succumbed. She felt sure she was going to die—a certain solemnity of feeling came over her. She thought of herself as on the brink of the grave. What did it matter for a few weeks or a few months whether she was happy or miserable. She would be happy in heaven when the end came, and would have done her duty, and that end could not be far off.

Perhaps Amy was not entirely miserable in these thoughts. To die young, when your life has been but short, as hers had been, is not terrible. It is rather sweet to the imagination. She thought of it, and of the grave covered with violets, which would soon be hers, with a youthful exaltation of feeling, which was as much joy as grief. And she would have saved her family. She would be as Iphigenia, nay, almost as Christ himself. She would die, thus getting rid of all misery, and they would be saved. She wrote tender, sweet, religious letters to all her friends, telling them that "it was borne in upon her" that she was to die young. She wrote one heart-rending letter to poor Rex. She was kind to Tom Furness even, and very gentle, though she shrank from him; and she had made up her mind how she was to meet Charlie, how she was to say it was her own choice, how she was to refuse all relief from her engagement. It was all settled. The only thing that grieved her in her resigned, and, as it were, dying state, was that her mother avoided her, and could not bear to behold the sacrifice she had exacted. This was a little hard on poor Amy, but she accepted it like the rest. She made pictures to herself of her mother stealing out to weep over her grave, of how they would miss her in the house, of how they would say Amy liked this and that, and hold trifles sacred for her sake. All this was a pleasure to her, though it is so strange to say so; and on account of the gentle early death which was coming, she felt it possible to put up with her fate.

Charlie for his part had been absorbed in his college life, and had thought but little of home. He had received one indignant, enraged letter from Rex Bayard, which half amused, half annoyed him. In it Rex informed him that he had been accepted by Amy, but sent away by her mother. "You must be dreaming, or she must be out of her mind," Charlie had written back cheerfully in return; "but never mind, old fellow, have patience only till I get home again." He had no doubt whatever of being able to set everything right when he got home. Evidently things were at sixes and sevens there for want of him—so the young man thought; but when he got back —— And then Charlie forgot all about home, and made himself quite happy with his friends.

These three months were very dreary to all in the house. Furness went and came continually, and when he thought that Amy repelled him ever so little, he went and threatened her mother, and declared it would all come to nothing, and that she never meant her daughter to marry him. The whole house began to fear those visits. The servants complained, and Jasper gave warning. Even Woods would have done so, but that he was, he said, attached to the family, and meant to see this business out. Mrs Thomas wept and shook her head from the time Tom Furness entered the house till he left it. The children avoided him, for he teased them. And poor Amy tried to be kind to him. She was the only one at Scudamore who did not hate him. She tried to be kind, and would not allow herself to hate.

All this went on till Christmas; but it is impossible to tell with what sinking yet swelling hearts the women of the house looked forward to the arrivals which they expected. Charlie came one day and Mr Pilgrim came the next. Mr Tom Furness was there, to Charlie's immense astonishment. He sought his mother out the very first evening and remonstrated, "Why do you bring that fellow here? Aunt Thomas is very well, but I don't see that we are bound to be complaisant to her friends——"

"Don't let us speak of him now —to-morrow," Mrs Scudamore had said. "To-morrow I have something to tell you about him; but for heaven's sake be civil to-night!"

"If I do it will be a hard struggle, I can tell you," said Charlie; but yet he did restrain himself as well as he knew how, though the fellow's familiarity, his evident acquaintance with the house, and especially his tone to Amy, made her brother furious. And Amy looked like a ghost and kept out of his way. He was very uncomfortable, for he could not make it out. "Scudamore don't look a bit like itself — everything seems at sixes and sevens," he said to Aunt Thomas. She was the only one who was not changed, and the chief comfort he had.

Next day Mrs Scudamore called her son and the newly-arrived lawyer to the library, and told them her intentions about her daughter. If she had thrown a bombshell between them they could not have been more surprised. There was a terrible scene, Charlie and his mother defying each other mutually. "I will not allow it," he said. "And I have settled it all," she answered, with an appearance of calm. The lawyer tried to remonstrate, but it was in vain; and Amy was sent for, and with a face like death solemnly answered that it was of her own will that she was going to marry Mr Furness. "It is my own choice," she said,

crossing her hands on her breast. The men gazed at her with mingled awe and doubt. Her aspect was that of a martyr, but she smiled as she spoke. She would not give any one an excuse for interfering; no tear came to her eye, no quiver to her voice. "I shall die soon, and what will it matter?" she was saying to herself.

After this scene it may be supposed that life was not more pleasant at Scudamore. Charlie and his mother did not exchange a word for two or three days; and Furness obtruded his hateful presence upon her, asking for continual interviews, pressing for the marriage. Mrs Scudamore herself had been anxious to hasten it till now—but now she took fright, or was seized with sudden reluctance. Her child was so young; she was ailing and wanted care; and summer surely was soon enough. She resisted the last decision with feverish force. She would not fix the day. Amy, when appealed to, grew paler still, but said, "When they pleased;" and her mother struggled alone for delay. She had not an easy antagonist to meet; he had grown careless in his power over her—he began to address her roughly even in the presence of others, to warn her that she had better not provoke him, that the consequences might be such as she would not care to face. Her life became a burden to her in those dreadful days. She dared not order him to leave her house, as it was often on her lips to do. She dared not appeal to Charlie, or even permit him to suspect that this man whom she had chosen for her son-in-law was already her tyrant. She even, heaven help her, kept up the quarrel with her son that he might not find out the persecution to which she was exposed.

But one day this state of affairs came to an end. There had been a stormy discussion in the morning, and Mrs Scudamore, driven to her last resources, had promised a final answer in the afternoon. She was in the library once more, and her persecutor came in and joined her through the window which was open. It was one of those mild, warm, languid days which sometimes occur in the middle of winter, which people call unseasonable yet enjoy. There was an enormous fire as usual in the library, and the window had been opened in consequence. Tom Furness came in by it with his hands in his pockets and his hat on his head. If he condescended to remove the latter it was more for his own comfort than out of any respect to her. He began to speak almost before he got into the room,—"Now, look here," he said, "old lady — I hope you've made up your mind. I am not going to be kept hanging on like this, month after month. I've told you so. By Jove! I believe you want to leave me in the lurch after all."

"You have my word," said Mrs Scudamore, haughtily.

"Your word; oh, and a great deal of good that will do me! I want Amy's word,—do you understand? I want no more vague general promises. If your part of the bargain is not to be kept, neither shall mine. Would you like to hear once more, just to leave no manner of doubt on the subject, what I can do——"

"You will drive me mad," said Mrs Scudamore. "How dare you stand and threaten me thus at the open window; how can you tell who may hear you? and do you know, if you are overheard—if this slander is once spoken in anybody's ears but mine, that you lose all your power?"

He turned his back to the window with a careless laugh. "Not

much fear of any one hearing," he said. "We are not such agreeable society that people should follow us about to listen. But just look here. You know what will happen if I choose to speak. You know you have no more right to be mistress here than your housekeeper has; you know you are not fit company for decent folks, and your children aint Scudamores any more than I am. You may thank an honest man for taking a girl without a name into his house. You know as well as I——"

He had gone so far as this without looking at her. Now, quite suddenly, she caught his eye, and made him start. She was standing with her lips apart, the breath, as it were, frozen between them, as if she had tried to cry out and could not—her eyes dilated, fixed on something behind him, and deep lines of anguish about her mouth. Her hands were half uplifted in wonder, or appealing to some one, he could not tell which. In that attitude of agony, with pain written deep all over her, she stood as if petrified, unable to move—a figure of ice or stone.

He was frightened by her aspect, though he did not understand it; and, at the same time, he became aware that something had darkened the air behind him; he turned round hastily to see what it meant.

This was what it meant. He had but begun to speak when Mrs Scudamore, lifting up her eyes, saw a shadow behind him. Then, dumb with horror, she had seen Charlie suddenly appear at the window. He stood still, and she in her misery could not move, she could not cry out. She stood and gazed wildly at him, paralysed with boundless and hopeless despair.

"You have been listening, have you?" said Tom Furness, with a sharp laugh. "Well, you have been wondering what attraction I had. Now you know."

He had no time to say another word. Before he knew he was so much as threatened, he flew out of the window doubled together like a piece of goods.

"There's for insulting my mother," the young fellow shouted at the top of his voice; "and there's for Amy, and there's for myself. Did you think you could frighten me?"

"Oh, Charlie!" Mrs Scudamore cried, wildly. But Charlie paid no heed. He took up Furness's hat and tossed it after him. He closed the window loudly with a certain violence. He was trembling with excitement and the thrill of this discovery, and he had not spoken to his mother for three days before.

"Now tell me what it is," he said, peremptorily. "This fellow has bullied and frightened you. I suppose there must be something to build upon. What is it? You must tell me now."

Mrs Scudamore wavered for a moment. How could she tell him? She had been almost glad in her terror to see her persecutor flying thus out of her sight. She had been proud of her boy and his young vehemence and indignation; but now once more she was struck dumb; a great blinding horror came over her. Tell him her own shame and his! She could not do it. It would be better even, she felt, that he should hear it from Furness—from any one rather than herself.

"I cannot—I cannot!" she cried, covering her face with her hands. Was it indeed all over now? or could she make one effort still—one mad attempt to regain the friendship of her persecutor? "You don't know what you have done," she cried, wildly; "he is the best friend we have. Let me speak to him, Charlie. Say you are sorry, for the love of God!"

"I think it must be for the love of the devil," he said, sadly, "who only could make divisions among us like this. Mother, can you trust me so little? With my will you shall never speak to that miserable rascal again. Tell me, your son."

"I cannot—I cannot!" she cried, raising a ghastly face to his, in which supplication and despair were blended. Charlie was half crazed with the obstinate mystery that wrapped her round. He did not stop to think; he rushed out of the room to solve it in his own way. Even this was a relief to his mother. She sat supporting her deathlike face in her hands, with her eyes fixed on the door by which he had disappeared. It was over: he would know all; but at least not from her. There was a pause in which the whole world seemed to stand still. She did not breathe. Silence, awful as fate, was in her miserable heart, and in the house which was hers no longer, which she must leave in ruin and shame.

But she kept her senses when the door opened, though the figures which came in were as ghosts to her. Even then, in her stupor, it gave her a pang to see her boy leading that woman — *that* woman, through whom, she said to herself, it had all come. Mrs Thomas was crying, as usual—crying! She wondered vaguely how any one could weep at such a moment;—a child does it for some trifle; but now——

"I will say nothing till she gives me leave," said Mrs Thomas, among her sobs. "If I was wronged once, it is she who is wronged now. Oh, she's bitterly wronged — cruelly wronged! If my dying could have saved her, I think I could have killed myself; but it wouldn't, for Tom Furness knew. Oh, you poor soul! you are nearly dead of it. Give me leave to speak before it kills you!"

Other people had come into the room—other faces, it seemed, in a cloud; and Amy, who stole behind Mrs Scudamore's chair, and put her arms round her, supporting her—Amy, who was dying of it too, but without knowing what it was. Mrs Scudamore turned her white face towards the group, which she saw but vaguely through the mist that was gathering on her brain. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. She looked like Death embodied, but she resisted still. The excitement of the moment, however, had risen above all restraint; and either Mrs Thomas took those unspoken words for a permission, or she was swept out of herself by the emotion surrounding her.

"This is what it is," she said; "and I wish I had been dead—I wish my tongue had been torn out before I told it. Oh, children, curse me, or kill me, if you will. I was your father's lawful wife years before ever he saw her face."

"My father's wife!" It was Charlie who spoke, with white lips. He turned and looked round him with a gaze of bewildered despair. He did not know what he had fancied; but it was not anything like this. Then his eye fell on his mother, whose face was fixed on his; not her eyes only, for these were hollow, and strained, and almost sightless. He threw from him the hand of the other woman, which he had been mechanically holding, and rushed to her who had the best right to his support. She was sitting bolt upright, in an attitude which it was terrible to see. He went behind her, in vague terror, and drew her back to lean upon him. The other Mrs Scudamore, the legal possessor of everything,

the woman whose presence filled this house with shame, threw herself on her knees at her rival's feet, looking up at her with clasped hands, with tears streaming down her cheeks——

It was at this moment that Mr Tom Furness, having picked himself up, swaggered in, meaning to have his revenge of all who had injured him. "Oh, here you all are!" he exclaimed; and then stopped short, struck dumb by the sight he saw.

At the sound of his voice everybody started. It introduced a new element, and for the moment distracted their thoughts from the chief sufferer. Amy clasped her mother closer, and burst into a flood of blessed tears.

For she was free. The catastrophe was terrible, incomprehensible; but she was free. Whatever the fact might be, it could not be worse—it could not be so hideous as the price she had been about to pay. She kissed her mother's cap and her dress, in this sweet change of sorrow, with a passion of relief and enthusiasm. "Oh, mother dear, we will help you to bear it," she said. "Whatever it is, we will bear it together. Whatever it is, it cannot be so bad, mother darling!" Then Amy stopped, and uttered a sharp and terrible cry: "Mother, oh mother! Charlie, look!"

She sat there leaning back upon her son, with her daughter's arms around her, with the woman at her feet who had brought her to shame. Her face of marble looked out from the group, confronting the assailants of her honour. Dumbly she faced them still though she saw them not, shielding her children. Even Tom Furness gave a cry of horror. The look of those great sightless eyes of anguish never went out of his soul. She was dead. She had fought her battle to the end, and redeemed her pledge—at the risk of her life—to the peril of her soul.

The sway she had over them had been so great that, up to the moment when Amy made that terrible discovery, all the others who were gazing at her had been too much absorbed with the thought of what she was about to do or say, to find out what had happened. Now they all saw it at the same moment. At the climax of her long suffering, still facing her enemies, having no refuge open to her, she had died—in harness as it were, with her arms in her hands.

It would be vain to dwell longer upon such a scene. The young people left Scudamore that night, carrying their dead with them, and went to a little house not far off which had belonged to her in her maiden right—a little lonely half-ruinous place, but not too dreary for them in their sorrow. There they buried her, half the county coming in wrath, and grief, and indignation beyond words, to the funeral. And then they began the strangest desolate new life.

But this life was not long desolate; and with all their efforts they could not, after the first pangs were over, make it as miserable as they felt it ought to have been. For the news brought Rex Bayard home from Italy, where he had been trying to learn patience, with lightning or at least with express speed. And by the time the violets began to bloom over her mother's grave, Amy, in sorrow but in gladness, married him, all her friends persuading her to a step so wise and so happy, and her little sisters thus found another home. "As for me it does not matter," Charlie said; for the blow had fallen upon him with tremendous force. He wanted to go away

to the end of the world, anywhere, only to forget and to be forgotten. His heart, he thought, was broken; his head he could never hold up again. So he believed; but he had the remnants of his mother's property to collect and look after. And he was but twenty-one; and Rex Bayard stood by him like a true brother—so that by degrees he reconciled himself to the bitterness of his fate. Poor Mrs Scudamore, now legally acknowledged and abandoned by everybody in her undesired grandeur, made overtures to the young people which I am sorry to say they did not respond to. But at her death she too had justice done to her, even by those whom she had so unwillingly injured. She left Scudamore Park and all the property over which she had any power to Charlie. Tom Furness brought a lawsuit against him, propounded another will, and spent a great deal of money in furious and ineffectual litigation. But all in vain. His aunt had escaped from him at the last moment into better hands. She left a letter for Charlie, imploring him not to refuse his just inheritance, and telling him that she was convinced his father, having abandoned her for so long, had no doubt that she was dead. This was a kind of balm to the wounds of the family, though it was one which implied a villany almost as great as that which had killed their mother. But the injury intended to be done to the submissive creature whom they had known as Aunt Thomas, did not affect them like the other. So that in ten years the great sea of human life had closed over this tragedy, as the other sea which is less terrible closes over a wrecked ship; and Charles Scudamore reigned peacefully in the home which had been nearly lost to him, and sat in his father's seat. Thus Time made it up to the survivors, but not till the first victim—the offering for sin—had been slain.