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THE STORY OF VALENTINE

AND HIS BROTHER

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TO
MY ETON BOYS

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THE STORY OF VALENTINE; AND HIS BROTHER.

CHAPTER I.

Two ladies were seated in a great dim room, partially illuminated by fits and starts with gleams of firelight. The large windows showed a pale dark sky, in which twilight was giving place to night, and across which the brown branches of the trees, rough with the buds of March, tossed wildly in a hurricane of wind, burdened with intermittent blasts of rain—rain that dashed fiercely against the windows a handful at a time, then ceased till some new cloud was ready to discharge its angry shower. Something fiercely personal and furious was in the storm. It looked and felt like something not

addressed to the world in general, but aimed individually by some angry spirit of the elements at the people who lived here high up above the brawling Esk amid the brown wintry woods at Rossraig House.

The drawing-room was large, lofty, and full of old-fashioned furniture which would have enchanted a connoisseur. The two ladies, who were its only occupants, were scarcely discernible at first, though the firelight, gleaming about among the still life, caught here a green reflection from a wonderful cabinet of rarest Vernis-Martin, and there entangled itself in the bevelled sides of a strange old mirror, used to reflecting wizards. It was more easy to make out these accessories of existence than it was to identify the two voices which occupied and reigned over this still and darkling chamber. They were in one corner of the room near the fire; one, the prevailing voice, was soft but strong, with the vigour in it of mature life, just roughened here and there by a touch of age, which gave it an *aigre-doux* of distinct character—and came from an ample dark shadow in a great chair, turned towards the fire. The other, which gave forth only monosyllabic sounds of assent or wonder, sweet

and tender, but feeble, belonged to a smaller person near the first, and facing her—whose countenance, turned towards the window, showed like a pale whiteness in the dark. This was the central light, the highest tone in the picture, except the pale gleaming of the sky from the windows, and the fitful red flash from the fire.

“Richard’s story,” said the stronger voice, “cannot be supposed to be very interesting to any but ourselves. If it is for mere curiosity, Mary——”

“Curiosity!”—there was a tone of reproach in the soft repetition—a reproach and an appeal.

“That was unkind. I did not mean it. I meant interest, friendship; but Mary, Mary, friendship is weak, and interest a poor bit feeble echo of feeling to them that are all bound up in one life as I have been in my son!”

Here there was a little pause, and then the younger voice answered, faltering, “I have known him all my life. I have seen few men but him——”

This was preliminary to the story which old Lady Eskside had begun to tell when I opened to you, gentle reader, the door of this great dim room. She was deep in it by the time

we shadows entered, among the shadows, to listen. And most of us can figure to ourselves what a mother would be likely to say of her only child—the child not of her youth even, which puts a kind of equality between mother and son, and brings them together, as it were, upon one table-land of life, sooner or later—but the child of her mature age, and therefore always a child to her. What she said of him I need not repeat. The reader will make acquaintance with the man for himself, a different creature from the man as seen through his mother's eyes.

“Perhaps it is not a thing to remark to you,” said the old lady, who was old enough not only to retain a Scotch accent, but to use occasionally a word peculiar to the north,—“but, Mary, you are not a bit girlyie unacquainted with the world. You will recognise Richard in this that he married the woman.—God forgive me! I’m sorely tempted to think sometimes that vice is less deadly for this world than virtue. You know what most men would have done—they would have taken the girl as they would have gathered a flower; and neither she nor one belonging to her knew better, nor expected better; but my Richard, God bless him! was a

fool, Mary,—he was a fool ! His father says so, and what can I say different ? He has always been a fool in that way, thank God ! He married the woman ; and then he sent to me when it was all over and nothing could be mended, to come and see, for God's sake, what was to be done."

"And you went ?"

"I went after a struggle ; I could not thole the creature,—the very name of her was odious to me. It was a ridiculous name—a play-actor's name. They called her *Altamira*. What do you think of that for Richard's wife ? I thought she was some shopkeeper's daughter — some scheming, dressing, half-bred woman that had made her plan to marry him because his father was Lord Eskside—though, heaven knows, it's a poor enough lordship when all's said. Perhaps we women are too apt to take that view ; naturally, when such a thing happens, we think it the woman's fault—the woman's doing. But, Mary, Mary, when I saw the girl——"

"You freed her," said the other, with a sighing sound in her low voice, "from the blame ?"

"The blame !" cried the old lady, with some impatience ; then, sinking her voice low, she

said hurriedly—"the girl was no shopkeeper's daughter, not even a cottage lass, nor out of a ploughman's house, or a weaver's house, or the lowest you can think. She was out of no house at all—she was a tramp. Mary, do you know what that means?—a creature hanging about the roads and fields, at fairs and races, wherever the roughest, and the wildest, and the most miserable congregate—that was Richard's wife——"

"Oh, Lady Eskside !"

"You may well say, Oh ! As for me, if I had ever fainted in my life I would have fainted then. She was a beautiful creature ; but the sight of her brought a sickness to my very heart. She was like a wild hunted thing, frightened to death for me and everything that was civilised—looking out of her wild black eyes to see how she could escape—shrinking back not to be touched as if she thought I would give her a blow. Blame ! you might as well blame a deer that it let itself be taken, poor, bonnie, panting, senseless thing ! I blamed nobody, Mary ; I was just appalled, neither more nor less, at the man's folly that had done it. Think of a son of mine having so little command of himself ! The madness of it ! for it was no question of making a

lady of her, a woman that could take his mother's place. She had to be tamed first out of her gipsy ways, tamed like a wild beast, and taught to live in a house, and wear decent clothes as she had never done in her life."

A low cry of dismay and wonder came from the listener's lips, and a strange pang which nobody knew of went through her heart—a pang indescribable, mingled of misery, humiliation, and a kind of guilty and bitter pride; guilty, though she was innocent enough. This was his choice, she said to herself; and that sharp and stinging contempt—more painful to herself than to the object of it—which a woman sometimes permits herself to feel for a man who has slighted her, shot through the gentlest soul in the world.

"I cannot tell you," said Lady Eskside, her voice sinking low so that her companion had to stoop forward to hear, "all that I went through. She broke away from us, and got back to her people more than once. Our ways were misery and bondage to her. At first she had to be dressed like a child—watched like a child. Her husband had no influence over her, and she was frightened for me: the moment she was out of

our sight her whole mind was busy with schemes to get away."

"But what reason—what motive——" began the other, faltering.

"None," said Lady Eskside. "Listen, Mary; there was one thing. She was good, as people call good; there was no wickedness in her, as a woman. What wife meant, in any higher sense, she was ignorant of; but there was no harm—no harm. Always remember this, whatever may happen, and whatever you may hear. I say it—Richard's mother—that can have no motive to shield her. She wanted her freedom, nothing more. She was not an ill woman; nothing bad—in that way—was in her head. She would have put her knife into the man who spoke lightly to her, as soon as look at him. She was proud in her way of being Richard's wife. She felt the difference it made between her and others. But she was like a wild animal, or a bird. She would not be caged, and there was too deep an ignorance in her to learn. There was no foundation to build upon—neither ambition, nor pride, nor any feeling that the like of us expect to find."

"And was there no—love?" The voice that

made this inquiry trembled and had a thrill in it of feeling so mingled as to be indescribable—bitterness, wonder, pity, and a sense of contrast more overwhelming than all.

Lady Eskside did not reply at once. “Often and often I’ve asked myself that question,” she said at length; “Was there love? How can I tell? There are different kinds of love, Mary. You and I even would love very differently, let alone you and her. With you there would be no thought of anything but of the person loved——”

“I am not at all in question, Lady Eskside,” said the other, with the strangest delicate haughtiness.

“I beg your pardon,” said the old lady, quickly. “You are right, my dear; there is no question of you. But still there are different kinds of love. Some think only of the person loved, as I said; but some are roused up into a kind of fierce consciousness of themselves through their very love. They feel their own individuality not less but more in consequence of it. This was that poor creature’s way. Mixed with her wild cravings for the freedom she had been used to, and the wild outdoor life she had

been used to, I think she had a sort of half-crazy feeling how unlike Richard she was ; and this became all the stronger when I came. My dear," said Lady Eskside, suddenly, "the most untrained woman feels what another woman thinks of her far more than she feels any man's criticism. I have thought and thought on this for years, and perhaps I put my own thoughts into her mind ; but I cannot help fancying that sometimes, though she did not understand me in the least, poor thing, she caught a glimpse of herself through my eyes ; and what with this and what with her longing to be out of doors, she grew desperate, and then she ran away."

The listener made no reply. I don't think she cared to hear any excuse made for the wild woman who was Richard's wife—whom Richard had chosen instead of any other, and who had thus justified his choice.

"I stayed as long as I could, and tried all I could," Lady Eskside continued, "and then there came a time when I felt it was better for me to go away. I told Richard so, and I advised him to take her abroad—where she would have nobody to fly to. And so he did, and wandered about with her everywhere. I can't

think but what she must have made some advances, in sense, at least, while they were so much together; but it takes a long time to tame a savage; it takes a long time to graft a new stock upon a wild tree."

"And have you never seen her again?"

"I saw her when her children were born. She was so far tamed then by weakness, and by the natural restraint of the circumstances," said Lady Eskside, "that I hoped she might be changed altogether. And she would talk a little—not so much as that one could find out how her mind was working—but yet a little—enough to swear by; and her voice was changed. It lost its wild sound and took finer modulations. You know how particular Richard always was in all his ways—you remember his voice."

The other drew back her chair a little. Somehow the sudden reference struck her like an arrow through and through. It was not her fault. For years she had been trying to think of Richard—as she ought to think—not too much, nor too kindly, but with gentle indifference and friendship; no, not indifference; old long friendship which may be permitted to re-

member. "Like his sister," she had often said to herself. But somehow these sudden words, "You remember his voice," struck poor Mary at unawares. They brought her down to the very ground. She tried with a choking sobbing sensation to get out the word "Yes." Remember it! She seemed to hear it and nothing else, till her head ached and swam, and there was a ringing in her ears.

"Ah!" Lady Eskside paused, with a wondering sense that something was going on in the dark more potent than mere interest in her story. But after a while, as even a story which is one's own takes a stronger hold upon one than the emotion of another, however deep—she recommenced, going back to herself. "Her voice had changed wonderfully. She spoke almost like an educated person—that gave me great hope. I thought, what with the children and what with this opening of new life in herself, that everything would be changed; and my heart was moved to her. When I left I kissed the children, and for the first time I kissed her; and I promised to send her a nurse, an excellent nurse I knew of, and came home quite happy. You recollect my coming home, and

how proud I was of the twins—the darlings! Oh, Mary, Mary! little did I know——”

Mary put out her hand and took that of her old friend. She was too much moved herself to say anything. From this point she had a faint knowledge of the story, as everybody had.

“The next I heard was that she had disappeared,” said the old lady;—“disappeared totally, taking the babies with her. Richard went with me so far on my way home, and while he was absent his wife disappeared. There is no other word for it; she disappeared, and no one has ever heard of her again. Oh, Mary, what news for us all! There had been some gipsy wanderers, some of her own class, about the place, we found out afterwards; and whether they carried her off, or she went of her own will, nobody knows. Sometimes I have thought she must have been carried away, but then they would not have taken the children; and sometimes I have blamed myself, and thought that what I said about the nurse may have frightened her—God knows. We sought her everywhere, Mary, as you may suppose. I went myself up and down over all the country, and Richard went to America, and I cannot tell you where. We

had the police employed, and every sort of person we could think of ; but we have never heard any more of her to this day."

"Nor of the children?" said Mary, drawing closer and holding still more tenderly her old friend's hand.

"Nor of the children ; two bonnie boys—oh, my dear, two lovely boys!" cried the old lady, with a sob. "I never saw such sweet children. You may fancy all I had said to my old lord when I came home, about them : one was to have my property, such as it is, and the other the Eskside lands. A single heir would have been better, Lord Eskside said, in his way, you know—but he was as proud as I was. Two boys!—no fear of the old house dying out. We began to plan out the new wing we had always thought of building. Oh, Mary, now you will understand how I can never laugh when the gentlemen make a joke with my poor old lord about the new wing!"

"Dear Lady Eskside! but you must not—you must not break down—for his sake."

"No, I must never break down ; and if I would I could not," said the old lady ; "it's no my nature. I must keep up. I must stand firm

till my last day. But, Mary, though it is my nature, I have to pay for it, as one pays for everything. Oh, the weary nights I have lain awake thinking I heard her wandering round the house, thinking I heard her at the window trying to get in. She knew nothing about Rossraig—nothing; but, strange enough, I always think of her coming here. When the wind's blowing as it blows to-night, when the leaves are falling in autumn—oh, Mary, have you never heard a sound like steps going round and round the house?"

"It is only the leaves falling," said Mary; and then she added, suddenly, "I have heard everything that the heart hears."

"And that's more than the ears ever hear tell of," said the old lady; "but oh, to live for years and never hear that without thinking it may be them—never to see beggar bairns on a roadside without thinking it may be them—to go watching and waiting and wondering through your life, starting at every noise, trembling at every sudden sound—God help us! what is that—what is that?" she cried, suddenly rising to her feet.

"Oh, Lady Eskside!" cried the other, rising too, and grasping her hand with a nervous

shudder ; “ it is nothing — nothing but the storm.”

The old lady dropped heavily into her seat again. “ Sometimes I cannot bear it,” she cried — “ sometimes I cannot bear it ! I get half-crazed at every sound.”

“ The wind is very high,” said Mary, soothing her, “ and the Esk is running wild over the linn, and the storm tearing the trees. It must be the equinoctial gales. If you only heard them as we do, roaring and raging over the sea ! ”

For a few minutes the two ladies sat quite still holding each other's hands. The storm outside was wild enough to impose silence upon those within. The trees were tossing about as if in an agony, against the pale whiteness of the sky ; now and then a deeper note would come into the tumult of sound, the hoarse roar of the river, which grew rapidly into a torrent at the foot of the hill ; and then the wind would rush, like the avenging spirit through the bleeding wood in the *Inferno*, tearing off the limbs of the trees, which shrieked and cried in unavailing torment. The last lingering rays of twilight had disappeared out of the sky, the last gleams of firelight were sinking too—even the mirrors had sunk out of

sight upon the walls, and nothing but the large windows filled with the mournful pallor of the sky, and Mary's pale face, a spot of congenial whiteness, were even partially visible. After this story, and while they sat silent, conscious of the strange stillness within, and commotion outside, was it their imaginations that represented to them another sound striking into the roar of the storm? Lady Eskside did not start again as she had done before, but she grasped Mary's hand tightly; while Mary, for her part, sat bolt-upright in her chair, thinking to herself that it must be imagination, that it was a mere trick of excitement which filled her ears with echoes of fanciful knockings. Who could be knocking at this hour? or how could such a sound be heard even, in the onslaught of the storm?

What was it? what could it be? Now, was that the forlorn peal of a bell? and now a gust of cold air as if the door in opening had admitted the storm in person, which swept through the house like a mountain stream; and now a wild dash and clang as if the same door had closed again, shaking the very walls. Tighter and tighter Lady Eskside grasped Mary's hand. No words passed between them, except a faint "It

is nothing—it is fancy,” which came from Mary’s lips unawares, and under her breath. Was it fancy ? Was it some curious reverberation through the air of the countless anxieties which the old lady had hushed in her mind for years, but which until now she had never betrayed ? For the next few minutes they heard their own hearts beating loud over the storm ; and then there came another sound ludicrous in its methodical calm, which startled them still more than the sounds they had supposed themselves to hear.

“Something has happened, Mary !” cried Lady Eskside, withdrawing her grasp and wringing her hands. “Something has happened ! some one has arrived and Harding is coming to let us know.”

“He is coming to light the lamps,” said Mary, making one desperate effort to throw off the superstitious impression ; and she laughed. The laugh sounded something terrible, full of mockery and contempt in the midst of the always resounding storm ; the echo of it seemed to breathe all round the room, calling forth diabolical echoes. In the midst of these Harding came solemnly into the room. He was an elderly man, who had

been many years in the house, and was deeply impressed by the solemnity of his own position. He came in without any light, and stood invisible at the door, another voice and nothing else. "My lady," said Harding, solemnly, "something has happened—something as is very mysterious and we can't understand. Would it be a great trouble to your ladyship if we was to ask you to come down-stairs?"

She had sprung up nervously at his first words. She rushed now before him down-stairs—unable to reply, unable to question—as light as a girl of twenty, though three times that age; followed trembling by the other, who was not half so old, nor half so full of life as she.

CHAPTER II.

BEFORE I can fully explain what happened next, and what Lady Eskside saw when she rushed down-stairs, I am obliged to turn back for some hours to the afternoon of this day, and for some miles, to a scene of a very different kind—a scene so opposed to the other in all its circumstances, that it is strange to realise the close connection between them ; though the two were so closely linked together as to be incomprehensible, one without the other. The village of Lasswade lies on the Esk, at a lower elevation, and nearer to the sea, than Rossraig House. It was, at the time I speak of, a much more primitive village than it is now, when so many cottages of gentility have sprung up around as to make it almost a suburb of Edinburgh. It consisted of little more than one street, which straggled off into the country at one end, and

at the other dragged itself across the bridge to conclude in a humble postscript of an additional street on the other side of the water. The Esk, which ran through it, was not beautiful at this point. It was somewhat dirty, and encumbered with the overflowings of the village ; but yet the groups of clustered houses on either side of the river, framed in by the high wooded banks which you could see rising in the distance on either hand as you stood on the bridge, and with the fresh green fringe of rich and silent country beyond, was a pretty sight. There was no railway near at that time, but a coach ran regularly on all lawful days, from the corner of Princes Street to the Bull Inn in the High Street, and conveyed its few passengers with a regularity and steadiness quite satisfactory to those leisurely people. But the aspect of Lasswade, though considered cheerful and inviting by its Edinburgh visitors, was very dreary on this March afternoon, when the wind blew a hurricane, and the rain now and then came down in torrents. Between these storm-showers there came "blinks" of intermission, when people who loved to see what was going on came forth to their doors, after the fashion of the place ; and it was this humble sprinkling of

the population which, as many of them remembered later, witnessed the passage through the town of a still humbler visitor, a poor woman who arrived shortly before the darkening in a miserable condition enough. Two small boys accompanied her, wet through, splashed with mud, and crying with weariness, and with the buffets of the wind which blew them off their little legs. The woman was tall, wrapt in an old shawl of that indescribable no-colour of which the vagrant class has a monopoly. Her damp clothes hung limp about her, her poor bonnet, wet and limp like her dress, clung to the dark locks which here and there escaped from its cover. She was a stranger, as her weary and bewildered looks testified, and the children who clung to her on either side seemed to confuse her still more by their whimpering weariness. This melancholy little group came over the bridge in one of the pauses of the storm, when a few people had strayed out to their doors to relieve the *ennui* of the wet and stormy day by a little gossip at least. Chief among these were Merran Miller, the blacksmith's wife, a woman too fond of hearing everything that was going on (people said), for the comfort of her house; and the old

postman, Simon Simson, whose work was over for the day. When the stranger approached this knot of gossips, and asked the way to Jean Macfarlane's inn, they all answered at once, glad of an event, with directions on the one hand and remonstrances on the other. Old Simon pointed out the way with officious haste ; but Mrs Miller stopped the wayfarer to tender advice.

"My woman," she said, "I would not go to Jean Macfarlane's if I were you. You're wet and cauld, but a wee piece further would make little difference. John Todd at the Loanhead is real respectable, and would give you lodgings just as cheap."

"Hoots, woman ! Jean Macfarlane will do her nae harm," cried old Simon, interrupted in the midst of his instructions.

"It's no a house for an honest woman," said the smith's wife, "or for little bairns, poor things. They maun have travelled far the day to be so wet and so draiglet. Bide a moment and I'll give them a piece."

"Where did you say it was ?" said the stranger, vacantly, paying no regard to this benevolent offer ; and she went on with her children,

following the old man's directions, without waiting for Mrs Miller's return with the "piece" which she had gone into her house to seek. This of itself was a strange thing to happen with any one so poor and miserable, and impressed the fact of her appearance upon the mind of the smith's wife, mortified by such a tacit refusal of her kindness. "She maun be a foreigner—or a fool," said Merran, standing with the rejected piece in her hand, and watching the retreating figures as they approached Jean Macfarlane's door.

Jean Macfarlane's house was worse spoken of than any other house in Lasswade. Every disturbance that happened in the tranquil place came from that centre of disorder and lawlessness; and to lodge there, or to propose lodging there, was of itself a tacit acknowledgment of vagrancy, or at least of an absence of that regard for other people's opinions which is the first step towards respectability. All the disreputable class of travellers who passed through so quiet a place found their way to it by instinct, and recommended others of their own kind. No one was too low for Jean Macfarlane. Pedlars of the lowest class, travelling tinkers, tramps without

even that pretence at occupation, frequented her house. She was herself the most dreaded personage in the village : a large, coarsely-handsome woman, loud-voiced and hot-tempered, the most terrible scold and “randy” on all Eskside. The minister, who had once attempted, simple soul, to bring her to reason, had been made to flee before her ; and the chief elder of the parish, Mr Mouter himself, was known to be in the habit of walking a mile round rather than pass her door, —a proceeding at which many people scoffed, asking, What was religion if it preserved you so little from the fear of man, or indeed of woman ? It may be supposed, then, that the poor woman who openly asked to be directed to Jean Macfarlane’s was as poor and as completely beyond all regard for the prejudices of society as it was possible to be. She went on without pause or hesitation, with an abstracted indifference of demeanour which perhaps was occasioned by mere weariness and discomfort, to the little tavern. The aspect of the house was not encouraging, neither was the reception which the traveller received. It was the last house in the village, dreary always, drearier than ever on this stormy afternoon. In the poor little par-

lour with its sanded floor, which was the better part of the establishment, two men, in wet coats, steaming from the rain, sat before the fire, talking loudly over their little measure of whisky, while Jean's voice rang through the house as she went and came, in a continuous and generally angry monologue. The new-comer came up to her timidly, holding back the children, and asked in a low tone for a room with a fire, where she and her children could rest. "A room to yoursel'!" said the mistress of the house; "set you up! are you better than other folk, that ye canna share and share alike? Sirs, this leddy's mista'en her road. She thinks she's at the Bull, where there's plenty o' parlours and private rooms, and naebody tae gang near them. Here's a' the private room you'll get in my hoose. Eh, woman, canna ye stop the mouth o' that girning brat? It's cauld and weet? I can see that: but it needna deave decent folk. Sit aff from the fire and let the woman in, ye twa drucken brutes of men! What do you want there, dribbling and drinking, and spending your wives' siller? Let the puir bit things get near the fire——"

"Jean, you're the greatest randy in the

parish !” said one of the men, getting up in time to save himself from the ignominious push aside which sent his companion, reeling, out of the way.

“And if I’m a randy, what are ye? drucken beasts that drink a’ night and sit owre the fire a’ day? Ca’ yourselves men!” cried Jean, with the freedom of perfect independence. “You can sit down here, wife, if this will do ye. Eh, what a handless thing that canna warm her wean’s feet, nor even gie’t a clat on the side of the head to make it haud its tongue! Ye’re a’ alike, a’ alike. Tea? Lord preserve us! what does the woman want with tea? A wee drap whisky would do ye ten times the good. Will I gie you what ye want? Oh ay, now you’ve gotten to your English I’ll gie ye what ye want—if ye’ll make thae little deevils stop their clatter, and no look such a draiglet idiot yoursel’.”

The men laughed uneasily, not knowing whether they might not divert the stream of Jean’s eloquence upon themselves, as she thus rated her other guest; but all took the despotism as a matter of course, and submitted meekly, without anything of the surprise or indignation with which the lodgers of a different kind of

hostelry would have regarded such an address. They were her customers, it is true, but at the same time they were her subjects. The new-comer scarcely, indeed, seemed to hear the abuse directed against her. She drew her little boys to the fire, took one on her knee and put her arm round the other, drying their little wet hands and faces with a corner of her shawl. They were subdued into quiet and comfort by the time that Mrs Macfarlane's servant-lass, Jess, brought them their tea, on a battered old iron tray, with coarse brown sugar, and a jug of skim-milk flanking the broken and smoky teapot. People in this poor woman's condition of life are not fastidious, and the miserable beverage warmed and comforted the humble travellers. After some time and much further parley with Jess—who was less peremptory and despotic than her mistress, though she, too, felt herself the superior of so poor a guest—the woman and her children were allowed to go upstairs into a dingy little bedroom,—a poor exchange for the fireside which, grimy as it was, had the comfort of warmth. Dear reader, your children or mine would (in our apprehensions at least) have died of such treatment; but the tramp-mother

is saved from anxieties which trouble mothers in other circumstances. She did all she could for them, and which of us can do more? She had no dry clothes to put on them, but she was not afraid of taking cold. She put them both on the bed, where they soon fell asleep, and covered them with a blanket;—they were damp but warm, and rest was heavenly to their poor little wearied limbs. They were asleep as soon as their little heads touched the pillow; and then she sat down by the beside—to think.

How many processes get called by that name which have little enough to do with thought! The mother of these children had lived up to this time an almost entirely physical existence—if it is possible to say this of one who had gone through passions and miseries, and acted upon impulses which had to do with the more ethereal part of her being. She had been moved to despair, which is (I humbly suppose, not knowing) a sensation beyond the reach of any animal, save man; but never in all her life had she been moved before by a tremendous moral impulse, against her own will, and in contradiction to all that she believed to be for her own good and happiness. At other times she had eased the

pain in her breast by sudden resolutions, sudden actions, all more or less like the instincts of an animal, to get rid of some burden or trouble which oppressed her. But somehow, she could not tell how, an entirely new tide had set in, mysterious and unaccountable, in her being. She had been driven by an impulse which she hated, which she resisted, which made her miserable, to do a certain act which her wild and uninstructed mind took to be justice. Long she had struggled against it, but gradually it had grown until it became too much for her, and had driven her at last to the verge of an act which would make her miserable, yet would be *right*. What a wonderful moral revolution had been worked in a creature so untaught as to seem without any moral nature at all, before things came to this pass, I need not say. And now she sat down, as she thought—to think; not to think whether she would do it, but—which it was to be? Her mind was wildly made up, after many a conflict, to submit to the wild law of justice which had seized upon her against her will. She was about to give up, to “them that had the right to it,” one of her children. What she had to decide now was—which was it to be?

I do not believe that a woman ever sullied by vice would have been capable of the moral impression to which this woman had been made subject. I think that the natural consciousness (rather than conscience) of the vicious, coincides curiously with common law in this respect,—giving, with a bitterness of natural scorn, upon which conventional interpretations throw the aspect of a privilege and advantage, no fatherhood to the vicious man, and but one parent to the child of shame. Purity alone recognises the right on both sides; though law stops short with insolent opposition to nature, and robs the virtuous woman as it robs, justly, the vicious man. How long it was before it dawned upon the woman of whom I speak, in the confusion of her uninstructed thoughts, in the bewildered silence of her ignorant soul, that she had robbed the father of her children in taking both of them, I cannot tell; nor how long in her absolute solitude, with no one to counsel or even to understand what was in her mind, she fought against the idea; but at last it had become too strong for her. To my thinking there could be no such unanswerable argument to prove that she had remained an uncontaminated wife; and now the

long-debated question had come to its hardest point, its most limited compass—which was she to give and which to keep, of the two who were all in all to her? Which was she to give away?

Poor soul! she had done much that was very foolish, and much that was wrong (but that because she knew no better) in her life. She had been a trouble to many better people than herself. She had spoiled one other existence as well as her own, and thrown a cloud upon several lives—all without knowing much what she was doing,—without meaning it—out of ignorance. Now here she sat, absolute arbitress of two lives more, able to determine their course almost as she pleased, yet as ignorant as ever—as little aware of the real character of her responsibility. If ever woman merited pity, this poor woman did—not only to give up one of her children, but to choose which to give up. Her brain, so dull, yet so keen as it was, became, as it were, suffused with a mist of pain; her head grew giddy, a film came before her eyes; a sense of the intolerable overwhelmed her—that terrible sensation which makes your very being reel like a drunken thing, the sense that you cannot bear that which you know you must bear, whatever

happens. She put down her throbbing head into her hands. To keep silent for that terrible moment—not to cry out and writhe, as this sword went through her heart, was all that she could do.

She was a tall young woman, with a fine, elastic, well-developed figure, looking about thirty, but not so old. Her features were very fine and regular: her great, restless, unquiet, dark eyes flashed out of deep caverns, which seemed to have been hollowed out by pain or passion rather than by time. Any delicacy of complexion or youthful bloom which she had ever possessed must have been long gone, for her skin was burned to one uniform tint of reddish brown—the colour of exposure, of health and vigour, but of that vigour and health which are purchased by all the severities of an outdoor life. No one could see her once without looking again, without wondering over so much beauty accompanied by so little attractiveness. She had vagrant written in every line of her fine form and miserable dress; but notwithstanding there was that in her abstract look, always busy with something else than the thing immediately before her—in a certain careless calm of manner, and

indifference to all surrounding her, which, I think, would have made the most abandoned of men hesitate ere he offered any rudeness to this strange vagrant. She had a wedding-ring on her finger—that was no great matter, for it is easy to show to the world that ensign of respectability ; but there was something more trustworthy in her look and presence, the passionless abstraction of her air. In her rough dress, with her outdoor look, her hard hands, her strange beauty scarcely on the wane, she was protected from every shadow of insult by the stony purity of her looks. Such a woman might be miserable enough, but wanton never.

There were dreary red curtains half drawn over the window, and the dingy blind was partially drawn down, leaving little light in the miserable room, even had the sky been bright ; and it was now darkening towards night. It was the physical cold, I think—that discomfort which always makes itself doubly felt when the mind is weighed down with trouble—which roused her to the sense that what she had to do must be done quickly. She rose up and wandered, tottering, round and round the bed—first to one side, then to the other, asking herself that

heart-rending question, Which? The children lay there in the pretty grace of childish *abandon*. One little fellow had kicked off unawares his muddy boot, which fell to the ground, and startled her so that she put her hands to her panting side, and did not recover the shock for some moments. He was the fair child of the two, and lay like a little white angel with his dimpled hands stretched above his head in the perfect grace of infant sleep. The other was almost as dark as his brother was fair; his black curly locks were ruffled up from his bold forehead, his little arms folded on his breast, his rose-mouth shut close with unconscious resoluteness—though it might be but the mother's sick fancy which saw this expression on the little face. They were beautiful children both, with a general resemblance to each other; yet very unlike,—one so blond, and the other so dark, one so delicately gentle in his aspect, the other bold and handsome like a little gipsy prince. Poor soul! what words can I use to describe the agony of choice with which this unhappy woman hung over them? But she made no choice at all—how could she? Suddenly, in passionate quick decision of her fate and his, she snatched

the dark child into her arms—not because she loved him least, nor because he was the eldest, nor for any other reasonable motive under heaven. Only because the other, God help her ! had kicked off his boot upon the floor. In such a terrible choice, what but the most fantastic chance, the wildest hazard, can tell upon a mind distraught ? She caught him up to her, with anxious care not to wake him, which contrasted strangely with the passion and misery in her face. Once having done it, nature itself demanded that no moment should be lost. She gathered him closely into her arms, wrapped her shawl round him, and leaving the other on the bed, went swiftly and silently down the dark stairs, and out into the night.

If any one had spoken to her or touched her, I believe the poor distracted creature would have gone mad or fallen into dead unconsciousness ; for nature was strained in her almost to the furthest limit ; but no one saw or interfered, or knew what was being done. She never looked at the boy again, but held him fast and hurried on. He was a child of seven years old, but small and light ; in her vigorous arms—she was as strong as a man, as light and rapid as a savage—he was

as a feather's weight. She went away with him unnoticed, wrapping her poor shawl round him to keep him from the rain, through the muddy roads, in the storm and dusky twilight. Merran Miller, the smith's wife, shutting her door in the darkening, when the rain began to blow in, saw the dark figure pass, and said to herself that Jean Macfarlane had sent the beggar-wife away ; and oh ! what a night it was to travel, even for the like of her ! “ But what's come o' the bairns ? ” she asked herself ; then shut the door, and went in, and stirred her fire, and put on her kettle. The beggar-wife and her bairns were no concern of hers.

“ The beggar-wife ” went swiftly up by dark Eskside beneath the trees, that waved overhead like spirits in pain. She was blinded with the rain, not with tears, for her eyes were dry and refused to shed more. Her limbs trembled under her, but her wild heart and purpose did not fail. After a time she came back again alone, without her burden. The dark branches still tossed against the pale sky, and kept on their passionate struggle against the elements ; but the forlorn human creature who tottered along underneath, swift but unsteady, beaten

about by the wind, drenched by the rain, too miserable to feel either, had lost all sense of struggle. The lassitude of soul which comes after a great act accomplished was in her. She went like a ghost across the bridge, where no one now was visible, so much had the storm increased, and up the further end of the village street. Jean Macfarlane was sitting with her guests in the little room down-stairs, drinking with them, and filling the air with her loud excited voice and torrent of words. There was no one in the passage or stair to note the dark figure gliding back to the room which no one had cared to notice since she entered it. It was dark, but she required no light. The other child, he who remained, her only one, lay still as she had left him. She put down her face upon his warm flushed cheek ; she lifted him tenderly on her lap, and put on his little boot, and soothed him when he woke and cried in the dark, and clung to her. “Mother’s here !—mother’s here !” she murmured, crooning to him, poor wretched hopeless soul ! with the voice of a dove in her nest. Then she took him too in her arms, and going down-stairs stopped the dirty maid who was Jean Macfarlane’s whole staff of service,

and paid for the poor refreshment she had had. "You're no going on sic a night?" said the girl; "and whaur's the other wee laddie?" "He has gone on before," said the mother. "We are going to meet the coach at Loanhead." "Then you'll have to be awfu' quick," cried the girl, compassionate. "Poor wee man! what a night to be out in! Here's a piece to give them when you're in the coach; but oh, woman, tak' pity on the bairns, and bide till the morn. It's enough to give them their death."

"I cannot stay—good night," cried the stranger, passing out. The good-natured lass, though she was dirty, looked after her, shaking an unkempt head, and twisting up as she did so an elf-lock which had fallen out of the poor hold of her deficient hair-pins. "Eh, thae tramps, what an awfu' life!" Jess said to herself, comparing her own position with that of the wanderer, with a thrill of superior comfort and well-being. She paused to fasten up the refractory lock before she followed to the door to look out after the departing guest; but by that time the darkness had swallowed her up, and nothing was visible except the wild sweeping rain, which came down in a sheet, visible across the blackness of the

night, like the warp of a sable web. "Lord save us ! sic a night to be out in ! and oh thae puir weans !" cried Jess, with a grimy tear in the corner of her eye.

The stranger and her child got into the coach at Loanhead, but they did not reach Edinburgh in that respectable conveyance. Somewhere in the outskirts of the town they managed to drop out of the coach, leaving the money for their fare on the damp seat, which their wet clothes had soaked. "A queer customer yon, but an awfu' honest woman !" the coachman said, with mingled wonder and admiration. It was still scarcely night, though so much had happened since it began to grow dark. The vagrant found her way to some haunt of vagrants such as I do not know, and have no chance of being able to describe, and there passed the night safe from all search or possibility of pursuit, encompassed by securities and precautions which can only be made perfect by a class at war with society. She herself had done no crime so far as any one knew ; but the instinctive suspicion of a race accustomed to shelter from the eye of justice kept her safe. Notwithstanding the hue and cry that was raised after her, she went on her

way as secure as any woman could be, and got back to England with her boy, and disappeared among the mysterious fastnesses of her class, not to reappear or be heard of for years. Poor soul ! she had left no traces behind her by which she could be recognised. Even in Jean Macfarlane's house the instinct of caste was roused to cover her retreat. "A woman with a wean ? Am I to remark a' the women with weans that come and gang afore my door—there's ower mony o' them, far ower mony ! I've something better to do than to glowr at women," cried the mistress of the place. "There was but ane here—a real decent person, with twa bairns. She took them baith away with her, safe and sound, and got the coach at Loanhead," said Jess. "What like was she ? How am I to tell that never saw her but in her bannet ? A' that I can tell you was that she sighed sair, mair like a moan than a sigh. She was a real decent woman," cried good-hearted Jess. And this was all her history and description—all by which she could be identified among others. The prolonged investigations that were made disclosed nothing more.

CHAPTER III.

THE hall at Rossraig was large and long : there was a great fireplace in it, from which came a feeble gleam of firelight. A large lamp, swinging from the raftered roof, threw but a moderate light into its great height and space ; but upon a side-table a candle was flaring, its long waving flame blown about by the movement in the air, which had not yet subsided after the opening of the door. A group of servants who had been crowding round some unseen object in the corner dispersed hastily as Lady Eskside was seen descending the stair, but only to hang about behind-backs waiting the interpretation of the mystery. One person only, an old and confidential servant, kept her place near the door, round which there was a wide stain of wet made by the rain, which had burst in when it was opened. Lady Eskside went forward bewildered, not perceiving

what it was she had been called to see ; and it was not till a sick disappointment had begun to creep over her that the old lady found out the central object on which all eyes were turned. On the great skin mat which lay between the door and the wall stood something so small and dark as to be almost undistinguishable, till the light caught a glimmer and sparkle from a pair of eyes low down, gleaming out of a little pale and scared face. Lady Eskside went slowly forward, bracing herself for something, she knew not what. When she caught the gleam of those eyes, she stood still and uttered a sudden cry.

A child stood there, with its feet buried in the long skin of the mat, backing closely into the corner for support, half frightened, half defiant. Tears were standing in those great eyes, and hanging on the pale little cheek—the lip was ready to quiver at a moment's notice ; but still he confronted the novel world in which he found himself with a certain defiance. The old lady, who felt all her dreams and hopes suddenly realised at the first glance, went nearer to him, with tremulous excitement, and stooped down over the child. Her whole frame was trembling—a mist obscured her eyes. “ Who

are you?—who are you?” she cried. “Oh, who are you?” then stopping short as the frightened look got the mastery on the child’s face, and his lip began to quiver, she changed her tone with a wonderful effort, and dropped down upon her knees on the mat to bring herself on a level with him. Lady Eskside saw in the little face more than any one else could see, and knew him, as she said afterwards, at once. “My bonnie man!” she cried, “my poor little man, nobody will hurt you. What is your name, and who brought you here? You are safe—quite safe—and nobody will harm you. Who are you, and who brought you here?”

The child made a pause—he was struggling proudly against his inclination to cry; and there was breathless silence in the hall as if some great revelation had been about to be made. Then a small whimpering voice, with tears in it, made itself audible, “I am—Val,” it said.

Lady Eskside rose up as if by some force which she could not resist. She turned upon Mary Percival, and the group of servants beyond, with uplifted hands, calling their attention imperatively, though for the moment she could

not speak. Then her voice broke forth, choked and hoarse, "Val! Mary, you hear, you hear! Did not I know it? Val! Oh, at last, at last!"

Then in a moment she stilled herself, and knelt down trembling upon the mat. "My bonnie little man!" she said, her voice trembling, "tell me again. Val—Val what? And, oh, who brought you here?"

"Nobody don't call me nothing but Val," said the child. "Mammy brought me. Not for no harm. She's gone back for Dick."

"Ah!" Lady Eskside's breath seemed to stop. She put out one hand behind her, and plucked blindly at Mary Percival's dress, to call her close attention. "Your mammy has gone back—for—Dick?"

"He's down at the village," said the child, keeping his eyes fixed upon her with the watchfulness of terror. "He's asleep. I've got to wait for mammy. She put me in out of the rain. I'll be good till mammy comes. Oh, don't let him touch me! I ain't come for no harm."

Harding the butler had approached nearer, anxious to bring his superior cleverness to his

mistress's aid ; and it was this movement which made the little fellow back further into his corner, holding up one small arm before his face as if to ward off a blow. A precocious knowledge of danger and a precocious desperation of baby courage glimmered in his frightened but excited eyes. "I won't touch nobody if you'll let me alone !" he cried.

"Stand back, Harding," said Lady Eskside ; and then she laid her soft old hand upon the child's raised arm, which yielded to her touch. "Nobody will harm you here, my poor little bonnie man. Oh, look at him ! look at him, Mary ! Is it my old een that deceive me ? Is it from having always one idea in my head ? But you are not half-crazy like me. Mary, try to forget the name and everything else. Look at his face !"

Mary Percival stood close behind, as much moved in her way, though with feelings very different from those of her old friend. Instead of the love and yearning in Lady Eskside's heart, there was something which felt like half-hatred—a repugnance for which she detested herself—in the intense interest with which she had watched every look and movement of the

little alien creature. Her voice was low and choked as she replied, as if the words were extracted from her, "I am looking at him. He is dark—not fair—like—his father. He has different eyes. Oh, Lady Eskside, what can I say? Everything else is Richard—everything; and I don't wish to think so like you."

I do not believe that Lady Eskside heard these last words, which were foreign to the passionate tenderness and joy in her own mind. She heard only so much as chimed in with her own thoughts. "Mary sees it too," she said, with a low outcry of such emotion as cannot be put into words. She was still on her knees in the attitude of prayer. With one hand she held the child fast, and with the other she covered her face. Some low sounds, but they were not audible words, came from her as she knelt—sounds which no one around heard distinctly, yet all understood by the strange sentiment of mingled anguish and rapture there was in them. Then she rose up, shaken and agitated, yet all her vigorous self.

"Harding," she said, "you'll stay here and watch—till—she comes back. For God's sake take care what you do. You must not scare

her, or send her away ; or go out yourself down the avenue, and let your wife stay here. It's a matter of life and death. Marg'ret, you hear all I say." This was to the housekeeper, Harding's wife. "Keep the house quiet ; no noise, no excitement ; but watch and be ready. Let one of the women prepare the green room, and light fires ; and Joseph can bring me wine, and some milk for the children. Oh, thank God that I can say such a word ! You'll show—*her*—every respect. Marg'ret, Marg'ret, *you* know what I mean ?"

"Oh, yes, my lady—yes ! I see it a'," cried the housekeeper ; "but it will be too much for you."

"Joy's never hard to bear," said Lady Eskside, with a smile. "My bonnie boy ! come with me—you are not afraid of me ?"

The child looked at her with his great eyes, which fright and novelty and the paleness of his little face made twice their usual size. "Richard never had eyes like these," Miss Percival said to herself ; but it would have been cruel, indeed, to have said this aloud. He paused a moment irresolute, and then gave a wild glance at the door, as if the impulse of

flight was the strongest; then he put his little cold hand, half-reluctantly, into the soft white hand held out for it. The old lady looked round upon them all with a glow of triumph indescribable; how her hand closed upon those little tremulous fingers! She marched to the door of the dining-room, which was nearest, her whole figure expanding like some Roman woman in a victor's procession. What battle had she won? what enemy had she conquered? Mary, full of strange agitation, followed her, wondering, tremulous, excited, but always with a certain repugnance, into the warm room, all ruddy and cheerful with light from the fire.

And then a sudden change, strange to be seen, came upon this old Volumnia, this heroic matron in her triumph. She sat down by the fire, in the great chair where her old lord had been sitting over his wine half an hour before, and gathered up the child into her lap, and turned at once as by the touch of a wand into the old mother, the mere woman, all whose instincts culminated in simple maternity. Perhaps her delicate old hands had never touched anything so muddy and rough before; but she was totally unconscious of this as she set the shiver-

ing wet little figure upon her satin lap, and began to unlace and draw off his wet boots. Lady Eskside was a proud woman, fastidious in everything she approached or handled ; but she undid the muddy leather laces, and pulled off the dirty little boots, and stained her worn and fine old hands, so delicately white and dainty, without hesitation, even without a thought. She held the child close to her, murmuring over him unconscious sounds of endearment, like a dove in her nest. “ My little man ! my bonnie little man !—Put out your poor wee feetie to the fire—how cold they are, the poor wee pilgrim feet—and how far they’ve wandered ! but this is home, my darling, this is home !—And so they call you Val !—Oh, my bonnie boy, to be out in such a night,—they call you Val ? and your brother is Dick—oh, may God keep my heart that I may not die of joy ! ”

The child sat on her knee with all the gravity of his age, and heard everything, but made no response. I think the weariness and the unusual comfort began alike to tell upon him ; the cheerful light dazzled his eyes, the warmth crept into his baby limbs, and even the excitement and strange novelty of his position were

not enough at seven years old to counteract these subduing influences. By-and-by his little eyes began to wink as he gazed into the fire and felt the drowsy spell of the genial warmth. When Joseph brought the tray, he took the piece of cake which was put into his hand, and ate it slowly, gazing and winking at the fire. Then his head began to droop against Lady Eskside's breast. With an effort he opened his eyes at intervals, fixing them severely as if they could never close again, upon the fire, then gradually subdued by the warmth shut them altogether, and half turning towards her, nestled his head upon the old lady's shoulder. As his curls fell finally into this resting place, Lady Eskside turned to Mary with an unspeakable look: "He knows them that belong to him," she said in a whisper. Her arms encircled him with that delight of protecting maternity which goes through all the levels of creation. It was but the hen gathering her chickens under her wing—yet God himself can find no tenderer simile. All expression, save that last supreme beatitude which borders upon vacuity, went out of her face. She forgot everything around her—the past, the future, her duties of the present.

Everything in the world had become suddenly concentrated to her in this action, which was no more elevated than that of a bird in her nest, this watch which secured warmth, slumber, and safety to the child.

Miss Percival sat on the other side of the great dining-table and gazed at her old friend with that mixture of irritation, wonder, and reluctant sympathy which provokes and tantalises a friendly soul when watching some novel exhibition of human weakness. She could not understand Lady Eskside's instant adoption into her very heart of the strange little unknown creature, dropped from the skies or by the winds, unseen and unknown until this moment, and which might be a little demon in human form for aught that any one knew. And yet she did understand in a way which made her irritation rather greater than less. Mary was not very clever, not very remarkable in any way ; but she was herself—thinking and feeling according to her own nature and principles, and not according to any conventional model. She did not possess that sugary sweetness of disposition, or those very ethereal Christian sentiments which put aside all personal consciousness of wrong and seem to prefer injury. Richard Ross

had been, if not her lover, at least so indicated by every family prepossession, so prepared by training and association to be her eventual husband, that his sudden and strange marriage had given a shock to her nerves and moral nature from which she had never recovered. I cannot tell if she had ever been what people call "in love" with him. If she had, her love had never taken full shape and form, but had lingered insidiously about her heart, prepared, by every indication of her young life, and every probability of the future, to come into being at a touch. This touch was given in another way when Richard disappeared into the nameless obscurity and shame that surrounded his marriage. Her whole being received the shock, and received it without warning or preparation. It changed the aspect of all mankind to her, more perhaps than it changed her feeling towards Richard. He it was who had inflicted the wound, but its effects were not confined to him. She was the gentlest creature in existence, but her pride was roused against the whole world, in which outward appearances seem ever to gain the day, and the still and unpretending are held of no account.

Instead, however, of making the more (after

these reflections) of the simple beauty she possessed, which was of a very attractive kind, though moderate in degree, or taking the good of her real advantages, Mary had done what many proud gentlewomen do—she had retired doubly into herself after the shock she received. She had withdrawn from society, and society, heedless, had gone on its way and paid little attention to the withdrawal: so that the penalties fell not at all upon it, but upon herself. She was still young, between six and seven and twenty; but something of the aspect which that same mocking and careless world calls that of an old maid, was stealing imperceptibly upon her. Her pride, though so natural, thus told doubly against her—for people who were incapable of understanding the shock she had received, or the revulsion of her proud and delicate heart, called her, with light laughter, a disappointed woman, foiled in her attempt to secure a husband. Many of us who ought to know much better use such words in thoughtless levity every day. I need not enter into the circumstances which, on this night of all others, had brought Mary to Rosscraig, and recalled to her mind, through Lady Eskside's story, many

sharp and painful memories which she had partially succeeded in banishing from her thoughts. I do not think that this rush of recollection had the effect of moving her to any enthusiasm for Richard's child. The strange bitterness of scorn with which she learned what kind of woman that was who had been preferred to herself, moved not the best part of her nature; for Mary, as I have said, was not sweetness and gentleness personified, but a genuine human creature, not all good. Perhaps the very strength of her antagonistic feelings, and the absence of any general maudlin sympathy with everything pitiful presented to her, made her all the more certain that the child was Richard's child, the child of the tramp whom Richard had admired and loved more than herself; an interest which was half repugnance attracted her eyes and her thoughts to this little creature, who was assuredly no stranger, no impostor, but the very flesh and blood which might have been her own. Yes, he might have been her child—and the blood ran tingling with shame, anger, pride, and dislike to Mary's very finger-tips, as this thought flashed through her mind. She sat and watched him, falling asleep on Lady Eskside's knee, with

the strangest aching mixture of irritation and interest. She was half envious, half impatient of the strange beatitude and absorption with which her old friend held the boy, throwing her own very being into him—the child who had been stolen away from all lawful life and protection, who had lived among outcasts, a beggar, a baby-adventurer, the child of a tramp! How could that proud old woman take him out of hands so stained, and take him to her pure and honourable breast? Poor Mary was not quite responsible for the hot anger, the unjust condemnation of this thought; these angry feelings surged uppermost, as the worst of us always does, to the surface of her agitated soul.

The lamp had been placed in a corner, so as not to disturb the child's sleep, and the room formed a dark background to that group, which was relieved against the dusky glow of the fire. Silence was in the house, sometimes interrupted by a stealthy suggestive creaking of the great door, as Mrs Harding from time to time looked out into the night. The winds still raged without, and the rain swept against the window, filling the air with a continuous sound. Soon that

stealthy noise outside, which betrayed the watchers who were on the outlook for the mother's return with the other child, affected Mary with a sympathetic suspense. Her imagination rushed out to meet the stranger, to realise her appearance. Richard's wife! She could not sit still and think of this new figure on the scene. If the woman came Mary felt that she must withdraw; she would not meet her—she could not! and this feeling made her eagerly anxious for the appearance of the stranger who excited such wild yet causeless antagonism in her own mind. She went to the window, and drew aside the curtain and gazed out—that she might see her approach, she said to herself, and escape out of the way.

Thus time went ^{on}; Lady Eskside, worn out with emotion, and hushed by happiness, dozed too, I think, in the easy-chair with the sleeping child on her lap, while Miss Percival stood, with every sense awake, watching the dark avenue through the window. And I do not know how long it was before, all at once, another conviction took possession of Mary—which was the true one—that Richard's wife had no intention of coming back. This thought

came to her in a moment, as if some one had said it in her ear. Had some one said it? Was it a mysterious communication made to her somehow, from one soul to another through the darkness of that night which hid the speaker, which had fallen upon the child's mother like a veil? Miss Percival sank, almost fell, down upon the chair, on which she had been kneeling in her eagerness to look out. She was startled and shaken, yet calmed, with sensations incomprehensible to her. She sat still and listened, but without any further expectation. A strange dim realisation of the unknown creature of whom she had been thinking hard thoughts came into her mind. Was she too, then, an independent being, with a heart which could be wrung, and a mind capable of suffering?—not merely Mary's rival, Mary's antagonist, a type of lower nature and coarser impulse. The wind abated, the rain cleared off, the silent minutes crept on, but no one came to the house where all except the old lord were listening and watching. Mary, roused at length, stirred up in all her own energies by this conviction, felt that doubt was no longer possible. The unknown mother had given this remorseful tribute to the

house she had despoiled, but had kept her share and would appear no more.

“Dear Lady Eskside,” she said, laying her hand on her old friend’s shoulder, “don’t you think it would be better to let Mrs Harding put him to bed.”

“Eh? Is it you, Mary? What were you saying? I do not feel sure,” said Lady Eskside, looking up with a smile, “that I was not dozing myself upon the bairn’s head. Put him to his bed? it would perhaps be the best thing, as you say; but I cannot give him over to Harding, I will carry him upstairs myself.”

“Rather give him to me,” said Mary; “he is too heavy for you. I will take him to the old nursery——”

“Where his father and you have played many a day,” said Lady Eskside, with a smile which was weak with happiness. “Oh, my dear, my dear! but how different our thoughts were then!” Here she saw a contraction upon Mary’s face which gave her a note of warning. “Call the women, Mary,” she added, hurriedly. “I have lost count of time. *She* should have been here by now with the other one. Oh! but I can never love him like this one, that has slept

on my bosom like a child of my own, and crept into my heart."

"She has not come. She does not mean to come," said Mary ; but she spoke low, and Lady Eskside did not mark what she said. Her own mind was filled to overflowing with her new possession, and no real anxiety about the other one or about the mother existed for the moment in her mind. "Jean, take this darling in your arms—softly, softly," she said to the maid. "You are a strong, good girl, and you will carry him kindly. Don't waken my bonnie boy. I'll go with you upstairs and see him put to bed."

And, absorbed in this new occupation, she hurried upstairs after Jean, giving a hundred warnings—to lay his head comfortably—to hold him faster—to throw her apron about his little feet—like a foolish old mother, half beside herself with love and happiness. She could think of nothing but the lost treasure restored ; and I might spend pages on the description before I could tell you with what renewal of all old and dead joys she watched the maid's anxious but vain attempts to prepare the child for bed without awaking him, and to soothe him when

he stirred and pushed them away with his rosy feet, and murmured whimpering childish objections to everything that was being done for him. In this unlooked for fulness of joy, she forgot everything else in the world.

CHAPTER IV.

LORD ESKSIDE was a homely representative of Scotch aristocracy. He was as proud as Lucifer in his own way, but that way was quaint and unsuspected by strangers ; and his outward appearance and manners, and the principles he professed, were even humorously homely and almost democratical. Pretension of any kind moved him to an exaggeration of this natural homeliness ; though when his dignity was really touched nobody could be more decided in his treatment of the vulgar, whom on ordinary occasions he seemed to incline towards, and to whom, so long as they made no fictitious claims to importance, he was whimsically friendly and indulgent. He had many other paradoxical sentiments about him. Being a high Tory by tradition and birth, it happened to him now and then to take up a trenchant Radical theory,

which he clung to with the obstinacy of his race, and would carry out in the most uncompromising manner. He was keenly intelligent when he chose ; but when he did not choose, no lout in the village could be more thickheaded than the old lord, nor show greater need to have everything “summered and wintered” to him, as Lady Eskside often impatiently said. He had strong feelings, but they lay very deep, and were seldom exhibited to the common eye, his own consciousness of their existence showing itself chiefly in a testy determination to avoid all means of moving them, which gave many ignorant persons the impression that our old lord was an ill-tempered man. He was impatient, I allow, and resented all long and slow explanations, except when it happened to be his caprice to put on the air of requiring them ; and many people were afraid of his sharp retorts and ruthless questions. He was a little man, with keen hazel eyes gleaming out from under overhanging eyebrows, which often gathered into seeming frowns ; not a man with whom, you may be sure, sentimental considerations would weigh much—or at least who would permit it to be seen how much they weighed.

He was very much startled when he heard what had happened—so much startled that he received the tale in comparative silence, half stupefied by the strange incident ; and allowed himself to be led by his wife to the side of the bed where the child slept profoundly, almost without a word of remark. He stood and gazed at it, his keen eyes twinkling from beneath their heavy eyebrows, and his under lip working, as it habitually did when he was moved by any feeling which he did not choose to show. But he uttered nothing more than an unintelligible “humph !” and instead of sympathising with Lady Eskside’s excitement, her tearful enthusiasm, and the tumult of agitation in which she was, turned away almost without response, and went off to his study, where he had been painfully busy with calculations and cogitations over the ‘Journal of Agriculture ;’ for he was a great farmer, and just then deeply occupied with the question of manures, a study of thrilling and delicate interest. He tried to resume these studies, but for this his philosophy did not suffice. He sat down, however, by his table as before, and, with his periodical open before him—working his under lip, which projected slightly, and

bending his brows—gave his mind to this new problem, which was more astounding than anything in agriculture. After a while he rose and rang the bell. It was answered by Harding, the English butler, who had been in Lord Eskside's service for thirty years, and knew all about the family as an old servant knows—that is, rather more than there is to know. The fact, however, that Harding was English, gave a certain peculiarity to the connection between himself and his old master, who was equally ready to hold him up to admiration as “a good solid Englishman, not troubling himself about whimsies,” or to denounce him as “a doited English body, never understanding the one-half of what you said to him.” Lord Eskside had a mingled trust in Harding and contempt for him, which I do not think he could have entertained for a countryman of his own.

“Harding,” he said, “come in and shut the door. I suppose you know all that's happened in the house to-night. You should have called me. Haven't I always told you to call me when anything out of the way occurred?”

“My lord,” said Harding, not without agitation, “there has never nothing happened much

out of the way before. When I did call your lordship the night of the fire in the laundry, your lordship said I was a doited old fool—and how was I to know—— ? ”

“That will do,” said Lord Eskside ; “you needn’t recriminate. The thing I want to know is about this child. How did it come ? who brought it ? My lady has told me something, but I want your account. Now take your time, and begin at the beginning. Who brought the boy here ? ”

“My lord, if I were to die this moment,” Harding began——

“Idiot ! what would you die for this moment ? ” cried the old lord ; “and if you did die, what information would I get from that ? Begin at the beginning, I tell you : what happened ? none of your adjurations. What do you *know* ? ”

“If your lordship will let me speak,” said Harding, aggrieved. “I don’t know from Adam who brought him. It was close upon dark, and the storm raging. I thought it was nothing but the wind that swept in, and a blast of rain that came full in my face. There hasn’t been such a wind that I recollect since the year Mr Richard

went first to college—when there was a hawful storm, as your lordship may remember——”

“Never mind the storm,” said Lord Eskside, with an effort of patience, “think a little.—When did this occur? Fix upon the hour. Now—that’s something definite. We’ll get on from that.”

“*That* there can be no doubt about, my lord,” said Harding, promptly. “The bell was ringing for the servants’ hall supper—which made it a little hard at first to hear the door-bell. We has our supper sharp at nine——”

(“Trust him to mind his times of eating!” ejaculated Lord Eskside: “an Englishman never forgets that.”)

“—— And just then the door-bell rang. Not expecting nobody, I was a little scared-like. I said to myself, ‘Who’s this a-coming at this time of the night?’ and I called to Mrs ‘Arding——”

“Lordsake, man, never mind your thoughts or your Mrs Hardings! get on.”

“I called to Mrs ‘Arding, my lord,” said the butler, solemnly, “to wait and see who it was afore they went into supper. It might have been visitors unexpected, as I’ve known to arrive all in an ‘eap and never a room ready. It might

have been Mr Richard, as is always particular. Beg your lordship's pardon, that was what passed through my 'ead. Then them as was outside rang again. I'm a bit confused with all that's 'appened. It was that loud that it sounded like the day of judgment——"

"There are to be no bells that ever I heard of at the day of judgment," said his master ; "leave metaphors, man, and give me facts—that's all I want."

"Then they got to knocking on the door, my lord—not using the knocker like people as knows. I ain't superstitious, though I've heard tales enough to make your hair stand up on your head since I've been in the north—warnings and that sort. But I did say to myself, if so be it's for his lordship or my lady—spirits being in the family, so to speak—— Was it something else your lordship was pleased to want?"

"Send for your wife," growled Lord Eskside, who had rung the bell violently, and now stood impatient on the hearth with his back to the fire, working his projecting lip and shaggy eyebrows. This was so very common an interruption of the more important interviews between

master and man, that Mrs Harding came without further call, not sorry of the opportunity of getting rid of a little of her own excitement, and very anxious to know, in a matter of so much moment, "what my lord would say."

"Look here," said her master. "What did he see? Not a word can I get out of him but havers. What did the man see? I suppose you were there too, like all the rest of the house—like everybody, in short, except myself. What did he see?"

"He saw naething, my lord, that I can make out," said the housekeeper; "just the door dung open in his face with the wind and a good push from the outside. It's been a wild night, and the sounds of the storm were awfu' confusing even to the like of me. So far as I can discover, there was just something thrown inside, and a blast of weet, and the big door snatched out of his hand and clashed to, and all in a moment before he could say a word. That's a' that I can make out. I was in the servant's passage myself listening and wondering, and a' in a tremble with the thoughts of visitors or waur. He didna say a word but gaed a kind of skreigh, and I kent something had happened.

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When I ran into the hall, and a' the women after me—for ye ken the story of the Eskside warning, my lord, as well as me—there was the wean standing up in the corner against the wa'; and him there glow'ring at it, as if the bonnie bit laddie was a ghaist."

"And that's all?"

"That's all, my lord, as far as I can find out—he says he saw a figure, but what kind of a figure——"

"It was a woman wrapped in a cloak," said Harding, somewhat sullenly—"I was coming to that; a tall figure of a woman, not like nobody I know—a sort of a beggar—a tramp."

"Would you know her again, if you saw her?" asked Lord Eskside.

"As for that, my lord—I see as she had black hair hanging down, and something red twisted round her neck,—a roughish sort of a woman. She caught hold of the door and shut it in my face," said Harding, roused to energy, "though she was the one as was outside and me in——"

"And said nothing—you are sure she said nothing?"

"Not a word, my lord. I called out to her, Hollo! 'old 'ard!" said Harding; "but she

didn't pay no attention. She took hold of the door, and dragged it out of my hand. It's true as I was taken by surprise and didn't put out my strength."

"A muckle strong randy of a woman," said Mrs Harding. "I think I maun have seen her the other day down by the lodge, with a bairn tied on her back in a shawl:" then suddenly perceiving her mistake, she added, "no that such a quean could have anything to do with—with our wee gentleman, if my lady's right; and she's aye right," the housekeeper continued, in a lower tone, with keen eyes fixed on the old lord. Mrs Harding knew her master and mistress, and flattered herself that she had no small influence with them; but part of her power, like that of many other popular oracles, consisted in her vivid perception of the variations in the minds of her employers, whom she often seemed to lead by means of prompt and instantaneous following. She was herself very much excited, very doubtful and uncertain about this strange event; and she watched her master with a sharpness of observation which proved the urgency of the case. As for Lord Eskside, he stood knitting his brow, and forgetting, or at

least ignoring, the pair who stood, one sharply, and one dully, attentive, awaiting his next observation. When he spoke, his utterance was sharp and sudden—the abrupt issue of a long deliberation.

“Have you any reason to suppose that this—person—this woman—has been haunting the place? You say you saw her down at the lodge?”

“I saw a—beggar-wife,” said the housekeeper, subdued; “but on second thoughts, my lord——”

“D—— second thoughts!” cried her master, impatiently; then turning to her husband,—“and you, Harding, had you ever seen her before?”

Harding paused; he balanced himself first on one leg and then on the other; he scratched his puzzled head, fixing his old master with his eyes, in the hope that this precaution would guard him against an outburst. “Seen her before, your lordship?” Harding said, finally, with caution; “I’ve seen—a many like her——”

“Fool! can’t you answer a plain question?” cried his master, furious. “Had you seen *her* before? could you recognise *her* again?”

“My lord, I’m no wanting to interfere out of a woman’s sphere,” said the housekeeper. “You ken better than me, both your lordship and *him*; but if you’ll just consider—— He saw her one moment, nae mair. He was sair taken by surprise; it was dark, and the wind blowing wild, and the rain in his face. You should see the hall, a’ weet where it came in—and just one moment, my lord! If it had been myself he would scarce have kent me. And his een are no so shairp as they once were, your lordship well knows.”

“Oh ay, Marg’ret, I know; you take his part whatever happens——”

“And wha but me should take his part, when he’s my man?” said the housekeeper, triumphantly. As soon as she had brought that reluctant impatient smile momentarily to her master’s face, she was safe, she knew. Lord Eskside stood lost in his own thoughts for some time before he dismissed them, forgetting their existence, though to them he was the centre of the earth, and could not be forgotten. When at last, coming to himself abruptly, he waved his hand and muttered something about the night being too far spent for further action, the pair

left the room with very different sentiments. Harding, who had not yet recovered the discomfort of his watch in the wet avenue, was too thankful to be spared further trouble to disturb himself with any questions; but his wife, more interested, partly from her deeper concern in all that affected the family, and partly, perhaps, from mere feminine preoccupation with the mystery, was by no means satisfied. "Is my lady right?" she kept saying to herself; and put the evidence together with that strange ability and clearheadedness which family servants, whose entire intelligence is absorbed in the facts of a family history, so often show. My lady was generally right—at least her opinions were generally approved and adopted by the household, which comes to much the same thing; but there was a huge gulf of doubt before her, which Mrs Harding contemplated with a disquieted mind. How could this beggar's brat be the heir of Eskside? He was like the Rosses; he was called by their favourite name—"a daft-like name, no doubt, and out of the common," the housekeeper acknowledged to herself; but yet the difficulties overbalanced the probabilities in the judgment of this keen though homely

observer. She drove her husband nearly frantic by dwelling upon the subject all the night long. "It ain't none of our business," said Harding; "trust my lord and my lady to mind theirselves; it ain't got nothing to say to us." He was very glad to get rid of so troublesome a question, and to mind his work, as he said; for a better servant, as both his master and mistress often declared, was not to be found in Scotland. His wife had her faults; but she lay awake half the night pondering this strange incident while he slept the sleep of the just, unburdened by any anxieties. But he was more exact than she was (with her disturbed mind) about the comfort of the household next morning. On the whole, it is difficult to say which kind of service is the best.

Lord Eskside remained for some time longer in his study, and then he went up-stairs to the drawing-room, to join the ladies. Lady Eskside, however, was not to be found there, and a certain look of agitation was in the place of which she was the natural soul. She had gone up to "the nursery," — long disused and unaccustomed words! — to sit by the child's bedside, and brood over his slumbers. Mary Percival was sitting by the fire alone, with a book upon her lap,

which she did not even pretend to read. The fire was low, the lamp was low, the room was less bright than usual, and everything told of some occurrence which had broken the ordinary calm. Mary put her book aside and took up some knitting which lay on the table, when the old lord entered and took his position on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire as usual ; but her knitting was a mere pretence, as her reading had been—the pretence of a pretence, for she only held it vaguely in her hand. For some little time nothing was said except a few commonplaces consequent on Lord Eskside's curt impatient remarks. How bad the lights were ! it was the lamp that had run down, Mary said ; and went and screwed it up again, with a hand that trembled. Where was my lady ?—She had gone up-stairs ; Mary did not know if she meant to come down again ; perhaps, having been a good deal shaken, she had gone to bed. Humph ! Lord Eskside said, working his under lip, and bending his shaggy brows. Mary felt pained and embarrassed, like a stranger involved in a family quarrel, and obliged to explain the conduct of one member of a household to another ; and she felt the silence almost intolerable as she sat down again, and took her knitting in her

hand. At last the old lord rushed abruptly into the all-absorbing subject, as was his way.

“What do *you* think of all this, Mary? You’re a sensible girl. Is my lady out of her mind? or what’s to be done about this—child?”

“Oh, Lord Eskside,” said Mary, with tremulous agitation, “how could she be wrong on such a point? It is Richard’s child.”

“How should she not be wrong? how is any one to know? a nameless brat, without sign or surety; probably some gipsy’s spawn or other. Right! It could be but a guess at the best.”

“You did not see him,” said Mary, faltering. “He is like—his father.”

“Like his father!” cried Lord Eskside; and he began to pace up and down the long, large, partially-lighted room, a moving atom in it, yet supreme in his disturbed and disturbing humanity; “like his father!—very probably—but how can we tell who is his father? I think my lady, poor soul, has gone out of her mind.”

“But you have not seen him,” said Mary, softly, not knowing what to say.

“I have seen the creature, a little dark toad. Dick was always fair and feeble like my mother’s family, a fusionless being. We must write for him, and have his opinion. God bless me, Mary!

if they both hold to it, mother and son, and this foundling grows up as heir to the property, how is he ever to establish his title? We'll have Sandy Pringle down upon us with all the Scots law at his finger-ends—and what am I, a reasonable man, to do?”

“Oh, Lord Eskside, that is a long way off,” cried Mary, laying hold of the first argument that occurred to her.

“Things are none the easier for being a long way off,” said the old lord; and then he fell silent, pacing up and down the room, and finally returned to his place on the hearth-rug, where he stood pondering and waiting for his wife, whose hasty conclusions he so much objected to, yet whose presence and energy bore him up. Had she been there to argue with him, the strange thing that had occurred would have looked real. But in her absence what could Lord Eskside do but fret and fume? Mary and her gentle arguments were unsubstantial to him as any of the other shadows that filled the silent and deserted room.

CHAPTER V.

RICHARD ROSS had not visited his parents for years. He had scarcely been at home at all since the miserable catastrophe which had so fatally enlightened the world as to the folly of his marriage ; and perhaps the certainty that he must come now contributed something to his mother's rapture in the recovery of his child : for the instinct of nature overcomes all its unlikenesses ; and Richard, though a man whom she would have laughed at and scorned had he not been her son, was, being her son, dearer than all the world to Lady Eskside. The new event which had happened was important enough, and his mother's appeal was still more urgent and imperative ; but I doubt if it would be true to say that there was any excitement of feeling, any happiness of anticipation in Richard's mind as he travelled home in obedience to

the call. Nearly seven years had elapsed since his children were taken from him, and they had been too young to take any permanent hold on his affections. That they were his children was all that could be said ; and in Richard's mind, as time went on and he began to regard his misfortunes with a kind of hopeless apathy, they had come to be more like shadows of their mother than independent beings possessing rights and claims of their own. The first effect of the news was to rouse him to a painful sense of his own dismal shipwreck and hopeless failure in life, rather than to any excitement of a more tender kind. Those great personal misfortunes which change the complexion of our lives may fall into the background, they may cease to render us actively and always wretched ; but they lie in wait, keeping, as it were, ever within reach, to wake into hot recollection at a touch. Most of us prefer to avoid that touch when we can, and Richard had done this more persistently and with greater success than most people ; but yet they lay there ready, the shame and the pain, wanting nothing but a jog to bring them out in full force.

I would not go the length of saying that he

was touched by no feeling of thankfulness that his child was restored ; but his pleasure was infinitely less than the suffering he went through by means of this revival of all that was most painful in his life. He had long outgrown the boyish passion which led to his strange marriage ; and as he had nothing to look back upon in connection with that marriage which was not miserable and humiliating, it was not wonderful that shame and self-disgust were his most lively sensations when it was recalled to him. He could not understand how he could have been guilty of folly so supreme and so intense ; how he could have bartered his credit, his comfort, all the better part of life, not to speak of that hot love of youth, which in calmer years often looks so much like folly, even when it is happy and fortunate—for what ? Nothing. He had not even, so far as he knew, touched the heart of the woman for whom he had made so extraordinary a sacrifice. At best she had but accepted and submitted to his love ; she had never loved him ; his influence had not wrought any change in her. He had not even affected her being so much as to induce her to give up the habits of her former life, or show any inclination

to learn the habits of his. She had humiliated him in every way, and in no way so much as by allowing him to perceive his own impotence in regard to herself. This gave the last sting of bitterness to his recollections. A man can bear the outer annoyances which result from a foolish marriage ; he can put up, patiently or otherwise, with much that would revolt him in any other less close and binding connection ; but when, in addition to these, he is made to feel that he himself is nothing and less than nothing to the creature for whom he has made such sacrifices, it is inevitable, or almost inevitable, that the early infatuation should change into a very different feeling. Sometimes, it is true, the victim of passion, notwithstanding all enlightenment, continues in his subjection, and goes on adoring even where he despises ; but such cases are rare, and Richard's was not one of them. I cannot understand any more than his mother could, how "a son of hers" could have ever made so extraordinary a mistake in life ; but now that his existence was permanently ruined and devastated by this great blunder, Richard had felt that his best policy was to ignore it utterly. He had lived a celibate and blameless

life during all those years of enforced widowhood. Society knew vaguely that he had been married, and most people thought him a widower; but though much in the world, he had lived so as to avoid all disagreeable inquiries into the actual facts of the case. He had never betrayed even to his friends the blight which had stopped all progress in life for him. According to all precedent of fiction, some other woman ought to have stepped across his path and learned his secret, as Mr Thackeray's Laura does by George Warrington. But Richard Ross had indulged in no Laura. He had friends enough and to spare, but never any close enough or dear enough to warrant scandal. Instead of Platonic affections he had taken to china, a safer weakness; and it was to this tranquil gentleman in the midst of his collections that the mother's letter came, thrusting back upon his recollection the dismal and humiliating melodrama of which he had been the hero. It is not difficult to imagine in the circumstances with what bitter annoyance he bore this revival of all his miseries, and girded himself up to answer the summons, and for the first time appear at home.

He arrived on a spring night as mild as the

former one I have described had been boisterous. The sun had just set, and the rosy clouds hung above the trees of Rossraig, and over the hillside, just tinged here and there with the bursting of the spring buds, but still for the most part brown and leafless, which sloped to the brawling Esk. I do not know a fairer scene anywhere. Some old turrets of the older part of the house, belonging to that style of domestic architecture which is common to France and to Scotland, peeped forth above the lofty slope of the bank. Had winter been coming, the brown, unclothed trees might have conveyed an impression of sadness ; but as spring was coming they were all hopeful, specially where the green breaks of new foliage, big chestnut buds, and silken leaves still creased and folded, threw a wash of delicate colour upon the landscape. Richard's heart was somewhat touched by the feeling that he was approaching home ; but the more his heart was touched the less he was inclined to show it ; for had not he himself injured the perfection of that home, which was surrounded by people *who knew*, and who could not but comment and criticise ? He heaved an impatient sigh, even while his heart was melting

to the dear familiar place, and wished himself away again among people who knew nothing about him, even though he felt the many charms of home steal into his heart.

Richard Ross was a year or two over thirty—a young man, though he did not feel young—tall and fair, with a placid temper and the gentlest manners; a man to all appearance as free from passion and as prone to every virtuous and gentle affection as man could be. His aspect, indeed, was that of a very model of goodness and English domestic perfection—a man who would be the discreetest of guides to his household, the best of fathers, an example to all surrounding him. This was what he ought to have been. Had he married Mary Percival this is what he would have been; though I think it very likely that Mary would have wearied of him without knowing why, and found life—had she had him—a somewhat languid performance. But, unfortunately, she was quite unconscious of what would have happened had the might have been ever come to pass, and did not know that she missed some evil as well as some good. On the contrary, her heart beat far more than she would have wished it to beat

when the roll of the carriage-wheels which conveyed Richard was heard in the avenue. She stole out by the conservatory-door to be out of the way, and hid herself in the woods which sloped downward to Eskside. She scarcely heard the brawl of Esk, so loud was her heart beating. Poor Mary ! it was not Richard alone who had come back and had to be met with tranquilly, as one stranger meets another—but her youth and all her fancies, and those anticipations long past which were so different from the reality. Mary stayed under the budding trees till almost the last ray of daylight had faded, and the bell from the house, calling all stragglers, tinkled from the height among the evening echoes. This bell of itself was a sign that something had happened : Lord and Lady Eskside were homely in their ways, and it was never rung when they were alone.

Lady Eskside received her son with the child by her side, going forward to meet him with little Val clinging to her hand ; but when she forgot Val and threw her arms round her own boy whom she had not seen for so long, the child, bewildered, shifted his grasp to her gown, which he held fast, somewhat appalled as well as

jealous at the appearance of this new-comer. It was not until after Richard had received his father's less effusive greeting that even Lady Eskside bethought herself of the occasion of the visit—the little silent spectator, who, half buried in the folds of her gown, watched everything with keen eyes, “Ah!” she cried; then with a self-reproach for her own carelessness, “I think of my boy first, without minding that you are thinking of yours. Come, Val, and speak to your papa. Oh, Richard! oh, my dear! here is the child——”

“Oh!—this is the child, is it?” said Richard, with a momentary faintness coming over him. He did not snatch the little fellow into his arms, as his mother expected he would. He did something very different, for the poor man was short-sighted, a thing which none of us can help. He took up nervously that double eyeglass which the French call a *pince-nez*, and put it on his nose. He could not have seen otherwise had his heart been ever so tender; but it would be impossible to describe the shock, the chill, which this simple proceeding brought upon Lady Eskside. Was there, then, no paternal instinct in her son's heart—none of the feeling which had

made her own expand and glow towards the boy? Was her impulse of nature wrong, or his deadened? The old lord looked on curiously too, but with less vehement feeling, for Lady Eskside had a deeper stake in the matter. She felt that to find herself mistaken, and to have to give up the child whom she had adopted into her warmest affections, would be her death-blow.

“Richard! you don’t think—your father and I—have been wrong?” she cried.

It was on Lord Eskside’s lip to say that this rash adoption was none of his doing, and thus give up his wife to her fate; but he was sorry for her, and held his tongue, watching the man and the child as they stared at each other with gradually growing interest. The boy stood, holding by Lady Eskside’s gown, with a baby scowl upon his soft little forehead, half raising one arm with instinctive suspicion, as he had done on the night of his arrival, to ward off an imaginary blow. Richard sat opposite and gazed at him intently through his *pince-nez*. Something pathetic, tragic, terrible, yet ludicrous, was in the scene.

“Richard,” faltered Lady Eskside, “don’t

keep me in this suspense. Do you suppose—do you think—it is not him?”

“What is your name?” said Richard, looking at his son. “Val?—you are sure you are Val and not the other? Yes. I suppose, then, he’s the eldest,” he said hurriedly, getting up and walking away to the window at the other end of the room. The old couple were too much surprised to say anything. They gave a wondering glance at each other, and Lord Eskside, putting up his hand, stopped the crowd of wondering questions which was about to pour from his wife’s lips. Richard stood perhaps two minutes (it seemed an hour), with his back to them, looking out from the window. When he returned, his voice was husky and his face paler. “You have done quite right, mother, to take him in,” he said, in low tones, “so far as I can judge.” Then, with a suddenly heightened colour, “He is like—his mother. No one who has ever seen *her* could fail to recognise *him*.”

“Richard! oh, take him in your arms and give your child a kiss!” cried Lady Eskside, with tears in her eyes. “Oh, take your own mother’s word, it is you the darling is like—you, and none but you!”

“Is that like me?” said Richard, touching his son’s dark hair, with a harsh laugh; “or could we be mixed up, we two, in anything, even a child’s face? No; one of them was hers—all hers. Don’t you recollect, mother? I was pleased then, like an idiot as I was. The other,” he added, with a softened voice, “was like me.”

And then there was silence again. He had not touched the child or spoken to him, except that unfriendly touch; and little Val stood by his grandmother’s knee, still clutching her dress, looking on with a bewildered sense of something adverse to himself which was going on over his head, but which he did not understand. Richard threw himself into a chair, his fair, amiable face flushed with unusual emotion; he swung back in his seat, with an uneasy smile on his face, and an expression of assumed carelessness and real excitement totally unlike his usual aspect. As for Lady Eskside, she was struck dumb; she put her arms round the child, petting and consoling him. “My bonnie man!” she said, pressing him close to her side, comforting the little creature, who was nothing more than perplexed in his baby mind—as if he had shared the distinct pain in her own.

“Enough of this, Richard,” said Lord Eskside, coming to the rescue. “Whatever has happened, it is not the boy’s fault. Your mother and I have the property to think of, and the succession. It is necessary that you should give an opinion one way or another——”

“Father, I beg your pardon,” said Richard, rising to his feet with a sudden flush of shame. “I allowed my feelings to get the better of me. I acknowledge the child. He is too like to be denied. Valentine was the eldest, and had dark hair, like—— I have no doubt on the subject. If my mother chooses to use her eyes, she can see the resemblance——”

“To you, Richard! Oh, do not be bitter against the bairn; he is like you!”

Richard smiled—a painful smile, which sat ill on a countenance of which very nature demanded gentleness. “You may bring him up, sir, as your heir; I acknowledge him. There, mother, what do you want more of me? I can’t be a hypocrite, even for you.”

“You should remember that you are his father,” said the old lady, half indignant, half weeping; “whatever may have happened, as your father says, the child is not to blame.”

“No,” said the young man. “Do you mean me to go, now that I have done what you wanted? Am I to be dismissed, my business being over——”

“What do you mean, sir? said Lord Eskside, hotly; “you forget that you are speaking to your mother——”

“My mother has not a word nor a look for me!” cried Richard. “She wants me for nothing but this gipsy brat, that I may own him, and advance him to my own place. I say it is hard on a man. I come back here, after years; and the first words that are said to me are—not to welcome me home—but to upbraid me that I do not grow maudlin all in a moment over this child.”

“Richard!” cried the old lady, with a sharp tone of pain in her voice; “do you want me to think that though I have got your son I have lost mine?”

“That must be as you will, mother; you seem to prefer him,” said Richard, in high offence. It was the first quarrel they had ever had in their lives; for through all his youthful errors she had stood by him always. I do not know what demon of perversity, vexation, and personal

annoyance worked in him ; but I do know the intense and silent disappointment with which his mother's heart closed its open doors—wide open always to him—and she turned away, all her joy changed into bitterness. When she came to think of it, she blamed herself, saying to herself that she had been injudicious in thrusting the strange little new-comer upon him the very moment of his arrival ; but then she had judged him by herself—what can mortal do more ?—and had believed that the boy would be his first thought.

In this way a cloud fell on the house from the very moment of Richard's return. His was not the prodigal's return, notwithstanding his long banishment and his great error. He had done more harm to his father's house than many a profligate son could have done ; yet he was not wicked, but virtuous, and could not be received as a prodigal. And he, for his part, was warmly conscious of personal blamelessness, though his position, so far as other people knew, was that of one to whom much had been forgiven—a complication which was very productive of irritating feelings. I do not mean to say that the cloud lasted, or that Richard went

to his room that night unreconciled with his mother. On the contrary, when Lady Eskside followed him there, with a woman's yearning, to wipe out every trace of the misunderstanding, her boy fell upon her neck as when he had been really a boy, and kissed her, and did all but lift up his voice and weep, according to the pathetic language of Scripture. Even yet, after the recollection of his petulance was thus effaced, the shock she had received tingled through his mother's heart, and indeed through her physical frame, which was beginning to be more sensitive by reason of age, vigorous woman though she was. Even without any painful occurrences in the interval, a visit like this, paid after years of separation, is often a painful experiment. The son of Lord Eskside, a homely Scots lord, with few interests which were not national, or even local, was a very different person from the Hon. Richard Ross, senior *attaché* of the British Legation at Florence, whose life had fallen into grooves entirely different from those of home. Though he returned to all the soft kindness of his natural manner, the keen observation of the two women who were watching him (for Mary was little less interested than Lady Eskside)

soon made out that Richard took little interest in his father's talk, and was quickly fatigued by his mother's questions. He did not care for the parties of country neighbours who were asked to meet him. "Of course, my dear mother, whoever you please," he would say, with a faint little contraction in his smooth forehead; but then probably that was because those country neighbours knew all about him, and understood that they were invited to eat the fatted calf, and celebrate a prodigal's return.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER this first experience of his feeling on the subject, Lady Eskside, though with a painful effort, wisely resolved to avoid further embarrassment by letting things fall into their natural course, and making no effort to thrust his child upon Richard's notice. The little fellow, already familiar with the house, and fully reconciled, with a child's ease and *insouciance*, to the change in his lot, ran about everywhere, making the great hall resound with his voice, and beginning to reign over Harding and the rest of the servants, as the spoiled darling, the heir of the race, is apt to do, especially in the house of its grandparents. The only person Val was shy of was his father, who took little or no notice of him, but after his first introduction expressed no active feeling towards the child one way or another. Perhaps, indeed, Richard was slightly

ashamed of that uncalled-for demonstration of his feelings. Valentine was his son, whether he liked it or not, and must be his heir and representative as well as his father's ; and though it never occurred to him to contemplate the moment when he himself should reign in his father's stead, he felt it wise to make up his mind that his boy should do so, and to give his parents the benefit of his own experience as to Val's education. "You must be prepared for an ungovernable temper and utter unreasonableness," he said to his mother, making a decided and visible effort to open the subject.

"My dear, there is nothing of the kind," cried Lady Eskside, eagerly ; "the bairn is but a bairn, and thoughtless—but nothing of the kind can I see——"

"He is seven years old, and he is fooled to the top of his bent—everybody gives in to him," said Richard. "Mark my words, mother,—this is what you will have to strive against. Self-control is unknown to that development of character. So long as they don't care very much for anything, all may go well ; but the moment that he takes a fancy into his head——"

Mary was present at this interview, and it

was not in human nature to refrain from a glance at his mother to see how she received this lofty delineation of a character which Richard evidently thought entirely different from his own. Lady Eskside saw the glance, and understood it, and faltered in her reply.

“Many do that, my dear,” she said, meekly, “that are gentle enough in appearance. I will remember all the hints you give me. But Val, though he is very high-spirited, is a good child. I think I shall be able to manage him.”

“Send him to school,” said Richard—“that is the best way ; let him find his level at school. Send him to Eton, if you like, when he is old enough, but in the mean time, if my advice is worth anything, put him under some strict master who will keep him well in hand, at once. My dear mother, you are too good, you will spoil him. With the blood he has in his veins he wants a firmer hand.”

“My hand is getting old, no doubt,” said Lady Eskside, with a little glow of rising colour.

“I do not mean that ; you are not old—you will never be old,” said her son, with that flattery which mothers love. This put the disagreeable parts of his previous speech out of

her mind. She smiled at her boy, and said, "Nonsense, Richard!" with fond pleasure. To be sure it was nonsense; but then nonsense is often so much better than the sagest things which wisdom itself can say.

As for the meeting with Mary Percival, that was got over more easily than she herself could have expected. There were so many other things in Richard's mind that he took her presence there the first evening as a matter of course; and though that too had its sting, she was so great a comfort and help to them all in the excitement and embarrassment involved in the first meeting, that Mary was made into a person of the first importance—a position which always sheds balm upon the mind of one who has been, or thinks she has been, slighted. This state of comfort was somewhat endangered next morning, when Richard thought it proper to express his sense of her great kindness in coming to meet him. "It was very good of you," he said—"like yourself; you were always much kinder to me than I deserved." Now this is not a kind of acknowledgment which sensitive women are generally much delighted to receive, from men of their own age at least.

“Was I?” said Mary, trying to laugh; “but in this case at least I had no intention of being kind. I was here before there was any question of your coming; and I do not know that I should have stayed—for when she has you, Lady Eskside wants no other companion—but that I was very anxious to know about Val.”

“I ought to be grateful to Val,” said Richard; “he seems to have supplanted me with all my friends—even my mother is more interested, a great deal, in Val’s digestion, than she is in my tastes, nowadays. I have to fall back upon the consolation of all whose day is over. It was not always so.”

There was the slightest touch of bitterness in this, which partially conciliated Mary, though it would be difficult to tell why.

“I suppose that is a consolation,” she said. “I feel it too; but in your case there is no occasion. They worship the child because he is your son.”

“Yes, it is a consolation,” said Richard, “so far as anything can console one for the loss of opportunities, the change of circumstances. I find it safer to say nothing on such subjects, and to live among people who know nothing; but

now that I am forced to stand here again, to recollect all that might have been——”

It was a still afternoon, the sun shining with lavish warmth and force, the grass growing, the leaves opening, so that you could almost see their silent haste of progress. They were standing on the terrace outside the windows, looking down over the brown woods all basking in the sunshine, to Esk, which showed here and there in a wider eddy of foam round some great boulder which interrupted his course. It was too early for the twitter of swallows; but some of those hardy birds that dwell all the year at home were interchanging their genial babble, deep among the multitudinous branches, and a few daring insects hummed in the air which was so full of sunshine. Floods of golden crocus had come out on all the borders. It was not the moment for recollection; but these words raised a swell and expansion of feeling in Mary's heart which it was not safe to indulge. Soft moisture came to her eyes. Happily that rush of sensation was not strong enough to make her wretched, but it confused her so much that she could not reply.

“All the same,” said Richard, quickly, “I do

not agree with Browning in his rapture over an English spring. You should see Italy at this season : everything here is pale, a mere shadow of the radiance yonder. From Bellosguardo, for instance, looking down upon Florence ; you have never been in Italy, Mary?—a sky to which this is darkness, air all lambent with light and warmth, such towers, such roofs rising up into it, and the Val-d'Arno stretching away in delicious distance, like the sea, as ignorant people say—as if the sea could ever be so full of grace and interest ! It is, I suppose, the junction of art with exquisite nature which gives such a landscape its great charm. Here we have nature to be sure, pretty enough in its way ; but everything that man touches is monstrous. Those square horrible houses ! Happily we don't see them here.”

The soft flow of feeling which had risen in Mary's mind, and had filled her eyes with moisture, suddenly turned into gall. “No,” she said, “I have never been in Italy. I don't know that I want to go. I prefer to think my own country the most beautiful in the world.”

“Well,” said Richard, “perhaps if you are .

obliged to live in it all your life it is the most philosophical way."

How little Mary was thinking of philosophy at that moment! It was well for her that his mother came out from the open window, ready to walk down to the village, which she had made her son promise somewhat unwillingly to do. "Mary will go with us," Lady Eskside had said as an inducement to Richard, not perhaps taking Mary's inclinations much into account; for, of course (she reckoned securely), Mary would put her own feelings in her pocket rather than take away a motive from Richard to do his duty; and there could be no doubt that it was his duty to visit the old people who remembered him, and who would be wounded if he took no notice of them. "We must go to our old Merran's, your nurse that used to be. She is married to the smith, you remember, Richard? and doing well, I believe, though always a great gossip, as she was when she was a young woman. Her son has come to be under-gamekeeper, and your father thinks he will give him one of the lodges if he turns out well, for he is going to be married," said Lady Eskside, walking briskly down the winding path

through the wood, which was shorter than the avenue,—and full of a country lady's satisfaction in that sway over her humble neighbours and full knowledge of their concerns which is so good for both parties. Richard went dutifully by her side, and listened at least; while Mary came behind with little Valentine in wonderful new fine clothes, velvet and lace, the strangest contrast to his former appearance. He had been a beautiful child in his poor garments; he was like a little prince now, with aristocrat (a stranger would have said) written in every fine line of those features, upon which the noble father and the vagrant mother had both impressed their image. The mother not being by, the child was universally wondered over for his resemblance to his father; but to that father's eyes Val had nothing that had not come to him from the other—that other who had once been Richard's idol, and now was his enemy and his shame.

Merran Miller, you may be sure, had heard every word of the story, and more, and knew exactly how the beautiful boy, in his fantastic, costly dress, had been brought to Rossraig, and remembered how she had herself seen him make

his entry into his future kingdom, muddy and crying, "a beggar-wean" by the side of the mother who went to lodge at Jean Macfarlane's. She knew it all, but this did not lessen the warmth of her enthusiasm for Mr Richard's boy, the bonnie wee gentleman who was so like his papaw. "Eh, bless him, he's like a prince! I wish the queen herself might have the like!" she cried, with all the loyalty of an old retainer, and wiped her eyes with her apron at thought of the kindness of Mr Richard coming so far to see "the like of me!" Richard after he had said all that was civil to his old nurse, fell back, while his mother inquired into her domestic affairs, and informed her of Lord Eskside's intended favour to the young gamekeeper who was about to be married. "We cannot forget that you were a good nurse to our boy," said the old lady, gracious in her happiness; "and as Providence has been good to us, giving us back our grandchild, who is the heir, and his father at the same time, my lord and myself take a pleasure in seeing other folk happy too." "Eh, my lady, but you're kind and good! and what can I say to you for my Willie—for such a grand start in life!" cried Merran, once more

applying her apron to her eyes. Richard strayed aside, and would have fallen back upon Mary, not feeling much interest in this conversation, had not Mary, still affronted, eluded his address.

But as he looked round the cottage, something which interested him still more attracted his eye. It was the "aumrie" or oak press in which Merran and her mother before her had kept their "napery" for ages. The connoisseur rushed at it, and examined every line of its old carving; he opened the doors and looked over all the drawers and intricacies inside. "Here is something as fine as any piece of furniture in your house. Ask her if she will part with it," he said rapidly to his mother in French. His blue eyes sparkled with pleasant excitement, and his colour rose. Since he came back, nothing—not his unknown child, not his parents, not Mary, nor the associations of home—had given him so warm a glow of pleasurable feeling. He was in his natural element once more.

It became still more apparent, however, and in a more agreeable way, how much Richard was changed when the first dinner-party convoked in his honour assembled at Rossraig. The best people in the county were there, straining a

point to show the dear old Esksides (as the Dowager-Duchess herself said) that for their sake their son's misdoings would be overlooked, and himself received again as if nothing had happened. They all came prepared to be kind to him, to forget the disgrace he had brought upon himself and his family, and to condone all past offences on condition of future good conduct. But lo ! Richard was civil to the people who had intended to be good to *him*—he received them with the quiet self-assured air of a man of the world, which was ever so far removed from that of the conscious offender against social laws whom they had come to meet. He spoke with a certain gentle authority as a man much better acquainted with the great world and the highest levels of life than were his critics—giving them pieces of information about political matters, and deciding which was the real version of fashionable scandals in a way which struck the neighbours dumb. “My dears, we are all under a delusion,” said the same Dowager-Duchess whom we have already quoted, addressing a little group in the corner of the drawing-room to which they had retired to compare notes, and make their astonished comments on leaving the

dinner-table. "Depend upon it it's no tramp he has married, but some foreign princess. He's no more ashamed of himself than I am." And, indeed, a rumour to this effect ran through all Mid-Lothian. In the dining-room all the gentlemen were equally impressed. Before they rose from table, Sir John Gifford, the greatest landowner in the district, and son-in-law to the Marquess of Tranent, asked Richard's opinion as to what the Ministry would do about the then existing crisis (I do not remember what it was) in foreign politics; and they all listened to what he said about the state of feeling in Italy, and the condition of the smaller courts, as if it had been gospel. "That son of Eskside's, whatever he may have done to compromise himself in his youth, is a rising man, you may take my word for it," Sir John said solemnly at the next assembly of the county. "And the less we inquire into most men's youth the better, my dear Sir John," said the Dowager-Duchess, of whose tongue most people stood in awe; and Sir John coloured, and felt more and more sympathetic with Dick Ross; for he, too, had known the drawbacks of a *jeunesse orageuse*.

This revolution was made not gradually, but

in a single evening. The first dinner-party at Rossraig was intended more or less to represent that entertainment at which the fatted calf was eaten ; but in the curious change of sentiment that ensued, there was no more thought of fatted calves. The indulgent reception intended to be given to the exile, almost the outlaw, of whom every one had spoken for years with bated breath, turned imperceptibly into the welcome accorded to a distinguished guest. Richard's manners were allowed to be perfect ; he had all the *savoir vivre*, the easy grace, the perfect self-possession of a man of the world. He knew everybody, he had seen everything ; he was learned in art of every description, from the old masters in painting to lace and china ; and every lady in the county who possessed either was proud of his approbation. Perhaps he was not quite so great out of doors, where neither agriculture nor sport were in his way ; but men forgive much to a political authority, as women do to a connoisseur, and Richard's visit was an event in the neighbourhood. Lady Eskside's feelings on witnessing this revolution were of the strangest. She watched it with a certain consternation, half frightened, half triumphant ;

the poor boy's humiliation and sufferings, she said to herself, were all being repaid to him ; yet Lady Eskside was a just woman, and I do not think she was quite sure that Richard deserved to be thus received with an ovation. But where was there ever a mother who did not glow with pride and happiness to see her son the observed of all observers, the hero of her world ? Mary Percival, who stood by and looked on closely, a spectator less prejudiced in Richard's favour, yet full of the keenest interest, wondered still more, judging him differently in her heart. Mary's feelings were of a kind which would not bear analysing. She could not keep from watching him, she heard everything that was said of him, she noted his words and actions with a keen and never-failing concern ; but this wondering interest, and a partial amusement which pained herself, yet would not be altogether subdued, were not sympathy. She seemed to herself to be behind the scenes, and to see more than the rest did ; and by this means it came about that the rush of blood to her heart, and the thrill through all her frame with which Mary had acknowledged Richard's approach at first in spite of herself, died away and left her quite calm as all

the world awoke to his merits. This second and less important revolution Lady Eskside perceived dimly, but did not understand.

However, Richard's sudden popularity was the most fortunate incident possible for his child. Many people, after the first eager interest with which they had received the romantic story of little Val's first appearance at Rossraig, began to doubt it because it was so romantic, and pointed out to each other the much more likely and sensible way of accounting for it. "The beggar-wife is all a myth, depend upon it," said the Dowager-Duchess,—“a myth founded upon the popular conviction that Dick Ross was unfortunate in his marriage. Most of us are unfortunate in our marriages; but it seldom comes to that sort of thing. No, no; depend upon it, the child came with his father, as was natural and proper. What better explanation would you have?” There can be no doubt that this method of introducing a child who is heir to a peerage is a much more comprehensible and reasonable one than a wild tale by which he was represented as having been thrust in at the hall-door on a stormy night. There had been much excitement caused by the story; but that very

excitement was a proof to many sober people that it was ridiculous. Why search further ? they said. His father had come home on a visit, a very rising young man, and extremely agreeable, and he had brought the child with him. Valentine's appearance confirmed the district in this sensible view of the question. In his velvet tunic and collar of falling lace, he was utterly unlike anything but a dainty little dandy born to luxury and bred with every care, whose cheek the winds had never been allowed to touch rudely. To look at the child was quite enough, said many. He to have been wandering about the country with a tramp !—the idea was preposterous. He was a little aristocrat all over—from his dark curls to the buckles on his dainty shoes. And when the gentry of the country inquired, as they almost all did individually, into the origin of the other absurd story, it was universally traced to the servants' hall. My Lady Gifford's maid had got it from Joseph the footman at Rossraig, and the Dowager-Duchess had heard it from an under-gardener who kept the lodge, and with whom she did not disdain an occasional gossip. There is no limit to the imagination of persons in that class of

life, many people said ; and it became a mark of fashion on Eskside by which you could decide whether any individual really belonged to the cream of society or not. Belief in the common-sense theory that (of course) Richard had brought his son to his mother's care, was for a long time the shibboleth of the county. Those who had faith in the romantic part of the story were given over to a reprobate imagination, and stamped themselves vulgar at once by adopting a theory so ridiculous. Nothing could have been more fortunate for the young heir. Lady Eskside awoke to the importance of maintaining this "sensible" view before she had been tempted to utter the true occasion of her joy to any dear friend. Nobody knew the real facts of the case except Mary and the servants. Mary was safe as Lady Eskside herself, and as careful of the honour of the family ; and as for the servants, with their well-known love of the marvellous, how could any one pin his faith on them ? Thus circumstances arranged themselves for little Val a hundred times better than the most sanguine imagination could have believed.

But the story lingered in the lower levels of society, where nobody was deceived. Merran

Miller herself, though she had been Richard's nurse, and felt herself a partisan of the family, paused to give an elaborate description of the child and his finery to her friends, when, throwing her apron over her cap, she rushed out to proclaim her Willie's good fortune to all the world : " I wish I was at the bottom o't," cried Merran ; " it's an awfu' queer story. I'm real glad now that it came into my head to give the weans a piece, and that I was civil to the woman. But to see yon bairn decked up like a cheeny image ! and him gaun greeting with a beggar-wife nae later than Wednesday at e'en—— ! "

CHAPTER VII.

“RICHARD, there is one disagreeable subject which, as you said nothing about it, I have avoided as long as possible ; but I must speak now, before you go.”

Lady Eskside had led her son out upon the terrace the evening before he was to leave. She was dressed for dinner in her black satin gown, with a lace cap and stomacher, which even his fastidious eye approved. She had come to the age when little change of costume is possible. Sometimes she wore velvet instead of satin, but that was about all the variety she made, and her lace was her only vanity. She had a crimson Indian scarf thrown over her head and shoulders. Her erect old figure was still as trim, and her step as springy, as any girl's. She was the picture of an old lady, everybody allowed ;—and it was true she was old—yet full of an un-

quenchable youth. She had taken her son by the arm in the interval before dinner, and led him out into the open air to speak to him. Perhaps it was an inopportune moment ; but it was a subject for which she felt a few minutes were enough, as it could not but be painful to both.

“ Well, mother,” he said, with a tone of resignation. He was going next day, which gave him strength to bear this ordeal, whatever its cause might be.

“ I have said nothing to you—indeed, indeed, I have wished to say nothing—about—— Richard, my dear boy, listen to me with patience, I will not keep you long——about—Val’s mother—your wife.”

“ What about her ?” said Richard, with harsh brevity. He made a movement almost as if to throw off his mother’s arm.

“ My dear, you must not think this subject is less disagreeable to me than to you. Nothing has been said about her for a long time——”

“ And why should anything be said about her ?” said Richard. “ In such a hopeless business, what is the advantage of discussion ? She has chosen her path in life, which is not the same as mine.”

His soft and gentle face set into a harsh rigidity : it grew stern, almost severe. "Come indoors, mother—the evening gets cold," he added, after a pause.

"Just a word, Richard—just one word ! Do you not see a trace of something different rising in her ? She has brought back your boy : I suppose she thinks, poor thing, that it is just she should have one of them——"

"Mother," said Richard, "I am astonished at your charity. You say, poor thing. Do you remember that she has ruined your son's life ?"

Lady Eskside made no answer. She looked at him wistfully, with an evident repression of something that rose to her lips.

"She has been my curse," said Richard, vehemently. "For God's sake, if she will leave us alone, let us leave her alone. She has made my life a desert. Is it choice, do you think, that makes me an outcast from my own country ? that shuts me out from everything your son and my father's son ought to have been ? Why cannot I take my proper place in society—my natural place ? You know well enough what the answer is—she is the cause. She has been my ruin : she is the curse of my life."

He spoke almost with passion, growing not red but white in the intensity of his feelings. Lady Eskside looked at him, kept looking at him, with a face in which sympathy shone—along with some other expression not so easy to be defined.

“Richard,” she said, in a low voice, “all you say is true—who can know it better than I do ? but oh, my dear, mind ! she could have had no power on your life, if you had not given it to her—of your free will.”

“So, then, it is I alone who am to blame ?” said Richard, with a laugh, which was half rage and half scorn. “I might have known that was what you were sure to say.”

“Yes, you might have known it,” said Lady Eskside—“for nothing, I hope, will ever shut my mind to justice ; but not because I am in the habit of reproaching you, Richard—for that I never did, even when you had made my heart sore ; but we need not quarrel about it, you and me. What I want to know is, if you do not see now the still greater importance of getting some hold upon her—for Valentine’s—for all our sakes ?”

“You will never get a hold upon her : it is

folly to dream of it. She is beyond your reach, or that of any reasonable creature. Mother, come in—the bell must have rung for dinner.”

“I have written to the man we employed before,” said Lady Eskside, hurriedly. “This was what I wanted to say. Do not stare at me, Richard! I will not put up with it. I must do my duty as I see it, and whatever comes of it. I have given him all the particulars I could, and told him to try every means, and lose no time. Her heart must be soft after giving up her child.”

“So,” said Richard, with a quivering pale smile, “you consult me what should be done after all the steps have been taken. This is kind! You have taken care to provide for my domestic comfort, mother——”

“If we should find her—which God grant!—I will take charge of her,” said Lady Eskside, with a flush of resentment. “Neither your comfort nor your pride shall be interfered with—never fear.”

“You are most considerate, mother,” said Richard. “Your house, then, is to be finally closed to me, after the effort I have made to

revisit it? Well, after all, I suppose the Palazzo Graziani suits me best."

"You are cruel to say so, Richard," said his mother. Tears came quickly to her bright old eyes; but at that moment Lord Eskside looked out from one of the drawing-room windows, and stayed the further progress of the quarrel.

"What are you two doing there, philandering like a lad and a lass?" said the old lord. "Richard, bring your mother in; she'll catch cold. There's a heavy dew falling, though it's a fine night."

"It is my mother who insists on staying out in the night air, which I disapprove of," said Richard. "The Italians have a prejudice on the subject of sunset. They think it the most dangerous hour of the day. I am so much of an Italian now—and likely to be more so—that I have taken up their ideas; at least so far as sunset is concerned."

"So much an Italian—and likely to be more so!—I hope not, I hope not, Richard," said his father. "After this good beginning you have made, it will be hard upon your poor mother and me if we cannot tempt you home."

"Or drive me away for ever," said Richard,

so low that his mother only heard him. She grasped his arm with a sudden vehemence of mingled love and anger, which for the moment startled him, and then dropped it, and stepped in through the window, letting the subject drop altogether. She was unusually bright at dinner, excited, as it seemed, by the sharp little encounter she had just had, which had stirred up all her powers. Lord Eskside, who was not of a fanciful nature, and whose moods did not change so quickly, regarded her with some suspicion. He was himself depressed by his son's approaching departure, and somewhat disposed to be angry, as he generally was when depressed.

"You must have been saying something to your mother to raise her spirits," he said, after one or two ineffectual attempts to subdue her—when Richard and he were left to their claret.

"Not I, sir," said Richard, "on the contrary ; my mother has ideas with which I disagree entirely."

"Ay, boy, to be sure," said the old lord, "she was saying something to me. Then it was opposition, and not satisfaction as I thought ? You see, Richard, women have their own ways of thinking. We cannot always follow their

reasoning ; but in the main your mother's perhaps right."

And having said this, in mild backing up of his wife's bolder suggestions, Lord Eskside changed the subject and spoke of the property, and of new leases he was granting, and the improvement of the estate.

"There is a great deal of land about Lasswade that might be feued very advantageously—but I would not do it without ascertaining your feeling on the subject, Richard. It can't make much difference in my time ; but in the course of nature that time can't be very long."

"I wish it might be a hundred years," said Richard, with no false sentiment ; for indeed, apart from natural affection, to be Lord Eskside and live up here in the paternal château among the woods did not charm his imagination much.

"That is all very pleasant for you to say," said his father, receiving and dismissing the compliment with a wave of his hand ; "but, as I say, in the course of nature my time must be but short. There is just the question about the amenities upon which every man has his own opinions——"

“The—— what did you say ?” asked Richard, puzzled.

“The amenities of the place. It is true the village is not visible from the house, but if in the future you were to find the new houses that might be built an eyesore——”

“That is entirely a British notion,” Richard answered, with a smile ; “I think great part of the beauty in Italy is from the universal life you see everywhere—villages climbing up every hill-side. No ; I have no English prejudices on that point.”

“I don’t know that it’s an English prejudice,” said Lord Eskside, who never forgot the distinction between English and Scotch as his son invariably did. “Then you don’t object to feu-ing ? Willie Maitland will be a proud man. He has told me often I might add a thousand a-year to the income of the property by judicious feus. They will be taken up by all kind of shopkeeper bodies, retired tradesmen, and the like—a consideration which gives me little trouble, Richard, but may perhaps act upon you. No ? Well, you’re a philosopher : they’re bad at an election ; they’re totally beyond control—unless, indeed, your mother and I were to put ourselves out of

our way to visit and make of them ; but we would want a strong inducement for that."

Here Lord Eskside looked at his son with a look of veiled entreaty, not saying anything ; and Richard knew his father well enough to comprehend.

"You must not think of that, sir,—indeed you must not. Am I in a position to be set up before the county, and have every fact of my life brought up against me ? No, father, anything else you like—but let me stay among strangers, where the circumstances of my existence need not be inquired into."

"I don't know that you have anything to be ashamed of," said Lord Eskside, with a husky voice.

"Anyhow, I cannot offer myself as a subject to be discussed by all the world," said Richard. Courage, he said to himself—to-morrow and all this will be over ! He made a strenuous effort to be patient, strengthened by the thought.

"Well, Richard, if you have made up your mind—but you know our wishes," said the old lord with a sigh. Little Val had been exercising his grandfather's temper by his excursions round the table a little while before. He had

been obstinate and childishly disobedient till he was carried off by the ladies ; and Lord Eskside, somewhat out of temper, as I have said, by reason of being depressed in spirits, had been ready to augur evil of the child's future career. But the contradiction of Val's father was more grave. When he resisted his parent's wishes it was of little use to be angry. The old lord sighed with a dreary sense that nothing was to be made by struggling. Of all hopeless endeavours that of attempting to make your children carry out the plans you have formed, is (he thought to himself) the most hopeless. Everything might favour the project which would make a man's friends happy, and satisfy all their aspirations for him ; when, lo ! a causeless caprice, a foolish dislike, would balk everything. It is true that he had for years resigned the hope of seeing Richard take his true place in the county, and show at once to the new men what the good old blood was worth, and to the old gentry that the Rosses were still their leaders, as they had been for generations ; but this visit had brought a renewal of all the old visions. He had seen with a secret pride, of which, even to his wife, he had not breathed a word, his son

assume with ease a social position above his brightest hopes. The county had not only received him, but followed him, admired him, listened to his opinions as those of an oracle. To bring him in for the county after this, and to carry his election by acclamation, would be child's-play, his father thought. But Richard did not see it. He was, or assumed to be, indifferent to the applause of "the county." He cared nothing for his own country, or for that blessedness of dwelling among his own people which Scripture itself has celebrated. No wonder that Lord Eskside should sigh. "I believe you think more of these fiddling play-acting foreigners," he said, after an interval of silence, during which his eyebrows and his under lip had been in full activity, "than for all our traditions, and all the duties of your condition in life."

"Every man has his taste, sir," Richard answered, with a shrug of his shoulders, which irritated his father still more deeply.

"Well, you are old enough to judge for yourself," he said, getting up abruptly from the table. A great many things to say to his son had been in the old lord's mind. He had meant

to expound to him his own view of the politics of the day, at home, to which naturally Richard had not paid much attention. He had meant to impress upon him the line the Rosses had always taken in questions exclusively Scotch. But all this was cut short by Richard's refusal even to consider the question. Being sad beforehand by reason of his son's departure, I leave you to imagine how melancholy-cross and disappointed Lord Eskside was now.

"What! is that imp still up?" he said, as going into the drawing-room he stumbled over his own best-beloved stick, upon which Val had been riding races round the room. "How dared you take my stick, sir? If you do that again you shall be whipped."

"You daren't whip me," cried saucy Valentine. "Grandma says I am never to be frightened no more—but I ain't frightened; and I'm to have what I want. Grandma! he is taking my stick away!"

"*Your* stick, ye little whipper-snapper! No; one generation succeeds another soon enough, but not so soon as that. Send the boy to his bed, my lady. He ought to have been there an hour ago."

"Just for this night," said Lady Eskside, as

she caught the little rebel, and, holding him close in her arms, smoothed the ruffled curls on his forehead, and whispered in his ear that he was to be good, and not to make grandpa angry. "Just for this night—as his father is going away."

"Oh, his father!" said her husband, with a slight snort of irritation which showed Lady Eskside that the last evening had been little more satisfactory to him than to herself. Her own voice had faltered a little as she spoke of Richard's departure, and she looked at her son wistfully, with an incipient tear in the corner of her eye, hoping (though she might have known better) for some response; but Richard, as bland and gentle as ever, had seated himself by Mary, to whom he was talking, and altogether ignored his mother's furtive appeal. Valentine gave her enough to do just at that moment to hold him, which, perhaps, was well for her; and Lord Eskside walked away to the other end of the room, pretending to look at the books which were scattered about the tables, and whistling softly under his breath, which was one of his ways of showing irritation. Even Mary was agitated she scarcely knew

why ; not on Richard's account, she said to herself, but as feeling the suppressed excitement in the house, the secret sense of disappointment and deep heart-dissatisfaction which was in those two old people, who had but little time before them to be happy in, and so wanted the sunshine of life all the more. Richard's visit had been a success in one sense. It had answered to their highest hopes, and more than answered ; but yet in more intimate concerns, in a still closer point of view, it had been a failure ; and of this the father and mother were all the more tremulously sensible that he showed so little consciousness of it—nay, no consciousness at all. He sat for a long time by Mary, talking to her of the most ordinary subjects, while his mother sat silent in her chair, and Lord Eskside, at the other end of the room, made - believe to look for something in the drawers of one of the great cabinets, opening and shutting them impatiently. Richard sat and talked quite calmly during these demonstrations, unaffected by them. He kissed his child coolly on the forehead, and bid him good-bye, with something like a sentiment of internal gratitude to be rid of the little plague, who

rather repelled than attracted him. Mary went to her room shortly after Valentine's removal, which was effected with some difficulty, pleading a headache, and in reality unable to bear longer the painful atmosphere of family constraint—Lady Eskside's half-appealing, half-affronted looks, and anxious consciousness of every movement her son made, and the old lord's irritation, which was more demonstrative. Then the three who were left gathered together round the fire, and some commonplace conversation—conversation studiously kept on the level of commonplace—ensued. Richard was to start early next morning, and proposed to take leave of his mother that night—"not to disturb her at such an unearthly hour," he said. "Did you ever leave the house at any hour when I did not make you your breakfast and see you away?" Lady Eskside asked, with a thrill of pain in her voice. And as she left the room, she grasped his hand, and looked wistfully in his face, while he stooped to kiss her. "Richard," she said in a half whisper, as the two faces approached close to each other, "for myself I do not ask anything—but, oh, mind, your father is an old man! Please him if you can."

Lord Eskside was leaning upon the mantelpiece, gazing into the fire. He continued the same commonplace strain of talk when his son came back to him. How badly the trains corresponded ; how hard it would be, without waiting at cross stations and losing much time, to accomplish the journey. " And as you have to make so early a start you should go to your bed soon, my boy," he said, and held out his hand ; then grasping his son's, as his wife had done, added hastily, his eyebrows working up and down—" What I have been saying to you, Richard, may look less important to you than it does to me ; but if you would make an effort to please your mother ! She's been a good mother to you ; and neither I nor anything in the world can give her the pleasure that you could. Good night. I shall see you in the morning ;" and Lord Eskside took up his candle and hurried away.

The effect of this double appeal, so pathetically repeated, was not, I fear, all that it should have been. When he reached his own room, Richard yawned, and stretching his arms above his head—" Thank heaven ! I shall be out of this to-morrow," he said.

CHAPTER VIII.

I HAVE now to change the scene and bring before the notice of the reader another group, representing another side of the picture, with interests still more opposite to those of Lord Eskside and his heir-apparent than were, even, the interests of that heir-apparent's mother. But to exhibit this other side, I have fortunately no need to descend to the lower levels of society, to Jean Macfarlane's disreputable tavern, or any haunt of doubtful people. On the contrary, I know no region of more unblemished respectability or higher character than Moray Place in Edinburgh, which is the spot I wish to indicate. Strangers and tourists do not know much of Moray Place. To them—and great is their good-fortune—Edinburgh means the noble crowned ridge of the Old Town, fading off misty and mysterious into the wooded valley beneath ;

the great crags of the castle rising into mid-sky, and the beautiful background of hills. Upon this they gaze from the plateau of Princes Street ; and far might they wander without seeing anything half so fine as that storied height, lying grey in sunshine, or twinkling with multitudinous lights, as the blue poetic twilight steals over the Old Town. But on the other side of that middle ground of Princes Street lies a New Town, over which our grandfathers rejoiced greatly as men rejoice over the works of their own hands, despite the fullest acknowledgment of the work of their ancestors. There lie crescents, squares, and places, following the downward sweep of the hill, with, it is true, no despicable landscape to survey (chiefly from the back windows), yet shutting themselves out with surprising complacency from all that distinguishes Edinburgh amid the other cities of the world. Nobody can say that we of the Scots nation are not proud of our metropolis ; but this is how our fathers and grandfathers — acute humorous souls as most of them were, with a large spice of romance in them, and of much more distinctly marked individual character than we possess in our day—asserted the fundamental

indifference of human nature, in the long-run, to natural beauty. How comfortable, how commodious are those huge solid houses !—houses built for men to be warm in, to feast in, and gather their friends about them, but not with any æsthetical meaning. Of all these streets, and squares, and crescents, Moray Place perhaps is the most “palatial,” or was, at least, at the period of which I speak. Personally, I confess that it makes a very peculiar impression on me. Years ago, so many that I dare not count them, there appeared in the pages of Blackwood a weird and terrible story called the “Iron Shroud,” in which the feelings of an unhappy criminal shut up in an iron cell (I think, to make the horror greater, of his own invention) which by some infernal contrivance diminished every day, window after window disappearing before the wretch’s eyes, until at last the horrible prison fell upon him and became at once his grave and his shroud—were depicted with vivid power. This thrilling tale always returns to my mind when I stand within the grand and gloomy enclosure of Moray Place. It seems to me that the walls quiver and draw closer even while I look at them ; and if the circle were gradually to lessen,

one window disappearing after another, and the whole approaching slowly, fatally towards the centre, I should not be surprised. But in Edinburgh, Moray Place is, or was, considered a noble circus of houses, and nobody feels afraid to live in it. I suppose as it has now stood so long, it will never crash together, and descend on the head of some breathless wretch in the garden which forms its centre; but a superstitious dread of this catastrophe, I own, would haunt me if I were rich enough to be able to live in Moray Place.

Mr Alexander Pringle, however, never once thought of this when he established his tabernacle there. This gentleman was an advocate, to use the Scotch term—the cosmopolitan and universal term, instead of the utterly conventional and unmeaning appellation of barrister common to the English alone—at the Scotch bar. His father before him had been a W.S., or Writer to the Signet—a title of which I confess myself unable to explain the exact formal meaning. How these comparatively unimportant people came to be the heirs-at-law, failing the Rosses, of the barony of Eskside, I need not tell. Pringle is a name which bears no distinction in its mere

sound like Howard or Seymour ; but notwithstanding, it is what is called in Scotland "a good name ;" and this branch of the Pringles were direct descendants from one of the Eskside barons. When Dick Ross's misfortunes happened, and his wife forsook him, Mr Alexander Pringle, then himself recently married, producing heirs at a rate which would have frightened any political economist, and possessing a wife far too virtuous ever to think of running away from him, became all at once a person of consequence. He felt it himself more than any one, yet all society (especially in Moray Place) had felt it. By this time he had a very pretty little family, seven boys and one girl, all healthy, vigorous, and showing every appearance of long and prosperous life.

Fear not, dear reader ! I do not mean to follow in this history the fortunes of Sandy, Willie, Jamie, Val, Bob, Tom, and Ben. They were excellent fellows, and eventually received an admirable education at the Edinburgh Academy ; but I dare not enter upon the chronicle of such a race of giants. Val was born about the time that Richard Ross's children disappeared, and the Pringles christened the baby

Valentine Ross, feeling that this might be a comfort to the old lord, whose "name-son" had thus mysteriously disappeared. Mr Pringle spoke of the event as an "inscrutable dispensation," and lamented his cousin's strange misfortunes to everybody he encountered. But dreadful as the misfortune was, it made him several inches higher, and threw a wavering and uncertain glimmer of possible fortune to come over the unconscious heads of Sandy, Willie, Val, and the rest. They cared very little, but their father cared much, and was very wide awake, and constantly on the watch for every new event that might happen on Eskside. The seven years of quiet, during which nothing was heard of Richard's children, ripened his hopes to such an extent that he almost felt himself the next in succession; for a mild *dilettante* like Dick Ross, who always lived abroad, did not seem an obstacle worth counting. Perhaps he was in consequence a little less careful of his practice at the bar; for this tantalising shadow of a coronet had an effect upon his being which was scarcely justified by the circumstances. But at all events, though they managed to keep up their establishment in Moray Place, and to

give the boys a good education, the Pringles did not advance in prosperity and comfort as they ought to have done, considering how well-connected they were, and the "good abilities" of the head of the house. Though he would sometimes foolishly show a disregard for the punctilios of the law in his own person, and was now and then outwitted in an argument, yet Mr Pringle was understood to be an excellent lawyer; and he had a certain gift of lucidity in stating an argument which found him favour alike in the eyes of clients and of judges. Had he been a little more energetic, probably he would have already begun to run the course of legal preferment in Scotland. He was Sheriff of the county in which his little property lay; and at one time no man had a better chance of rising to the rank of Solicitor-General or even Lord Advocate, and of finally settling as Lord Pringle or Lord Dalrulzian (the name of his property) upon the judicial bench. But his progress was arrested by this shadow of a possible promotion with which his profession would have nothing to do. Lord Dalrulzian might be a sufficiently delightful title if no more substantial dignity was to be had, but

Lord Eskside was higher; and the man's imagination went off wildly after the hereditary barony, leaving the reward of legal eminence far in the background. Gradually he had built himself up with the thought of this advancement; and though they were by no means rich enough to afford it, nothing but his wife's persistent holding back would have kept him from sending Sandy, his eldest boy, to Eton, by way of preparing him for his possible dignity. For the days when boys were sent from far and near to the High School of Edinburgh are over; and it is now the Scottish parent's pride to make English schoolboys of his sons, and to eliminate from the speech of his daughters all trace of their native accent. Mrs Pringle, however, was prudent enough to withstand her husband's desire. "What would he do at Eton?" she said. "Learn English? If he's not content with the English you and I speak, it's a pity; and as for manners, he behaves himself very well in company as it is, and you'll never convince me that ill-mannered louts will be made into gentlemen by a year or two at a public school. You may send him if you like, Alexander—you're the master—but you will get no

countenance from me." When a well-conditioned husband is told that he is the master there is an end of him. Mr Pringle was not made of hard enough material to resist so strong an opposition ; and then it would have cost a great deal of money. " Well, my dear, we'll talk it over another time," he said, and put off the final decision indefinitely ; which was a virtual giving in without the necessity of acknowledging defeat.

After all this gradually growing satisfaction and confidence in his own prospects, it is almost impossible to describe the tremendous effect which the news of Richard's return, and of the strange events which had taken place at Ross-craig, had upon the presumptive heir. He spoke not a word to any one for the first two days, but went about his business moodily, like a man under the shadow of some deadly cloud. The first shock was terrible, and scarcely less terrible was the excitement with which he listened to every rumour that reached him, piecing the bits of news together. For a week he neglected his business ; forsook, except when his attendance was compulsory, the Parliament House ; and, if he could have had his will,

would have done nothing all day but discuss the astounding tale, which at first he declared to be entire fiction, a made-up story, and pretended to laugh at. He hung about his dressing-room door in the morning, while his wife finished her toilet, talking of it through the door-way ; he hovered round the breakfast-table, after he had finished his meal, neglecting his ' Scotsman ' ; he was continually appearing in the drawing-room when Mrs Pringle did not want him, and " deaved her," as she said, with this eternal subject. To no one else could he speak with freedom ; but this sweet privilege of wifehood, instead of being an unmingled good, often becomes, in the imperfection of all created things, a bore to the happy being who is thus elevated into the ideal position of her spouse's *alter ego*. Mrs Pringle was not sentimental, and she soon got heartily sick of the subject. She would have cheerfully sold, at any time, for a new dinner dress—a thing she was pretty generally in want of—all her chances, which she had no faith in, of ever becoming Lady Eskside.

"Don't you think, Alexander," she said, having been driven beyond endurance by his rejection of a proposed match at golf on Musselburgh

Links,—a thing which proved the profound gravity of the crisis,—“don’t you think that the best thing you could do would be to take the coach and go out to Lasswade, and inquire for yourself? Take Violet with you—a little fresh air would do her good ; and if you were to talk this over with somebody who knows about it, instead of with me, that know nothing more than yourself——”

“Go—to Lasswade !” said Mr Pringle—“that is a step that never occurred to me. No ; I have not been invited to Rossraig to meet Dick, and it would look very strange if I were to go where nobody is wanting me. If you think, indeed, that Vi would be better for a little change—— But no ; Lord Eskside would not like it—there would be an undignified look about it—an underhand look ; still, if you think an expedition would be good for Vi——”

It was thus that under pressure of personal anxiety a man maundered and hesitated who could give very sound advice to his clients, and could speak very much to the purpose before the Lords of Session. Mrs Pringle knew all this, and did not despise her husband. She felt that she herself was wiser in their own

practical concerns than he was, but gave him full credit for all his other advantages, and for that ability in his profession which did not always make itself apparent at home. And she had a great many things to do on this particular afternoon, and was driven nearly out of her senses, she allowed afterwards, by this eternal discussion about Dick Ross's children and the succession to Eskside.

"Do you remember," she said, exercising her ingenuity, with as little waste of words as possible—for the mother of seven sons, not to speak of one little daughter besides, who is not rich enough to keep a great many servants, has not much time to waste in talk—"that little cottage at the Hewan, which I was always so fond of? The children are fond of it too. As you are off your match, and have the afternoon to spare, go away down and see if the Hewan is let, and whether we can have it for the summer."

"But, my dear, it is not half big enough for us," Mr Pringle began.

His wife turned upon him a momentary look of impatience. "What does it matter whether it's big or little, when you want to see what is

going on?" she said. "Take the child with you, and ask about it. It would be fine to have such a place, to send Vi when the heat gets too much for her." These last words were spoken in perfect good faith, for people in Edinburgh keep up a fiction of believing that the heat is too much for them—as if they were in London or Paris, or anywhere else, where people love a yearly change.

"So it would," said Mr Pringle; "and you could go out yourself sometimes and spend a long day. It would do you good, my dear. I think I will go."

"Run and tell nurse to put on your best hat, Violet," said her mother; "and you may have your kid gloves, if you will be sure not to lose them. You are going out to the country with papa."

Little Violet rose from where she had been sitting, with a family of dolls round her, on the carpet. She had been giving her family their daily lessons, and felt it a very important duty. She was but six years old—one of those fair-haired little maidens who abound in Scotland, with hair of two shades of colour, much brighter in the half-curled locks which lay about her

shoulders than on her head. With these light locks she had dark eyes, an unusual combination, and pretty infant features, scarcely formed yet into anything which gave promise of beauty. She was so light that Sandy, her big brother, could hold her up on his hand, to the admiration of all beholders. One daughter in such a family holds an ideal position, such as few girls achieve otherwise at so early an age. Their little sister was the very princess of all these boys. The big ones petted and spoiled her, the little ones believed in and revered her. To the one she was something more dainty than any plaything—a living doll, the prettiest ornament in the house, and the only one which could be handled without breaking wantonly, on purpose to have them punished, in their hands; and to the others she was a small mother, quaintly unlike the big one, yet imposing upon them by her assumption of the maternal ways and authority. When she addressed the nursery audience with, “Now you ’ittle boys, mind what I say to you,” the babies acknowledged the shadow of authority, and felt that Vi wielded a visionary sceptre. She was very serious in her views of life, and held what might appear to some people exaggerated ideas

as to the guilt of spilling your tea upon your frock, or tearing your pinafore ; and was apt to wonder where naughty little children who did such things expected to go to, with an unswerving and perfectly satisfied faith in everlasting retribution, such as would have edified the severest believer. Violet awarded these immense penalties to very trifling offences, not being as yet wise enough to discriminate or get her landscape into perspective. Her dolls were taught their duty in the most forcible way, and she herself carried out her tenets by punishing them severely when they displeased her. She got up from the midst of them now, and though she had been lecturing them solemnly a few minutes before, huddled them up, with legs and arms in every kind of contortion, into a corner which was appropriated to her. She walked upstairs very gravely to be dressed, but made such a fuss about her kid gloves, that nurse, with two baby boys on her hands, was nearly driven to her wits' end. On ordinary occasions, Vi wore little cotton gloves, with the tops of the fingers sewed inside in a little lump, which made her small hands (as they used to make mine) extremely uncomfortable. When she was fully

equipped, she was a very trim little woman—not fine, but as imposing and dignified in her appearance as a lady of six can manage to be; and when the anxious heir-at-law to the Eskside barony came down-stairs with her to start on this mission of inquiry, she was very particular that he should have his umbrella nicely rolled, and that his hat should be brushed to perfection. She liked her papa to be neat, as she was, and took, in short, a general charge of him, as of all the house.

This, dear reader, is the villain of this history, who is bent on spoiling, if he can, the hero's prospects, and working confusion in all the arrangements of the Eskside family, for the advantage of himself and his Sandy, the next heir, failing Richard Ross's problematical children. But on this particular day when he lifted his little girl into the coach, and made her comfortable, and smiled at her as she chatted to him, notwithstanding all his preoccupations, he was not a very bad villain. He would have liked to turn out to the streets the little beggar's brat of whom he had heard such incredible stories, and who was supposed to be likely to supplant in his lawful inheritance himself and his handsome

boys ; but then he had never realised the individuality of this beggar's brat, while his heart was very much set upon his own children and their advantage—a state of mind not very uncommon. He was as good to little Violet as if he had been an example of all the virtues, and instead of feeling at all ashamed of so very small a companion, was as proud of her as if she had been a duchess. To see her brighten up as the coach rolled on through the green country roads distracted him for the first time from his all-absorbing anxiety ; and as they came in sight of the village of Lasswade, and he pointed out the river and the woods and the village houses to little Vi, he almost forgot all about the barony of Eskside. You would say that evil intentions could scarcely take very deep root in a heart so occupied ; but human nature is very subtle in its combinations, and it is curious how easily virtue can sometimes accommodate itself by the side of very ill neighbours. Mr Pringle had no idea or intention of working mischief, though mischief might no doubt arise by chance in his path. All that he wanted, so far as he was aware, was justice, and to make sure that there was no cuckoo's egg foisted into the nest at Eskside.

CHAPTER IX.

“Oh, sir, no, sir,” said the smiling landlord at the Black Bull, where Mr Pringle went to have some luncheon and to order “a machine,” to take Vi and himself to the Hewan—the little cottage, which was the ostensible end of his mission—“there’s different stories going about the country, but we must not believe all we hear. The real truth is, I’m assured by them that ought to know, that the little boy came over from foreign parts with his father, the Honourable Richard Ross, to be brought up as is befitting, in a decent-like house, and among folk that have some fear of God before their eyes,—which it’s no easy to find, so far as I can hear, abroad.”

“Came over with his father!” cried Mr Pringle, through whose soul this information smote like a sword. If this was the case, fare-

well to the beggar's brat theory, and to all hope both for Sandy and himself.

"Well, that's the most reasonable story," said the landlord ; "there's plenty of other nonsense flying about the country. What we a' heard at first was, that some gangrel body knockit loud and lang at the ha' door the night of that awfu' storm, and threw in a bundle, nigh knocking over auld Harding the butler ; and when lights were got—for the lamp was blown out by the wind—it was found to be this boy. It's an awfu' age for sensation this, and that's the sensational story, folk ca' it. But Mr Richard, there can be nae doubt, has been home direct from Florence and Eitaly, and what so likely as that he should bring the bairn himsel' ? So far as I can learn, a'budy that is anybody, so to speak, the gentry and them that ought to ken, believes he came with his father. The servants and folk about the town uphold the other story ; but you ken, sir, the kind of story that pleases common folk best ? Aye something wonderful ; fancy afore reason."

"But surely it is very easy to get to the bot-tom of it," said Mr Pringle, with a beating heart. "Was the child with Mr Ross, for instance, when he arrived ?"

“Na, I never heard that,” said the landlord, swaying over to the other side. “The carriage passed by our windows. So far as I could see, there was but himself inside, and his man on the box. We maunna inquire too close into details, sir—especially you that are a relation of the family.”

“That is exactly why it is so important I should know.”

“Well-a-well, sir! they do say, I allow,” said the man, sinking his voice, “that the little laddie was here before his father; that’s rather my own opinion—no that I ever saw him. They sent down here, about a week before Mr Ross came home, to inquire about a woman and a wean; nae woman or wean had been here. There was one I heard, at Jean Macfarlane’s on the other side of the bridge, which is a place no decent person can be expected to ken about.”

“And who was the woman?” said Mr Pringle, with breathless interest.

“Na, that’s mair than I can tell. Some say a randy wife that’s been seen of late about the country-side; some says one thing and some another. Auld Simon the postman and Merran Miller were twa I’m told that saw her; but this is a’ hearsay—a’ hearsay; I ken naething of my

own knowledge. I must say, however," added the landlord, seriously, "that I blame themselves up at the big house for most of the stir. They sent down inquiring and inquiring, putting things into folk's heads about this woman and the wean. My lord had a' them that saw her up to the house, and put them through an examination. It was not a prudent thing to do—it was that, more than anything else, that made folk begin to talk."

"And was that before Richard Ross came home?"

"Oh ay, sir—oh ay; a good week before."

"At the time, in short, that the child came?" said Mr Pringle, with legal clearness.

"Well, Mr Pringle—about the time the bairn was said to have come, I'll no deny; but a'boddy that's best able to judge has warned me no to build my faith on a coincidence like that. Maist likely it was nothing more than a co-inn-cidence. They're queer things, as you that are a lawyer must know."

"Yes, they are queer things," said Mr Pringle, with a flicker of hope; and then he changed the conversation, and began to inquire about the Hewan, and whether it was let for the season, or

if any one had been in treaty for it. "My wife has a fancy for the place. She knew it when she was young," he said, half apologetically.

"But it's a wee bit box of a place—no fit for your fine family. It would bring the roses, though, into little Miss's cheeks, for the air's grand up on that braehead."

"It is just for her we want it," Mr Pringle said, with an unusual openness of confidence. "She is rather pale. Come, Vi, there is the gig at the door."

Vi walked down-stairs very demurely and got into the gig, trying to look as if she mounted with some dignified difficulty, and not to clamber up with the speed and sureness which her breeding among so many boys had taught her. She had been listening, though she took no part in the talk. "Who is the little boy, papa?" she said, curiously, as they drove briskly along through the keen but sunshiny air.

"A little boy at Rossraig up yonder among the trees. Do you see the turrets, Vi?"

"Yes, I see them: are they made of gold? and is he a bad little boy, papa?"

"No, Vi; I don't suppose he means it, and you don't understand, my pet; but it would be

very bad for Sandy and the rest if he were to stay there."

"Then, papa, if it will be bad for Sandy, and the little boy is naughty, why not drive up the avenue and take him and carry him away somewhere where he can do no harm?"

This was Violet's incisive way of dealing with difficulties. She had all the instincts of a grand inquisitor: and would have acted with the same benevolent absorption in the grand object of doing good to her patient whether he liked it or no. The pair drove at a spanking pace up the pretty road among the budding trees, through which at intervals there were glimpses of Esk brawling over his boulders, his brown impetuous stream all flecked with foam, like a horse in full career. A sensation of positive happiness was in Mr Pringle's mind as he drove along the familiar road through the country which he hoped might yet acknowledge his influence and authority. He could not have kidnapped the little offender as Violet suggested; but he was glad to think that there was every chance he was an impostor, and the field clear for himself and his heir. A lawsuit rose up before him in fullest dramatic detail, a kind of thing very at-

tractive to his professional imagination. He saw how much more difficult it would be on the other side to prove the right of this supposititious heir, than it would be on his to throw doubt upon him. I do not think the thought ever crossed his mind that the child might not be supposititious at all, but the real grandson of Lord Eskside. It is so much easier when you are deeply interested in a subject to see your own side of the question, and to believe that yours is the side of right. In his sense of the possibilities of the case his spirits rose, and he enjoyed his drive to the Hewan with his innocent little girl beside him. Up they went, mounting the long slope, now letting the horse walk at the steep parts, now urging him to a momentary spurt, now rolling rapidly along on a shady level, with the branches almost meeting overhead. The day was warm for April, yet the wind was fresh and chilly, and blew in their faces with a keen and sweet freshness which brought the colour to little Violet's cheek. "Little Vi would change into little Rose up here on Eskside," said Violet's father—he had not felt so light of heart for many a day.

The Hewan is the tiniest of little cottages,

perched high up on a bank of the Esk, and surveying for a mile or two the course of the picturesque little stream between its high wooded banks, with here and there a pretty house shining far off among the trees, on some little plateau of greensward, and the sound of the river filling the air with a soft rustling and tinkling. Alas! there are paper-mills now along the course of that romantic stream. I was but six years old, like Violet, when I first saw that wild little place, and ever since (how long a time!) it has remained in my mind, charming me with vague longings. Vi trotted to the grassy ridge and gazed down the course of the stream, and said nothing; for what can a child say, who has no phrases about the beautiful at her tongue's end, and can only stare and wonder, and recollect all her life after, that brawling, surging river, those high trees, inclining from either bank towards each other, and that ineffable roof of sky? The old woman who kept the cottage consented that it was still unlet, and threw no difficulties in the way; and Mr Pringle secured it there and then for the summer. "I should like to buy it," he said to himself, "if it were not——" If it were not?—that perhaps the turrets within sight

might one day be his—a castle of dreams. The idea of the great possibilities before him suddenly surged upwards, flooding his soul; and then a hunger seized him for the river, and the woods, and the fair country which they threaded through. He wanted to have them, to possess them—not the rent of them, or the wealth of them, but themselves—a passion of acquisition which is something like love, swelling suddenly in his heart. He forgot himself gazing at them, till Vi roused him, plucking at his coat, “Papa, it is bonnie; but why do you look and look, with your eyes so big and strange, like the wolf that ate little Red Riding Hood?”

“Am I like a wolf?” he said, half laughing, yet tremulous in his momentary passion, seizing the child in his arms, and lifting her up to share his view. “Look, Vi! perhaps some day all that may be yours and mine.”

Violet looked gravely as a duty; but there was something in his strenuous grasp that frightened her, and she struggled to be put down. “I do not think,” she said, with precocious philosophy, “that it would be any bonnier if it was yours, papa—or even mine.”

Mr Pringle was tremulous after this burst of

unusual emotion, for what has a respectable middle-aged lawyer to do with passion either of one kind or another ? The fit went off, and he felt slightly ashamed of himself ; but the thrill and flutter of feeling did not go off for some time. He sent the gig and horse to meet him at the Eskside gates, and taking Vi's hand in his, went down by a pathway through the woods to a side entrance. " Perhaps we shall see this little boy we were talking of," he said ; but he was far from having made up his mind to confront the two old people, my lord and my lady, who would see through his pretences, as people are clever to see through the guiles of their heirs. He was reluctant to face them boldly ; but yet he was—how curious !—eager to look the present crisis in the face, and see for himself what he had to fear. After they had gone a little way along the woodland path, which was still high above the course of the stream, though accompanied all the way by the sound of its waters as by a song, Violet escaped from her father's hand, and ran on in advance, making excursions of her own, hither and thither, darting about in her brown coat and scarlet ribbons like a robin-redbreast under the

budding branches. Mr Pringle, lost in his own thoughts, let her stray before him, expecting no encounter. Presently, however, there came from Vi a little cry of surprise and excitement, which quickened his steps. He hurried on after her, and came to an opening in the trees where the path widened out. It was a small circular platform, open to the slope of the river-bank, and with a rustic seat placed in an excavation on the higher side of the way. Into this open space another little figure had rushed from the other side, panting and flushed, grasping a tall stick, and stood, suddenly arrested, in front of Violet, facing her, with an answering cry, with big brown eyes expanded to twice their natural size, and a face suddenly filled with curiosity and wonder. Mr Pringle it may be supposed was *blasé* in the matter of boys, and I do not think that the affectionate father of an honest plain family is ever a great amateur of childish beauty. This little figure, however, in his fantastic velvet dress, with his hat perched on the back of his head, and all his dark curls ruffled back from his bold brown forehead, struck him with a certain keen perception of beauty which was almost pain. Ah ! and with a perception of

something else which was still sharper pain. He fell back a step to recollect himself, staggered by the sudden impression. What made the child so like Richard Ross? What malignant freak of fortune had so amalgamated with the dark complexion and look which was not Richard's, those family features? Mr Pringle stood as if spell-bound, contemplating the child about whom he had been so curious, about whom his curiosity was so fatally satisfied now.

"You are the little boy that lives at Ross-craig," said Violet, feeling the responsibility of a first address to lie with her, but somewhat frightened, with tremblings in her voice.

"Yes; and who are you?" cried the little fellow. Mr Pringle behind noticed with a pang that he spoke with an "English accent," that advantage which the ambitious Scotch parent so highly estimates. This gave him a still deeper pang than the resemblance, for it seemed to give the final blow to the beggar's brat theory. Beggar's brats in Mr Pringle's experience spoke Scotch.

"Who are you?" said Val. "I never saw you before. Will you come and play? It's dull here, with no one to play with. Do you hear

any one coming? I've run away from grandpapa."

"But you oughtn't to run away from your grandpapa," said Violet. "It is very naughty to run away, especially when the other people can't run so fast as you."

"That's the fun," cried the other, with a laugh. "If you'll come and play, I'll show you squirrels and heaps of things. But help me first to hide this big stick. I think I hear him coming—quick, quick!"

"Would he beat you with it?" said Vi, growing pale with terror.

"Quick, quick!" cried the boy, seizing her by the wrist; but just then there was a rush of steps along the sloping path which wound down the brae to this centre, and Lord Eskside himself appeared, half angry, half laughing, pulling aside the branches to look through. "Give me back my stick, you rogue!" he cried, then paused, arrested, as Mr Pringle had been, by that pretty woodland picture. It was something between a Watteau group, and the ruder common rendering of the "Babes in the Wood:" the girl in her scarlet ribbons with liquid dark eyes uplifted, her face somewhat pale, with mingled terror, and

self-control ; the boy all flushed and beautiful in his cavalier dress, grasping her by the wrist ; with the faintly green branches meeting over their heads, and the brown harmonious woods, all musical with evening notes of birds and echoes of the running water, for a background. The men on either side were so impressed by the picture that they paused mutually, in involuntary admiration. But they had both perceived each other, and though their sentiments were not very friendly, politeness commanded that they should speak.

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“ I hope you are well, Lord Eskside,” said Mr Pringle, stepping with an effort into the charmed circle. “ I had just brought my little girl through the woods to see how beautiful they are. This is my Violet ; and this fine little fellow is—a visitor, I suppose ? ”

“ Is it you, Alexander Pringle ? ” said Lord Eskside. “ I could not believe my eyes. It is a sight for sore een to see you here.”

“ Indeed it is chance—mere chance,” said Pringle, with a fulness of apology which he was himself uneasily conscious was quite uncalled for. “ I have been up at the Hewan, which I have taken for the summer.”

“The Hewan for the summer ! why, man, it’s a mere cottage ; and what has become of your own place ?”

“Oh, I retain my old place ; but it is a long way off, and best for the autumn, when we can flit altogether. My wife is fond of the Hewan, though it is so small ; and we thought it would be handy to run out for a day, now and then. In short, it suits us. Does this little fellow, Lord Eskside, belong to the place ? or is he a visitor ? He seems to have struck up a sudden friendship with my little girl.”

“A visitor !” said Lord Eskside. “Do you mean to say you have not heard—do you see no likeness in him ? This is my grandson, Pringle—my successor one day, I hope—Richard’s eldest son.”

“Richard’s son !—you are joking,” said Mr Pringle, growing pale, but with a smile that hurt him,—“you are joking, Lord Eskside ; a child of that complexion Richard’s son !”

Lord Eskside felt that his adversary had hit the blot—and, to tell the truth, he himself had never perceived Val’s resemblance to Richard. “Colouring is not everything,” he said ; “I suppose he has his complexion from his mother :”

then with a return blow, "but I cannot expect you to be very much delighted with the sight of him, Pringle; he takes the wind out of your sails—yours and your boys'."

"I hope my boys will be able to manage for themselves," said Pringle, with a forced laugh. "If I say that I don't see the resemblance, it is for no such reason. I have never hungered for other folk's rights: but that is one thing and justice is another. Vi, my dear, we must go."

"What! won't you come and see my lady? She will be affronted if you pass so near without calling; and you see," said the old lord, with an effort at cordiality, "the children have made friends already. Come and have some dinner, man, before you go home. You know me of old. My bark is waur than my bite—I meant no harm."

"Oh, there is no offence," said the heir-at-law; "but it's getting late for a delicate child, and our gig is waiting at the Woodgate. Violet, you must bid the little man good-bye."

"He is not a naughty boy, papa, as you said—he is a nice boy," said Vi, looking up with an appeal in her eyes; "please, I should like to stay."

“And what made you think he was naughty, my bonnie little girl?” said Lord Eskside, in insinuating tones.

“Come, come, Violet, you must be obedient,” said her father, hastily, shaking hands with his kinsman, whose old face, half grim, half humorous, was lighted up with sudden and keen enjoyment of the situation. Mr Pringle hurried his daughter on almost harshly in the confusion of his feelings. He had never been harsh to her before; and Violet, in her disappointment, took to crying quietly under her breath. “I should like to stay—I should like to stay!” she murmured; till out of pure exasperation the kindest of fathers could have whipped her, and thought of that operation as an actual relief to his feelings. Lord Eskside, on his part, stood still in the clearing, holding back Val, who was more vehement. “I want her to play with me; and you said I was to have whatever I wanted,” the boy cried, struggling with all his might to break away.

“You must know, my man, that there are many things which we all want and cannot get,” cried the old lord, holding him fast; and then he burst into a low laugh. “Here’s a

bonnie state of affairs already," he said to himself : " Richard's son breaking bounds to be after Sandy Pringle's daughter ! It's the best joke I've heard for many a day. Come, Val, come, like a good boy. We'll go and tell grandma. She may have a little girl in her pocket for anything you and I know."

" But I don't want any little girl ; I want *that* little girl," cried Val, with precocious discrimination. The old lord chuckled more and more as he half led, half dragged him up the steep path towards the house.

" Man, if you're after them like this already, we'll have our hands full by the time you're of age ! " But when he had said this, Lord Eskside paused and contemplated his grandson, and shook his head. " Can he be Richard's son after all ? " the old man asked himself.

Lord Eskside, however, looked grim enough before he went into the house, where he betook himself at once to the drawing-room, in which his wife sat alone, at a window overlooking the river. He went in to her moody, with the air of a man who has something to say.

" What is the matter ? " said Lady Eskside.

" Oh, nothing's the matter. We're entering

into the botherations I foresaw, that's all that's the matter. Who do you think I met in the woods but that lawyer-rascal Sandy Pringle, come to spy out the nakedness of the land!"

"And what nakedness is there to spy into? and what can Sandy Pringle do to you or me?" said the old lady, with a slight elevation of her head.

"Not much, perhaps, to you or me. He's taken the Hewan, Catherine, where he can lie in wait like an auld spider till he gets us into his net."

"I don't understand you," said the old lady, with the light of battle waking in her eyes. "What does it matter to us where Sandy Pringle lives? He has been out of the question, poor man, as everybody knows, since Providence sent to my son Richard his two bonnie boys."

"It's fine romancing," said Lord Eskside. "Where's the t'other of your bonnie boys, my lady? And where is your proof of this one that will satisfy a court of law? Likeness is all very well, and natural instinct's all very well, but they'll have little effect on the Court of Session. And though he's a haverel in private life, Sandy Pringle was always a clever lawyer. If you do

not find the woman there will be a lawsuit, that will leave Eskside but an empty title, and melt all the lands away."

"We'll find the woman," said the old lady, clasping her fine nervous hands. "I'll move earth and heaven before I'll let anything come in my boy's way."

At this moment Val burst in, rosy and excited, with his grandfather's stick, which in the vehemence of their new ideas both the child and the old man had forgotten. "Grandma, I want that little girl to play with. Send over directly," cried Val, in hot impatience, "to get me the little girl!"

"You have enough on your hands, my lady," said Lord Eskside.

CHAPTER X.

THE Hewan was not a cottage of gentility. It was too small, too homely, too much like a growth of the soil, to belong to any class that could be described as *ornée*. The roof indeed was not thatched, but it was of red tiles, so overgrown with lichens as almost to resemble a thatch, except in the rich colour, which, to tell the truth, very few people appreciated. Its present owner was a shopkeeper in Lasswade, in whose heart there were many searchings about the vulgarity of its appearance, which he felt sure was the reason why it was not more easily let for the summer; and this good man had almost made up his mind to the expense required for a good slate roof, when Mr Pringle fortunately appeared and engaged it "as it was." A sort of earthen embankment, low and thick, encircled the little platform on which it

stood. There was nothing behind it but sky, with a light embroidery of trees; for it occupied the highest "brae head" in the neighbourhood, and in a more level country would have been described as situated on the top of a hill. Before it lay the whole course of the Esk, not all visible indeed, narrowing here and there between high banks, now and then hiding itself under the foliage, or capriciously turning a corner out of sight,—but always lending to the landscape that charm of life which water more than anything imparts to the inanimate world around. Cliffs and trees, and bits of bold brown bank, and soft stretches of greensward, all took a certain significance and explained their *raison d'être* by the river. The houses, too, from the dignified roofs of Rossraig lower down the stream, showing their turrets, which little Violet supposed to be made of gold, between the clouds of trees—down to the square white houses of the paper-mill people on the other side, and here and there rough red tiles of a cottage of earlier date—were all harmonised by the river, which was the link which held them together. The usual geographical indications on Eskside were not by the points of the compass, as is so

common in Scotland, but by the stream—"up the water" or "down the water" was the popular indication; and a more picturesque one it would be difficult to find.

The Hewan was a long way up the water from Lasswade, yet not so far but that many a visitor would climb the brae to "get their tea" with old Mrs Moffatt, who was the mother of the proprietor,—living in charge of the house, and not too proud to superintend the domestic arrangements of small families who hired it for the summer. She had a little room with a "box-bed," that mystery of discomfort and frowsiness, but which was neither frowsy nor uncomfortable in the hands of the brisk little old woman—which her son had built on to the back of the house for her, and in which she continued summer and winter, retiring herself there in dignified privacy when "a family" was in full possession. Mrs Moffatt's little room, which had been made on purpose for her, had no communication with the cottage. She considered it a very dignified retirement for her old age. John Moffatt, her son, was a shoemaker in Lasswade; and when the savings of his cobbling enabled him to buy the Hewan, and establish

his mother there, no noble matron in a stately jointure-house was ever half so proud. Such a feeling indeed as pride, or even satisfaction, rarely moves the mind of the dethroned queen who has to move out of the house she has swayed for years, and descend into obscurity when the humiliation of widowhood befalls her. Mrs Moffatt, good old soul, had no such past to look back upon. She had been long a widow, knocking about the world, doing whatever homely job she could find, struggling to bring up her children ; and the Hewan and the little back room represented a kind of earthly paradise to the cobbler's mother. The summer lodgers who paid her for cooking and keeping in order their little rooms, gave the frugal old soul enough to live on during the winter ; and when by chance "a family" came which had no need of her, good John, out of the abundance of the rent, allowed his mother the few weekly shillings she required. She had a little kitchen-garden to the back, surrounding her nest, as she called it, and kept a pig, which was her pride and joy, and a few chickens. If she could but have had a cow, the old woman would have been perfectly happy ; but as it is not, I suppose—or at least

so people say—good for us to be perfectly happy, the cow was withheld from her list of mercies granted. Good little soul, her mouth watered sometimes when she thought of the butter she could make, and of the cheeriness of having “a neebor’s lassie” coming in with her pitcher for the milk, or even the luxury of a “wee drap real cream” in her cup of tea. But to mourn for unattainable things had never been her way; and when she went “doon the toun” with a basketful of eggs for her daughter-in-law, she was as proud and happy in her homely gift as if it had been gold or diamonds. She was a friendly body everybody testified, and known up the water and down the water as always serviceable and always cheery. When there was any gossip going on of an interesting nature, some one in Lasswade or the neighbourhood always found opportunity of taking a walk up to the Hewan, and a cup of tea with old Jean, who was every one’s friend.

On such occasions Mrs Moffatt carefully skimmed everything that looked like cream from the milk which had been standing in a bowl for this purpose since the morning, and put on her little kettle, and took out her best china, and

even prepared some "toasted bread" over and above the oat-cakes, which were her usual fare. The window of the old woman's nest looked out upon a dark wilderness of trees, which descended down a steep bank to the upper Esk, and shut out any view. Her door was generally open, as well as the window, so that the rustling of the trees and the singing of the kettle kept pleasant company. Her boarded floor was as clean as soap and water could make it, and her hearth well swept and bright; a huge rug, made by her own hands (for she was a capable old wife) out of strips of cloth of all colours, looked cosy before the fire. Her bed, like a berth in a ship, appeared behind, with a very bright bit of chintz for curtains, and covered with a gay patchwork quilt. She had some brilliantly-coloured pictures on the walls—a wonderful little boy with big eyes and a curly dog, and a little girl with long curls and a doll, not more staring and open-eyed than herself. The old lady thought they were like "our wee Johnnie and Phemie down the town," and found them "grand company." She had some brass candlesticks and a glorious tea-caddy on the mantelpiece, and such a tea-tray set up against the wall as would

have made all other ornamentation pale. "The worst o't is, ye maun be awfu' solitary, especially in the winter time, when there's naebody ben the house, and few on the road that can help it," her friends would say. "Me solitary!" said old Jean. "I'm thankful to my Maker I never was ane that was lanesome. I'm fond o' company, real fond o' company—but for a while now and then it's no' that ill to have your ain thoughts. And then there's the hens, poor things, aye canty and neighbour-like, troubling their heads about their sma' families, just as I used to do mysel'—and Grumphy yonder's just a great diversion; and when it's a cauld night, and I shut to the door, there's the fire aye stirring and birring, and the wee nest as warm as can be, and the auld clock, tick, tick, aye doing its duty, poor thing, though it might be tired this hunder year or twa it's been at it; and there's a hantle reading in the 'Courant,' though maybe the 'Scotsman' 's bigger, and I'm on the 'Leeberal side mysel'. Toots! solitary! there's naebody less solitary than me."

A cheerful soul is always a social centre, however humble it may be. Jean's friends accordingly went to see her, not out of pity, as to

cheer a poor solitary old woman, but for their own amusement, which in this kind of social duty is by far the strongest motive. She was about the best-informed woman on all Eskside. Every kind of gossip made its way to her ; and I doubt whether the people in Rosscraig House themselves, knew so well all that had happened and all that everybody said on the night of little Valentine's arrival. She heard a great deal even from Mrs Harding herself, the housekeeper, who could not resist the temptation of confiding a few details, not generally known, to her old friend's keeping. For Jean was known to be a person in whom it was possible to repose confidence, not one that would betray the trust placed in her. Besides, Mrs Moffatt had become a person of importance since it was known in Rosscraig that Mr Pringle had taken the Hewan for the season. Lady Eskside herself got out of her carriage one day as she passed, and went to pay the old woman a visit. She went into the cottage and complimented old Jean on the excellent order in which she kept it. " I hear it has been taken by a relation of ours—Mr Pringle," she said.

" I didna ken he was a relation of your leddy-

ship's; but it's Mr Pringle sure enough. I was sure I kent the face—no doubt I've seen him coming or going about the House."

"He comes very seldom to see us," said Lady Eskside. "In fact, before my grandson was born he considered himself the heir—after my son, you know; and he has been dreadfully disappointed, poor man, since. Val, don't go too near the dyke!"

"And this is the heir, nae doubt, my lady?—eh, what a bonnie bairn! Nane that see him need ever ask the rank he's born to. He has the look of a bit little prince. And I wouldna say but he was fond of his own way whiles——"

"More than whiles, more than whiles," said the old lady, graciously; "he is just a handful. But Mr Pringle has a large family, if it's him. He will never find room for his bairns in this little bit of a place."

"It's chiefly for the wee miss he had with him, my lady. She's delicate, they say; and if ever a man was wrapt up in a bairn—and her so delicate——"

"Dear me, I am sorry to hear it!" said Lady Eskside, whose sympathy was instantly aroused; "will it be anything the matter with the chest?"

I am always most afraid for the chest in children. Mr Pringle is a most excellent man. He has been a little disappointed and soured perhaps—but he is an excellent person. The air is sharp up here, Jean—too sharp for a delicate child. If she should want anything, cream or fresh milk in the morning, be sure you let me know. Cream is excellent for the lungs. I like it better than that oil that doctors give now—nasty-smelling stuff. But if there is anything the poor child should want, be sure you send to me.”

Lady Eskside was an acute woman, but she was foolish in this particular. She caught her own healthy blooming grandchild on the edge of the low embankment, where he was hazarding his life in warm enjoyment of the risk, and gave him a kiss though he deserved a whipping, and said, “Poor Sandy Pringle!” with the most genuine feeling. She went into Lord Eskside’s library when her drive was over, full of this information. “You need not alarm yourself about Sandy Pringle, poor man,” she said; “he has taken the Hewan on account of his poor little girl who is delicate—her chest, I am afraid. If you remember, his mother died of consumption quite young. It’s a terrible scourge when it’s in

a family. My heart is sore for him, poor man. When the child comes we must have her here, and see if anything can be done. Perhaps if they were to take it in time, and send her to Madeira or some of these mild places; there is always hope with a bairn."

"My word, my lady, but you go fast," said the old lord, with his little keen eyes twinkling under his shaggy eyebrows. But he did not convince her any more than she convinced him. And indeed, when the Pringle family began to appear about the woods, every member of the household at Rossraig, down to my lady's young footman, felt that curiosity of opposition in respect to them which is almost as eager as the curiosity of partisanship. Mrs Harding the housekeeper had for her part taken up Lord Eskside's view of the subject, and when she too made a visit to Jean Moffatt one evening of the early summer, her purpose was of a more sternly investigating order than that of Lady Eskside.

"How do you like the folk ben the house?" she said, as she sat at tea; the cake she had brought "in a present" was placed on the table in the place of honour, and the tea was "masking" before the fire. It was a soft evening in

May. The door was open, but the fire was not disagreeable, and the sound of the Esk far down below the brae, and the rustling of the leaves close round the house, were softened by the air of spring into a pleasant murmur. The family "ben the house" being separated by a good Scotch stone wall from old Mrs Moffatt's nest, gave no sound of their neighbourhood, and nothing but that wild but soft cadence of the waters and the trees interrupted the homely domestic harmonies more closely at hand—the cheery little stir and *pétillement* of the fire, the singing of the kettle, the purring of the cat, the ticking of the old clock. Mrs Harding combined an earnest desire for information with a very pleasant sense of the immediate comfort and ease which she was enjoying. My lord and my lady were "out to their dinner," and Harding himself had promised to daunder up to the Hewan in the gloaming and fetch his wife home. Being "out to her tea" was an unusual event in the housekeeper's responsible life, and the enjoyment it gave her was great. "Eh, how quiet and pleasant it is!" she added, almost with enthusiasm; "this is one of the days you can hear the grass growin': and to get away from a' the

stew and bustle o' the dinner, the hot fire, and the smell o' the meat, and thae taupies that let one thing burn, and another boil over. If I were to envy onybody in the world, I think, Jean Moffatt, it would be you."

"Hoots," said the old woman, with a pleasant consciousness that her lot was enviable; "when you and your man make up your mind to retire, my certy, ye'll be a hantle better off than the like o' me."

"And when will that be?" said Mrs Harding, with a sigh; "no as lang as *They* live, for they couldna do without my man an' me. But I was saying, how do you like the folk ben the house?"

"You shouldna let yourself be keepit in bondage," said Jean, with a touch of sarcasm; "when folk *maun* do without ye, they *can* do without ye—I've aye seen that. Oh, I like them real well. They come and they gang, and now it's a breakfast, and now the bairns' dinner—nothing more—and aye a maid to serve them; so it suits me fine. The lads are stirring boys, and Missie's a darling. She makes me think upon one I lost, that was the sweetest o' a' my flock. Eh! if you could but keep a girlie like

that aye the same, what a pleasure it would be in a house ! But the bit things grow up and marry, and have weans of their own, and get to be just as careworn and wrinkled as yoursel'. I think whiles my Marg'ret, with ten of a family, and a man no better than he should be, is aulder than me."

"It's the course of nature," said Mrs Harding—"we maunna grumble ; but I'm sure when I see a' that folk have to go through with their families, I'm thankful I have nane o' my ain. Ye ken your Mr Pringle sets up to be *our* heir ! It's real ridiculous if it wasna provoking. I could laugh when I think o't. He must have been terrible cast down when Mr Richard brought hame his boy."

"But I thought it was a randy wife, not Mr Richard——"

"Whisht !" said the housekeeper ; "we'll say no more about that. It's no' a story I pretend to understand, but I'm rather thinking it was some Italian or other that Mr Richard sent with the bairn. Foreigners are strange cattle. And whether it was man or woman I wouldna say, for nobody saw them but my man, and he's confused about the story. But this is clear, it was

Mr Richard sent the bairn hame ; and reason guid. You should have heard his man on Eetaly and thae places. You might as well sell your soul to Satan, and better too, for you would aye get something by the bargain—and there's no even *that* comfort out there. Ye canna but wonder at Providence that lets a' that play-acting and fiddling and breaking o' the Sabbath gang on, and takes nae mair heed than if a' thae reprobats were sober, decent, kirk-going folk like ourselves. But I'm thinking their time will come."

"Poor bodies ! I daur to say they ken nae better," said Jean. "It'll be by the mother's side that the Pringles and the Rosses count kin ?"

"Na ; how could that be, when he thinks himsel' the heir ? When ye've ance lived in a high family, ye learn a heap of things. Titles never gang the way o' the spinning-wheel, nor land that's entailed, as they call it. It's lad comes after lad, and the lasses never counted. I canna say it's according to justice, but it's law, and there's nae mair to be said. This is the way of it, for my lady told me hersel' : A Ross married a Pringle that was an heiress two or three

hunder years ago, and took his wife's name, which was a poor exchange, though I'm saying nothing against the name of Pringle; my first place was with the Pringles of Whytfield, a real fine family. And now that a' the Rosses have died down to the present family, the Pringles have come uppermost. My lady herself was six or seven years married before Mr Richard was born. So ye see they've had the cup to their lips, as you may say, more than once. That's a thing I could not bide. I would rather be my man's wife, knowing I could be no better all my days, than expect to be my lady, and never win further ben."

"It's much the same in a' ranks o' life," said Jean. "There's my Marg'ret; it's been her desire a' her days to get the house at the Loan-head, with a nice bit land, that would gang far to feed her family. She's had the promise o't for ten years back. Old John Thomson was to flit afore he died, but that fell through; and when he died, they couldna refuse to let his son come in; and then it was reported through a' the parish that young John was to emigrate——"

"I've heard that," said Mrs Harding; "and I aye give my advice against it: for nae man

will ever succeed if he doesna work hard ; and if he'll work hard, he'll do very well at hame."

"Young John was to emigrate," continued Mrs Moffatt ; "and it was a' settled about his roup, and Marg'ret was sure of getting in by the term ; when what does he do but change his mind ! I thought the poor lass would have broken her heart ; and oh, the fecht she has with a' thae bairns and a weirdless man. Then he had that awfu' illness, and it was reported he was dying. My poor Marg'ret came to me the day he was prayed for in the kirk, with red een. 'I'm doing naething but pray for him,' she said ; 'for oh, if I didna pray for him to mend, I would wish him dead, mother ; and what comfort could I have in onything that came to me after that ?' The man got weel," said the old woman, with a sigh ; "he's as weel as you or me, and a hantle younger, and he canna make up his mind if he'll go or bide. It's awfu' tantalising ; and it happens in a' classes of life. I'm real sorry for the poor gentleman, and I hope he doesna take it to heart like my Marg'ret, poor lass !"

"Ye mean well," said Mrs Harding, half affronted ; "but to pity the next heir is like grudging the Almighty's mercies to us. Folk should

learn to be content. I'm no saying for your Marg'ret ; but Mr Pringle is as weel off as he has ony right to be, and why should he come spying upon my lord and my lady ? Folk should learn to be content."

"It's awfu' easy when it's no' your ain case," said Jean ; "an' I suppose we've a' as much or mair than we deserve ; but that does not satisfy your wame when you're hungry, nor your back when you're cauld. The maister has never been out here since the first time. The leddy came once, a fine sensible woman, that looks weel after her family ; but it's Missie that's the queen o' the Hewan. As it's such a fine night, and nane but bairns in the house, if you'll come ben we'll maybe see them. I'll have to think o' some supper for them, for thae lang laddies are just wolves for their supper. Or maybe you'll first take another cup o' tea?"

Mrs Harding declined this hospitable offer, and rose, taking her shawl and bonnet with her, for it was nearly the time, she remarked, when she "must be going." The two lingered outside to look at the hens, and especially that careful but premature mother who had begun to "sit," though the weather was still but moderately

adapted for the fledglings ; and then they made a momentary divergence to see “Grumphy,” who was the pride of his mistress’s heart. “I’ll no’ kill him till after harvest, and I’ll warrant you there’ll be no better meat between this and Edinburgh. Poor beast !” she said, with a mixture of the practical and sentimental, “he’s a fine creature, and has a fine disposition ; but it’s what we a’ must come to. And yonder’s where I would keep the coo—if I had ane,” she added with a sigh, pointing to a little paddock. The cow was to old Jean what the barony of Eskside was to Mr Pringle, and the house at the Loanhead to her daughter Marg’ret : but the old woman’s lot was the easiest, in that the object of her desire was not almost within her longing grasp.

CHAPTER XI.

LORD and Lady Eskside, as the reader has seen, were not quite in accord about their grandson : or at least they took different views of the circumstances which attended his arrival. They took (perhaps) each the view which came naturally to man and woman in such a position of affairs. The old lord, although himself at length absolutely convinced that the boy was his son's child and his own heir, was deeply oppressed by the consciousness that though there was moral certainty of this fact, there was no legal proof. "Moral certainty's a grand thing," said Willie Maitland, the factor, a man who knew the Eskside affairs to the very depths, and from whom there were no secrets possible ; but he spoke so doubtfully as to inflame the mind of my lady, who sat by listening to their talk with an impatience beyond words.

“A grand thing!” cried Lady Eskside; “it is simply everything: what would you have more? And who can judge in such a question but ourselves? my son, who must know best, and my old lord and myself, who are next nearest? What do the men mean by their dubious looks? What can you have more than certainty? Mr Maitland, with your knowledge of the law, I would like you to answer me that.”

“Well, madam, as my lord says,” said Willie Maitland, who was old-fashioned in his manners, “there is legal proof wanted. It may be just a deficiency on our part—and indeed, according to the Scriptures themselves, law is a sign of moral deficiency—but everything has to be summered and wintered before the Lords of Session.”

“And what have the Lords of Session to do with our boy?” said my lady, indignantly. “I hope we are not so doited but what we can take care of him ourselves.”

“My dear Catherine, that is not the question.”

“What is the question, I would like to know?” said Lady Eskside, flushing with the heat of argument. “Do I need the Lords of Session to tell me whose son my own bairn is? I think you are all taking leave of your senses with your

formalities and your legal proof. Poor Alexander Pringle there, up the water, cannot bring his delicate little girlie to the country for change of air but you think he's plotting against Val. If this suspicion and distrust of every mortal, is what your bonnie law brings, I'm thankful for my part that I know nothing about the law ; and I wish everybody was of my mind."

Lord Eskside and his factor went out quite cowed from my lady's presence. They were half ashamed both of the law and themselves, and I think the visit which they made to the land which was being marked out for "feus" was necessary to get up their spirits. Lord Eskside was rather excited about these feus—allotments of land to be let for building, upon a kind of copyhold which secured a perpetual revenue in the shape of ground-rent to the proprietor : though he was a little disposed at the same time to alarm himself as to the persons who might come to live there, and perhaps bring Radical votes into the county, and corrupt a constituency still stanch, amid Scotland's many defections, to "the right side." This public anxiety was a relief to his mind from the private anxiety ; for however public-spirited a man may be, and however pro-

found his interest in politics, the biting of a little private trouble is more sharp and keen than that patriotic concern for his country which drives him wild with excitement over a contested election. Willie Maitland the factor—a man “very well connected,” half a lawyer, half a farmer, and spoken of by every soul in the parish and on the estate by his Christian name—was big and burly and easy-minded, and took things much more easily than his lord. “By the time there is any question of the succession,” he said, “the story will be clean forgotten. It will be many a year, I hope, before Richard succeeds, let alone the boy.”

“Ay, ay, that is very true,” said the old lord, knitting his brows; “it may be many a year; but it might be a question of days, Willie, for anything you and me can tell. Well, well; for the moment we can make nothing better of it; and here are the feus. Good morning, doctor! I hope you’re all well at the Manse. It is a fine day for a walk. We are going to take a look at Willie Maitland’s pet scheme here.”

“An excellent scheme,” said Dr Bruce, the parish minister, turning to accompany them, with all that sober pleasure in something new

which moves the inhabitants of a tranquil rural district in favour of such gentle revolutions as do not affect their own habits or comforts ; and the three gentlemen spent an agreeable half-hour pacing and measuring the allotments. While they were thus engaged, Lady Eskside drove past with Val on the coach-box, making believe to drive. “There is my lady with her boy,” said Lord Eskside, waving his hand to them as they passed ; but he thought he saw an incredulous smile upon the face of the minister, which took away from him all pleasure in the feus.

My lady worked while my lord thus allowed himself to be overcast by every doubtful look. Strong in her moral certainty, she took every means which lay in her power to spread the same conviction far and wide ; and as she worked very hard at this undertaking, she had a right to the success, which she enjoyed thoroughly. Her chief work, however, was with the child himself—the strange little unknown being unable to express all the wonderments that were in him at his change of lot, who was in her hands as wax in some respects, while in others she could make but little of him. Val had reconciled himself to the revolution in his fate with wonderful facility.

He was so young, that after a few fits of violent weeping and crying for his mother and his brother, he had to all appearance forgotten them ; and being indulged in every whim, and petted to the top of his bent, with abundant air, exercise, toys, and caresses, had so adapted himself to his new position as to look familiar and at ease in it before many weeks had passed. What vague recollections and baby thoughts upon the subject might be in him, nobody knew ; but as childish recollections are in most cases carefully cultivated, and exist by means of constant reminders, I suppose Val, deprived of such aids, actually did forget much more readily than children usually do. Lady Eskside devoted herself specially to his polish and social education, to the amending of his manners and speech, and the imparting of those acts of politeness which are the special inheritance of small gentlemen : and she succeeded, to her own surprise, much more perfectly than she had hoped to do. Val took to the teaching in which no books nor perplexing printed symbols were involved, with perhaps a precocious sense of humour, but certainly a readiness of apprehension which filled my lady with joy. She taught him to bow, to

open the door for her when she went out or in, to listen, and to reply ; and what was still more wonderful, to sit still when circumstances demanded that painful amount of self-restraint. "A little gentleman tries first of all to be pleasant to other people," said his instructress. "When you are out playing, you shall please yourself, Val, and everybody will help you to enjoy yourself ; but in company a gentleman always thinks of others, not of himself." And having well laid down this principle, my lady proceeded, with great minuteness, to details. She thought it was a certain sign of his gentle blood that he learned his social lesson with such quickness ; but I am inclined to believe that Valentine's success was owing much more surely to that latent dramatic power which exists in almost all children, and which they are so proud and happy to exercise on every possible occasion.

Certainly, whatever the cause was, the result was triumphant. When Val was alone—in the nursery, where he ruled like a little despot, or out of doors, where he conducted himself like a tiny desperado, always in mischief—he was uncontrollable ; but in the drawing-room, when his grandmother received her visitors, or when

he accompanied her on the visits which it was now a point in her diplomacy to make, no little paladin born in the purple could have shown more perfect manners, or behaved himself more gracefully. He was acting a part, well defined and recognisable, and the *rôle* gave him pleasure. Not that the child himself was conscious of this, or could have defined what his instinct enabled him to do so perfectly; but yet the mental exercise was one that excited him, and called forth all his powers. The little actor threw himself off, as he jumped from the coach-box, where he had been driving wildly, with precocious dash and nerve, restrained, with difficulty, by the cautious old coachman, who knew exactly how much my lady could put up with—and assumed in a moment the gracious character of the little prince, suave, soft, and courteous, saying what he had to say with childish frankness, and keeping himself still and in order with a virtue which was heroic. From the Dowager Duchess to the farmers' wives on Eskside, everybody was satisfied by these performances; and no reasonable creature who had seen Val's little exhibition could have lent a moment's credence to the vulgar story of the "randy wife."

“I don’t see the strong likeness to his father,” said the Dowager Duchess, who was, as it were, the last court of appeal and highest tribunal of social judgment in the county. “To me there’s another type of feature very evident besides the difference of complexion ; but in manners, he’s his father’s son. Not a lout, like Castleton’s boy, who ought to be a gentleman, heaven knows ! if race is anything—on both sides of the house.” Lady Eskside felt the implied sting about “both sides of the house,” but bore it heroically, knowing that the Marquis of Hightowers, the Duke of Castleton’s only son, was like any ploughman’s child beside her own bonnie boy ; and it did not occur to her, any more than it did to Val himself, that the whole secret of his success was his superiority in dramatic power, and in enjoyment of that suppressed but exquisite joke of mystification which children by nature love so dearly. Probably it was the blood of gipsy and tramp and roadside mime in Val’s veins which gave him more facility than usual in the representation ; but the same gift shows in every nursery in a greater or lesser degree. Little Violet Pringle, with her dolls around her, discoursing to them—scolding one for its naughtiness, and another for

having neglected its lessons, with high maternal dignity—was not more purely histrionic than was Val when he played at being young prince and good boy, according to his grandmother's injunctions, and enjoyed the mystification—unless when it chanced to last too long.

“He is a strange child,” said Lady Eskside to her favourite confidant Mary Percival, whose visits became more frequent and prolonged after this, and whose curiosity about the boy, whom she was not fond of, gave a certain point of interest and almost excitement to the pleasure she had in seeing her old friend. “He is a strange boy. When he goes out with me, you should see, Mary, the gentleman he is. The politest manners—better than Richard's, for Richard was shy; never too forward, nor taking too much upon him, but a smile and an answer for everybody; and ready to open the door or hand you anything, as if he had been brought up to it all his life. But when he comes home, he is just a whirlwind, nothing else—what is the meaning of it? I sometimes think the spirits of both the bairns have got together in one frame.”

“You have heard nothing of the other?”

"Nothing ; nor of *her*, which is hard to bear. I cannot say for my own part either, that I feel it so hard ; but I'm sorry for my old lord. I never saw him so full of fears and fancies. He thinks unless we can find her and the other boy, that Val's place in the world will never be sure. I tell him it's just nonsense. Who has anything to do with it but ourselves ? and who can be such judges as we are ? But he will not listen to me."

"I think Lord Eskside must be right," said Mary. "Lawsuits are terrible things, and bring great trouble. I know something about that."

"Lawsuits !" said Lady Eskside, with a laugh. "If Sandy Pringle has the assurance to bring a lawsuit, I think we could soon let him see his mistake. Besides, what could he bring a lawsuit about ? I don't think you show your usual sense, my dear. Because my lord and me have found our son's son, and have killed the fatted calf for our grandbairn ? The fatted calf is ours, and not Sandy Pringle's. He could scarcely make a case of that."

"No, indeed," said Mary ; but she did not feel any security in Lady Eskside's triumphant argument. Val had been out on one of his

expeditions with his grandmother, in which he had won all hearts, and now was in the wood making the air ring with shouts, and letting out the confined exuberance of his spirits in every kind of noise and mischief possible to a child of his age. "That's the boy," said Lady Eskside, leaning from the open window to listen. "You may be sure he's on the rampage, as Marg'ret Harding says." The smile upon the old lady's face went to Mary's heart; there was the foolishness of love in it, as there was the foolishness of triumphant security in her reasoning. She was not troubled by the problem of this little creature so strangely thrown upon her hands, nor even by the twofold life, which she wondered at. People do not analyse the characters of their children, but accept them—often with a mingling of wonder at their peculiarities, and frank unconsciousness of any cause for these peculiarities, which is very strange to the beholder. Lady Eskside took pride in Val's versatility, even while it occasioned her some delighted wonder; but she did not trouble herself by any speculation as to the qualities that produced it, or the results to which it might lead.

Thus things went on for some years, and the country-side, as Willie Maitland predicted, partially forgot the story. The boy grew tall and strong, a favourite in society, and not unpopular among the rougher public of his own age and kind, who, indeed, were chiefly represented to Val by the Pringle boys. The Pringles continued to keep possession of the Hewan partly because the children liked it, partly because the father still cherished in his secret soul some hope of finding out the fraud which he believed was being perpetrated against his rights and his boy's; and as the cottage was within easy reach of Edinburgh, some member of the family was almost always there. Sometimes it was the mother, with Violet and the little ones, sometimes the boys alone, walking out in a dusty merry party, on a holiday, for any diversion that happened to be in season. They came for skating in winter, for fishing in spring and autumn; for the Esk above the Hewan was sweet, and free from all poisonous paper-mills. And as they were undoubtedly relations, though in a very distant degree, it was not within the possibilities of Scotch politeness to refuse the boys some share of the shooting; and it was in

the company of Sandy and his stalwart brethren that young Val first fired a shot and missed a bird. Though Lord Eskside looked glum at the associations thus formed, and wondered more than ever what Sandy Pringle meant, it was impossible to keep his grandson from the company of the only boys within reach who were of his own class, or something approaching to it. He learnt all kinds of manly exercises from them or with them, and knew the way to the Hewan blindfold by night or day, as well as he knew the way to his own chamber—a result which the parents on either side were far from desiring, but seemed helpless to prevent.

One day in the early summer, when the boy was about twelve years old, he escaped, I don't know how, from the tutor who had been brought from Oxford for him, and whose life Val did his best to make a burden. He got away quite early in the morning, and escaped into the woods, with a double sense of pleasure in the thought that this holiday was surreptitious, the conquest of his bow and his spear rather than lawful leisure granted by lawful authority. Val had had no breakfast, but he did not mind—he was free. He went away into the thickest of

the woods and climbed a tree, and lay there among the branches in a cradle of boughs which he had long since found out, looking up at the breaks of blue sky through the leaves in the fresh early morning, before anything was astir but the birds. Val was great in birds, like most country boys. He listened to the universal twitter about him, amusing himself by identifying every separate note, till he tired of this tranquil pleasure. Then he looked out from his lofty retreat to count how many different kinds of trees he could see from that leafy throne ; and then for a few minutes he lay back with his face to the sky, and watched the white airy puffs of cloud which floated slowly across the blue, with a dreamy enjoyment. But such meditative pleasures could not last very long. It was true he had the delightful thought that he had played truant, and had a whole day to himself, to fall back upon when he was tired, and this was always refreshing. But after a while it weighed heavy upon Val that he had nothing to do, and presently even the satisfaction of having stolen a march upon Mr Grinder scarcely bulked so large in his mind as the want of breakfast, which he saw no easy way of ob-

taining up here among the leaves. He did not venture to go to a gamekeeper's cottage for a share of the children's porridge, lest he should be led ignominiously back to Grinder and grammar. All at once a brilliant idea suggested itself—the Hewan! In a moment this notion was carried into practice; and Val, jumping down like a squirrel from his nest in the branches, stole up the brae under the deepest trees, through the ferns all wet with dew, to the little airy platform on which the sun was shining, where the windows had just been opened and the day begun. One little figure sat perched on the low earthen dyke looking down the course of the Esk over tower and tree, and showing from far like a blue flower in her bright-coloured frock. "It's the flag," said Val at first to himself, as he toiled upward through the high ferns, keeping carefully away from the path; then he corrected this first notion, and said, "It's Sandy's cricket-cap;" and then he added to himself with animation, "It's Vi!"

It was Vi, grown older and a little bigger since the first time she came to the Hewan—a very stately, splendid, foolish, idle little person, full of laughter and gravity and baby fun and

precocious wisdom. She was as fond of taking care of everybody as ever she had been, but she forgot herself oftener, being older, and was not perhaps quite so severe on peccadilloes as at six. She was a little alarmed when she saw the big thing struggling upward among the ferns, and wondered whether there might really be a bear or a wolf in the woods, as there used to be in ancient times. A lion it could not be, Violet reflected, for the weather was too cold in Scotland for lions. She did not like to run away, but she thanked Providence devoutly that none of "the children" were here, and wondered with a delightful thrill of excitement whether, if it should be a lion, it would do anything to her. Then there came a whistle which Violet knew, and looking down through the bushes with a pleasant sense of safety, she recognised the wayfarer. "Oh, is it you?" she cried, calling to him from the top of her fortress; "I thought it was a bear." "Ay, it's me. There are no bears nowadays. Who has come?" said Val, laconic and *sans cérémonie*, as is the use of children, as he panted upwards to the embankment, and putting his foot in a crevice swung himself up with the aid of a tree. "You will

break your neck," said little Vi, with great gravity; "how can you do such things, you foolish boys?—nobody has come but me."

"Nobody but you!" said Val, with a whistle of surprise and half regret. Then he added with animation, "I'm awfully hungry; give us some breakfast, Vi. I have run off from Grinder, and I don't mean to go home till night. You can't think how jolly it is in the woods when there's nobody to stop you, and you have everything your own way."

"Oh, Val!" cried Violet, not knowing how to express the tumult of her feelings. She could not approve of such wickedness, but yet "playing truant" bore a glorious sound about it. She had heard the words from fraternal lips, mingled with sighs of envy. Sandy and the rest had never gone so far as to play truant that she knew of; but the words suggested endless rambles, woods and streams and wild flowers, and everything that stirs a child's imagination; and it was the beginning of June when the woods are at their freshest, and Vi was all alone at the Hewan, hoping for nothing better than a story from old Jean Moffatt to beguile the endless summer day. Her eyes lighted up with

excitement and curiosity. "Oh, Val! if they find you what will they do to you?" she cried with awe; "and where will you go, and what will you play at?" she added, eager interest following close upon terror. There was not a soul visible about the Hewan in the morning sunshine. Old Jean had gone away to her own quarters on the other side of the house, after putting Violet's breakfast upon the table in the little parlour—and was busy with her beloved Grumphy, out of sight and hearing. The innocent doors and windows stood wide open; the child, in her blue frock, musing on the dyke in childish dreaminess, had forgotten all about her breakfast. Absolute solitude, absolute stillness, infinitely more deep than that of the forest, which indeed was full of chatter and movement and inarticulate gay society, was about this silent sunny place. The bold brown boy, with his curls pushed off his forehead, his cheeks glowing, his dress stained with the moss and ferns and morning dew, and his young bosom panting with exertion, looked the very emblem of Adventure and outdoor enterprise—the young reiver born to carry peace and quiet away.

"I'm awfully hungry," was Val's only re-

sponse. "Vi, have you had your breakfast? I think I could eat you."

"To be sure I had forgotten my breakfast," said Violet, tranquilly; "you are always so hungry, you boys. Come in, there's sure to be plenty for both of us;" and she led the way in with a certain bustle of hospitality. There was a little coffee and a great deal of fresh milk on the table (for old Jean by this time had attained in a kind of vicarious way to the summit of earthly delight, and had, if not her own, yet Mrs Pringle's cow to care for, and made her butter, and dispensed the milk to the children with a lavish hand)—with two little bantam's eggs in a white napkin, and fresh scones, and fresh butter, and jam and marmalade in abundance. Val made a very rueful face at the bantam's eggs.

"Is that the kind of things girls eat?" he said; they're only a mouthful. I should like a dozen."

"You may have one," said Vi, graciously. "It's my own little white bantam, and they're always saved for me; but if you're so hungry, I'll call Jean—or I'll go myself, and see what's in the larder——"

"That is best," said Val; "it's nice to be by

ourselves, just you and me. Don't call Jean ; she might tell the gamekeeper, and the gamekeeper would tell Harding, and somebody would be sent after me. You go to the larder, Vi ; and I'll tell you when you come back what we'll do."

Violet ran, swift as her little feet could carry her, and came back laden with all the riches the larder contained, the chief article of which was a chicken pie, old Mrs Moffatt's state dish, which had been prepared for the arrival of Mr and Mrs Pringle, who were expected in the afternoon. Vi either forgot, or did not know, the august purpose of this lordly dish : and when were there ever bounds to a child's hospitality when thus left free to entertain an unexpected visitor ? She had some of the pie herself, neglecting her little eggs, in compliment to Valentine, who plunged into it, so to speak, body and soul ; and they made the heartiest of meals together, with a genuine enjoyment which might have filled an epicure with envy.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Val, with his mouth full ; "we'll go away down by the water-side as far as the linn—were you ever as far as the linn ? There's plenty of primroses

there still, if you want them, and I might get you a bird's nest if you like, though the eggs are all over; and I'll take one of Sandy's rods, and perhaps we'll get some fish; and we can light a fire and roast potatoes: you can't think how jolly it will be——"

"We?" said Violet, her brown eyes all one glow of brilliant wonder and delight; "do you mean me too?"

"Of course I mean you too—you are the best of them all," said Val, enthusiastic after his pie; "you never sneak, nor whinge, nor say you're tired, like other girls. Run and get your hat; two is far better fun than one—though it's very jolly," he added, not to elate her too much—"all by yourself among the woods. But stop a minute, let's think all we'll take; if we stay all day we'll get hungry, and you can't always catch fish when you want to. Where's a basket?—I think we'd better have the pie."

A cold shiver came over Violet as she asked herself what old Jean would say; but the virtue of hospitality was too strong in her small bosom to permit any objection to her guest's proposal. "After all, it's papa's and mamma's, not old Jean's—it's not like stealing," Vi said to herself.

So the pie was put into the basket, and some cheese from the larder, and some scones, and biscuits, and oatcake ; the jam Vi objected to, tidiness here outdoing even hospitality. " The jam always upsets, and there's a mess," she said, with a little *moue* of disgust, remembering past experiences ; therefore the jam was left behind. Valentine shouldered the basket manfully when all was packed. " You can bring it home full of flowers," he said, a suggestion which filled up the silent transport in Violet's mind. Had it really arrived to her, who was only a girl, nothing more, to " play truant " for a whole day in the woods ? the thought was almost too ecstatic—for you see Violet in all her little life had never done anything *very wicked* before, and her whole being thrilled with delightful expectation. Val put the basket down upon the dyke, pausing for one last deliberation upon all the circumstances before they made their start ; while Violet, scarcely able to fathom his great thoughts and advanced generalship, watched him eagerly, divining each word before he said it, with her glowing eyes.

" We shan't go by the road," said Val, meditatively, " for we might be seen. You don't

mind the ferns being a little damp, do you, Vi? If you hold the basket till I get down I'll lift you over. But look here, haven't you got a cloak or something? Run and fetch your cloak—look sharp; I'll wait here till you come back."

Violet flew like the wind for her little blue cloak, which, by good luck, was waterproof, before she plunged down with her leader into the wet ferns. Poor little Vi! that first plunge was rather disheartening, after all her delightful anticipations. The ferns were almost as tall as she was; and her little varnished shoes, her cotton stockings and frock, were small protection from the wet. Excitement kept her up for some time; but when her companion, far in advance of her, called loudly to Vi to come on, I think nothing but the dread of being taunted with cowardice ever after, and shut out from further participation in such expeditions, kept the child from breaking down. She held out valiantly, however, and after various adventures—one of which consisted in a scramble up to Val's favourite seat among the high branches, whither he half dragged, half carried her, leaving the basket at the foot of the tree—they reached the bank on the side of the water where

the sun shone, and dried her wet skirts and shoes. Here the true delight of the truants began. "Take off your shoes and stockings, and I'll put them in the sun to dry," said Val, who, in his rough way, took care of her; and Violet had never known any sensation so delightful as the touch of the warm, mossy, velvet grass upon her small bare feet, except the other sensation of feeling the warm shallow water ripple over them, as Val helped her out by the stepping-stones to the great boulders at the side of the linn. The opposite bank was one waving mass of foliage, in all the tender tints of the early summer; whilst on that along which the children had been strolling, the trees retired a little, to leave a lovely grassy knoll, with an edge of golden sand and sparkling pebbles. Through this green world the Esk ran, fretted by the opposition of the rocks, foaming over them so close by Violet's side that, perched upon her boulder, she could put her hand into the foaming current, and feel it rush in silken violence, warm and strong, carrying away with lightning speed the flowers she dropped into it—till her own childish head grew giddy, and she felt all but whirled away herself, notwith-

standing that she sat securely in an arm-chair of rock, where her guardian had placed her. Vi would have been happy, beyond words to tell, thus seated almost in the middle of the stream, with the water rushing and foaming, the leaves shining and rustling, the whole universe full of nothing but melodious storms of soft sound—loud, yet soft, penetrating heart and soul—had it not been for the freaks of that wild guardian, who would perch himself on the topmost point of the boulder on one foot, with the other extended over the rushing linn; or jump the chasm back and forward with shouts of joyous laughter, indifferent to all her remonstrances, which, indeed, he did not hear in the roar of the waterfall. But the fearful joy was sweet, though mixed with panic indescribable. “Oh, Val, if you had fallen in!” she cried, half hysterical with fright and pleasure, when they got back in safety to the grassy bank. I suspect Val was rather glad to be back too in safety, though he could not restrain the masculine impulse of showing his prowess, and dazzling and frightening the small woman who furnished the most appreciative audience Val had ever yet encountered in his short life.

I need not attempt to describe the consternation which filled all bosoms in the two houses from which the truants had fled, when their absence was discovered. The Pringles arrived to find their chicken pie gone, and their daughter, and Lady Eskside white with terror, consulting with old Jean Moffatt at the cottage door. Jean was not so deeply alarmed, and could not restrain her sense of the joke, the ravaged larder, and the prudent provision of the runaways; but poor Lady Eskside did not see the joke. "How can we tell the children alone did it?" she cried, with terrible thoughts in her mind of some gipsy rescue—some wild attempt of the boy's mother to take him away again. She was ghastly with fear as she examined the marks on the dyke where the culprits had scrambled over. "No bairn ever did that," cried the old lady, infecting Mr Pringle at least with her terrors. Lord Eskside and Harding and the gamekeepers were dispersed over the woods in all directions, searching for the lost children, and the old lady was on her way to the lower part of the stream, though all agreed it was almost impossible that little Vi could have walked so far as the linn, the most dangerous spot on Esk. "Would you

like to come with me?" my lady said with white lips to Mrs Pringle, whose steady bosom, accustomed to the vagaries of seven boys, took less alarm, but who was sufficiently annoyed and anxious to accept the offer. Mr Pringle got over the dyke in the traces of the fugitives, to follow their route to the same spot, and thus all was excitement and alarm in the peaceful place. "It is not the linn I fear—it is those wild folk," cried poor Lady Eskside in the misery of her suspense, forgetting that it was her adversary's wife who was also her fellow-sufferer. But good Mrs Pringle was nobody's adversary, and had long ago given up all thought of the Eskside lordship. She received this agitated confidence calmly. "They could have no reason to carry off my little Vi," she said, with unanswerable good sense. The two ladies drove down the other side of the hill to the water-side, a little below the linn, and leaving the carriage, walked up the stream—one of them at least with such tortures of anxiety in her breast, as the mother of an only child alone can know. Mrs Pringle was a little uneasy too, but her boys had been in so many scrapes, out of which they had scrambled with perfect safety, that her feelings

were hardened by long usage. At the linn some traces were visible, which still further consoled Violet's mother, but did not affect Lady Eskside—Violet's little handkerchief to wit, very wet, rather dirty, and full of wild flowers. "They have been playing here," said the more composed mother. "*She* has been here," cried the old lady, "but oh, my boy! my boy!"

"I see something among the trees yonder," cried Mrs Pringle, running on. Lady Eskside was over sixty, but she ran too, lighter of foot than her younger companion, and inspired with fears impossible to the other. The sun had set by this time, but the light had not waned—it had only changed its character, as the light of a long summer evening in Scotland changes, magically, into a something which is not day, but as clear as day, sweeter and paler—a visionary light in which spirits might walk abroad, and all sweet visions become possible. Hurrying through this tender, pale illumination of the woodland world about them, the two ladies came suddenly upon a scene which neither of them, I think, ever forgot. It was like a tender travesty, half touching half comic, of some maturer tale. Between two great trees lay a little glade of the

softest mossy grass, with all kinds of brown velvet touches of colour breaking its soft green ; vast beech-boughs stretching over it like a canopy, and a gleam of the river just visible. Over the foreground were scattered the remains of a meal, the central point of which—the dish which had once been a pie—caught Mrs Pringle's rueful gaze at once. A mass of half-faded flowers, a few late primroses, mixed with the pretty though scentless blue violet which grows along with them, lay dropped about in all directions, having been, it appeared, crazily propped up as an ornament to the rustic dinner-table. Against the further tree were the little runaways—Violet huddled up in her blue cloak, with nothing of her visible but her little head slightly thrown back, leaning half on the tree, half on her companion, who, supporting himself against the trunk, gave her a loyal shoulder to rest upon. The little girl had cried herself to sleep—tears were still upon her long eyelashes, and the little pouting rose-mouth was drawn down at the corners. But Valentine was not sleeping. He was pondering terrible thoughts under his knitted brows. How he was ever to get home—how he was ever to get *her* home ! The boy was chilled

and depressed and worn out, and awful anticipations were in his mind. What would happen if they had to stay there all night through the midnight darkness, among the stirrings of the mysterious woods? Val knew what strange sounds the woods make when it is dark, and you are alone in them—and a whole night! His mind was too much confused to hear the soft steps of the two ladies who stood behind the other big beech, looking, without a word, at this pretty scene—Lady Eskside, for her part, too much overpowered by the sudden sense of relief to be able to speak. I am not sure that a momentary regret over her chicken pie did not make itself felt in Mrs Pringle's soul; but she, too, paused with a little emotion to look at the unconscious baby-pair, leaning against each other in mutual support; the little woman overwhelmed with remorse and fatigue, the little man moody and penitent over the dregs of the feast, and the wild career of pleasure past. But just then there came a crash of branches, and louder steps resounding down the brae among the ferns, which made Val's face light up with hope and shame, and woke little Violet from her momentary oblivion. Lord Eskside's party of beaters,

and Mr Pringle, solitary but vigorous, all converged at the same moment upon this spot. "Here, my lord," said Willie Maitland's hearty voice, with laughter that made the woods ring—"here are your babes in the wood."

CHAPTER. XII.

THE exploit of the Babes in the Wood, as Willie Maitland called it, was one of the last freaks which Valentine played in his childhood by Eskside. Mr Grinder, who was from Oxford, a cultured and dainty young Don, was recognised to be no fit tutor for a child who preferred the woods to the classics, and could not construe a bit of Greek decently to save his life. What agonies Mr Grinder went through while his term of office lasted I will not attempt to describe. He was a young man of fine mind, one of the finest minds of his day, and that was saying a great deal. He loved pictures and fine furniture and dainty decorations as well as Richard Ross did, though perhaps he was not quite so learned ; and when he first saw the great green cabinets in the drawing-room, could barely say the common civilities to Lady Eskside before he

went on his knees to adore the Vernis-Martin. It may be supposed how little this dainty personage had in common with the boy, always carrying an atmosphere of fresh air about him, his pockets bulged out with unknown implements, his boots often clogged with mud, and his hands not always clean, whom it seemed a kind of desecration to introduce, all rustic and noisy, into the shadowy world of the Greek drama. Mr Grinder, I am afraid, had looked with lenient eye upon his pupil's absence on that June day. He had not reported the truant, but reconciled himself easily to the want of him ; and it was only when the day was almost over that he had taken fright at the boy's prolonged absence. Lady Eskside could not forgive him the panic he had caused her, and as soon as the most exquisite politeness and delicate pretences of regret made it possible, Mr Grinder and his knick-nacks were got rid of ; and a hard-working student from Edinburgh College, toiling mightily to make his way into the Scotch Church, and indifferent what labours he went through to attain this end, reigned in his stead. He was perhaps not so pleasant a person to have in the house, my lady allowed, but far better for the boy, which was the first object.

The new man cared nothing about the sanctity of the Greek drama, and perhaps did not know very much, if the truth were told. He turned Valentine on to Homer, and marched him through battle and tempest with some rough sense of the poetry, but very little delicacy about the grammar. But he kept his eye upon his pupil, and got a certain amount of work out of him, and prevented all such runaway expeditions, relieving the old people from their anxieties for the moment at least.

Val was not an easy boy to manage. He had two natures in him, as Lady Eskside said,—the one wild, adventurous, uncontrollable ; the other more than ordinarily impressionable by social influences. But when a boy gets into his teens he is not so easily kept up to the pitch of drawing-room polish as is a dainty little gentleman of eight in velvet and lace. With the period of black jackets the histrionic power begins to wane—temporarily at least : and when Val at thirteen turned his back upon the Dowager Duchess, and fretted furiously against being taken to make calls, his terrified grandmother thought immediately, not of his age, but of the mother's blood, which made him clownish ; and not only thought

so herself, but was seized with a panic lest others should think so. It had made her proud to see how far her little Val surpassed in manners the Marquis of Hightowers ; but it did not console her to think that Valentine now was no worse than his exalted neighbour. For, alas ! the mother of Hightowers had as many quarterings on her shield as his august father, and the boy might be as great a lout as he liked without exciting any remark or suspicion ; whereas poor Val could never be free of possible criticism on the score of his mother's blood.

This troubled the serenity of his childhood, though Val himself did not know the reason why. His recollections of the earlier period of his life had grown very vague in these years. Val had been well disposed to be communicative on the subject when he came to Eskside first. He had shown on many occasions a dangerous amount of interest and knowledge as to the economy of the travelling vans which sometimes passed through Lasswade with shows of various kinds, or basketmakers or tinkers ; and once had followed one of them for miles along the road, and had been brought back again much disfigured with weeping, whimpering that his

mammy must be there. But children are very quick to perceive when their recollections are not acceptable to the people about them, and still more easily led into other channels of thought ; and as he had nothing near him to recall that chapter of his life to his mind, he gradually forgot it. There was still a vague light of familiarity and interest in his eyes if, by any chance, he came upon an encampment of gipsies, or the vans of a show, or even the travelling tramps upon the road ; but the boy, I think, came to be ashamed of this feeling of interest, and to divine that his early life was no credit to him, but rather something to be concealed, about the same time as he ceased to be the perfect little actor and social performer he had been in his first stage. He began to be conscious of himself, that most confusing and bewildering of experiences. This consciousness comes later or earlier, according to the constitution of the individual ; but when it comes, it has always a confusing influence upon the young mind and life. When one's self thrusts into sight, and insists upon filling up the foreground of the scene, it changes all natural rules of proportion and perspective. The child or the youth has to re-

view everything around him over again to get it into keeping with this new phantom suddenly arisen, which does nothing but harass his mind, and puts him out in all his calculations. Me—how much has been said about it, philosophies based upon it, the whole heaven and earth founded on this atom! but there is nothing that bewilders the young soul so much as to see it surging up through the fair sunny matter-of-fact universe, and through the world of dreams, disturbing and disarranging everything. This change befell Valentine early. I think it began from that day in the woods, which was full of so many experiences. Even then he had been faintly conscious of himself—conscious of “showing off” to dazzle Violet on the linn—conscious of deceiving her as to their safety when she began to cry with fatigue and loneliness, and he, upon whom all the responsibility of the escapade lay, had to think how she was to be got home. In the chaotic bit of existence which followed, when Oxford, worsted, left the field, and Edinburgh, dauntless, came in, Valentine had a tough fight with this Frankenstein of himself, this creature which already had lived two lives, and possessed a vague confusing

world of memories half worn out, yet not altogether extinct, alongside of his actual existence. I do not mean to pretend that the boy was a prodigy of reflectiveness, and brooded over these thoughts night and day ; but yet there were times when they would come into his mind, taking all his baby grace away from him, and all the security and power of unconsciousness. Lady Eskside did not know what had come over her boy. She discussed it eagerly with her old lord, who tried in vain to dismiss the subject. "He's at the uncouth age, that's all," said Lord Eskside. "Oh, I hope it is not his mother's blood !" said the old lady. And thus the delightful day of playing truant in the woods was the primary cause of a wonderful revolution in Val's affairs. The grandfather and grandmother made up their minds to deny themselves, and send him to school.

The incident of the Babes in the Wood made a still greater impression on the other culprit. Mrs Pringle took her little daughter home, not without some emotion—for what mother can resist the delighted look of absolute security which comes to the face even of a naughty child, when, out of unimaginable danger and tragic

desolation, it suddenly beholds the Deliverer appear—the parent in whom Providence and Power and Supreme Capacity are conjoined? But she was half amused at the same time; and indeed the whole household at the Hewan regarded Vi's escapade with more amusement than alarm. “Oh, Miss Violet, to tak' the pie—that was a' I had for your papa's and mamma's dinner!” said old Jean. “They maun be content with ham and eggs noo, for I've naething else in the hoose. My larder's sweepit clean,” she added, when Violet had been carried off to have her damp and draggled garments changed. “Cheese and biscuits and everything there was: my word, but yon laddie maun have a good stomach! You wouldna think to bring the pie-dish back?”

“Indeed, we were too thankful,” said Mrs Pringle, “to find the bairns——”

“Oh, the bairns! bless you, there was never ony fear o' the bairns; but my dish was new, or as good as new. I'll give little Johnny at the farm a penny to gang and look for't. There was three fine fat young chickens, no' to speak of eggs and a' the seasoning. If that laddie's no' ill the morn he maun be an ostridge, or whatever ye ca' the muckle bird ye get the feathers from;

and a' the morning's milk and the new bread I laid in for your suppers ! Just an ostridge ! I wish the laddie nae harm, but he should have a sair head the morn, and a good licking, if he gets what he deserves."

"Alexander," said Mrs Pringle, an hour or two later, when she, with a warm shawl on, took a seat for ten minutes on the earthen dyke to keep her husband company while he smoked his cigar. The night was still clear, and pale with the lingering of the light, though it was past ten o'clock ; and the western sky shone with such silvery tints of celestial hue, sublime visions of colour, free of all earthly crudeness, as are never visible save in a northern summer. "Alexander, Sandy's wife, if he lives to have one, will never be Lady Eskside ; but I would not wonder if you and me had more interest in that title than any daughter-in-law could give us. We'll see what time may bring forth."

"You mean you'll have it yourself ? I am sure I hope so, one day, my dear," said Mr Pringle, complacently : "not meaning any harm to Dick Ross ; but his was never a very strong life."

"I am not meaning myself," said Mrs Pringle,

provoked. "How obtuse you are, you men! Neither you nor Sandy will ever have the lordship, you may take my word for that."

"And what do I care then who is my lady?" said the heavy husband. "I don't really see, my dear, why you should be so very decided against your husband and son. One would think you would be more likely to take our side."

Mrs Pringle shrugged her shoulders slightly, and drew her shawl closer round her. What was the use of throwing away her pearls—her higher insight? She changed the subject; and by and by, having no consolation of a cigar, and finding the lovely twilight chilly, though it was so beautiful, she went in, and went up-stairs to the little room in the roof where Violet lay warm and cosy, with her bright eyes still open, and turned to the soft clear sky of which her attic window was full. "Oh, mamma, was it very, very wicked to go?" said Violet. Her mother stooped to kiss the little tearful face.

"We'll say no more about it, Vi—but you must never play truant again."

"Never!" cried Vi, with a half sob which prolonged the word, and made it echo through

the tiny chamber. Alas, there was more than penitence in that vow ; there was regret, there was the ghost of a delight made doubly precious by trouble and terror. Oh, no, never again ! but what had all Violet's discreet and exemplary life—a life irreproachable and full of every (nursery) virtue—to show, which could compare with the transport, and terror, and misery, and sweetness, of that one never-to-be-repeated day ?

Vi had a great deal to bear afterwards, when the boys heard the story, and held over her the recollection of the “day she played truant,” with all that delight in torture which is natural to their kind. But with all this they could not take from her the memory of it, which grew dearer in proportion as she buried it in her own small bosom. The running of the water, the rustling of the leaves, the solemn drowse of noon in the full sunshine, the soft velvet rush of the foaming linn over the little fingers with which she tried to stop its torrent, and all the stirs and movements among the trees, peopled the child's recollection for many a day. Seated at a dull window in Moray Place, looking out upon the stiff garden with its shrubs—public property, and unlovely as public property generally is—

Violet could see once more her bold companion leaping from one boulder to another, with the furious Esk underneath, and feel again a delicious thrill of visionary terror. She had learned more about "the country," about woods and wilds, and birds and squirrels, and about the sensations of explorers in a new discovered land, than anything else could have taught her. "I too in Arcadia," she could have said: her one day of playing truant was the possession out of which she drew most enjoyment; and I leave the gentle reader to imagine, as Violet grew older, whether she could dismiss the partner of this celestial piece of wickedness into the mere common region of indifference, and leave him there undistinguished by any preference. She was always Val's defender afterwards, when any discussion of his merits arose among the boys; and what was more remarkable still, Mrs Pringle became Val's warm partisan and supporter, dismissing almost with indignation any suggestion which might be made to his disfavour. She was impatient of what she called her husband's "whimsey" about his heirship. "It is just a piece of folly," she would say with some heat. "Are the Eskside fools to take up a false heir?"

or what motive could they have ? Your father is a very clever man, and has a great deal of sense in a general way. But, boys, don't you build any hopes upon this, for it's just nonsense. You may be sure they are not the kind of folk to commit themselves, or expose the property to certain waste and destruction, with an impostor for an heir——” That he should have so important a deserter from his standard filled Mr Pringle with surprise. He was justified in thinking that it would have been natural that, right or wrong, she should have placed herself on her own boy's side. But Mrs Pringle was a woman who was given to an opinion of her own, and was not to be persuaded out of it when once formed upon sufficient cause.

And thus the soft-paced time went on, gently, dallying with the children, spinning out long tranquil days for them, and years that seemed as if they would never be over, as he does not do with their elders. They grew up slowly like the grass, which never shows itself in the act of growing, but is, while yet we are unaware of it ; the happiest of all life's various periods—not only to the younglings, who are unconscious of it, but also to the fathers and mothers, who

sometimes have an inkling of the truth. It looks long while it is in progress, thank heaven—though after, I suppose, when it is over, and the birds are out of the nest, it is like everything else in life, as short to look back upon as a tale that is told. But in the mean time there is little more to be said than that the children grew. And by and by Rossraig House fell into sudden shadow, as if the sun had gone behind a cloud, and the voices in it died down into subdued sounds of old people's voices, as had been the case before the child came to it, turning everything topsy-turvy. Val had been sent to school.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE school that Valentine Ross, Lord Eskside's grandson and heir, was sent to was, naturally, Eton. His father had been educated there, but not his grandfather, who belonged to an older fashion in education as in everything else, and was Scotch to his fingers' tips, and to every shade of idea in his mind. Valentine was placed with the brother of the tutor who had succeeded so indifferently with his early training—a kind of mingled compensation for that failure, and keeping up of old associations—for Mr Grinder's father had been Richard's tutor—which satisfied Lord and Lady Eskside. The boy's departure was no small trial to the old people. Each of them said something to him privately before he went away. Lord Eskside took him out for a last walk, and showed him the new feus that had been marked out, and told him confiden-

tially—recognising for the first time his partially grown-up condition—of the improvements he had been making, and the addition to the rent-roll of the estate which the feus would give—“enough to pay your school expenses, Val,” he said; and then he gave his grandson his parting advice.

“You have not to make your living by learning,” said the old lord, “therefore I don’t bid you give every moment to it that health allows; but a good scholar is always a credit to every rank in life; and if a thing is worth doing at all, it’s worth doing well. But there are other things at Eton besides books. A man in the position you will hold should know men like himself—not only the outside of them, but their ways of thinking, and what’s working in their heads. The working of young heads is a sign how the tide’s going; and I want you, if it’s in you, Val, some time or other, to go on the top of the tide—not just to be dragged with the swing of it, like common lads. You’re too young for that at present, but when you’re old enough you must try to get into what societies they have—debating, or the like. I don’t know very well what you’re going to turn to. You have good abilities

—very good abilities—and plenty of spirit when you like ; and mind, to give yourself over to play, and nonsense games, is bairnly, not manly—I would have you recollect that.”

“Do you mean cricket, grandpapa ?” said Valentine, with astonished eyes.

“I mean everything that turns a gentleman into a player, sir,” said the old lord, knitting his brows ; “setting sport above the honest concerns of this life and the ruling of the world—which is what young men of good family are born for, if they like to put their hand to their work. To set up a game in the highest place is bairnly, Val—mind what I say to you—and not manly. If you mean to put your life into cricket, you had better make up your mind to earn your bread by it, and give up the other trade I’m speaking of—which is not to say you may not play to amuse yourself,” he added, dropping from the seriousness of the previous address, “and, in moderation, as much as you like ; only never make a business of a mere pleasure. I am taking you into my confidence,” Lord Eskside continued, after a little pause. “I want you to go into public life at home. Your father will not, and he has his reasons, which are perhaps

good enough ; and I had not the time nor the possibility when I was young like you. I succeeded early for one thing ; and a Scotch representative peer does not cut much of a figure in politics. But you, my boy, have little chance of succeeding early. If your father lives to be as old as I am, you have a long career before you—and you'll mind my advice."

"Yes, grandpapa," said the boy, bewildered. Valentine was proud, yet much confounded, to be thus advanced to the position of his grandfather's confidant, and spoken to as if he were on the verge of the university, instead of entering at fourteen a public school. He did his best to understand, with eyes intent upon the old man's face.

"The secret of all success, Val," said the old lord, "is to know how to deny yourself. It does not matter very much what the object is. That's one advantage about even these games I was speaking of. Training, as they call it, is a good thing, an excellent thing. If you once learn to get the whip-hand of yourself, that's the best education. There is nothing in this world like it, Val. Prove to me that you can control yourself, and I'll say you're an educated

man ; and without this, all other education is good for next to nothing. Other people, no doubt, can do you harm more or less, but there is no living creature can do you the harm yourself can. I would write that up in gold letters on every school, if I had it in my power. Not that I like asceticism—far from it—but a man is no man that cannot rule himself.”

Lord Eskside paused with a sigh, while the boy looked at him with eyes and ears intent, taking in the words, but not all or indeed much of their meaning. And here I think Val’s attention began to wane a little ; for he had not the slightest clue to the thoughts into which the old man plunged, almost against his will—the dismal recollections of shipwreck which crowded into his mind as he spoke. “ We won’t enter into the subject at length,” he resumed ; “ but, Val, you have more than ordinary occasion to be upon your guard.”

“ Why have I more than ordinary occasion ? ” said the boy, wondering and curious ; this mysterious intimation immediately roused him up.

“ Ah, well, we’ll say nothing about that. You’ve wild blood in you, my boy ; and when you’re a man, you’ll remember that I gave you

sound advice. These are the great things, Val. I don't need to tell you to be good, for I hope you know your duty. Try and never do anything that you would think shame to have told to us ; you may be sure sooner or later that it will be told to us, and to every soul you want it kept from. There's no such thing as a secret in this world ; and the more you want to hide a thing the more it's known—mind that. For lesser matters, I'll see you have enough of pocket-money, and I hope you'll take care to spend it like a gentleman—which does not mean to throw it away with both hands, mind ; and you'll keep your place, and learn your lessons like a man ; and you'll write regularly to your grandma ; and God bless you, Val ! ”

Saying this, the old lord wrung the boy's hand, and turned off down a side path, leaving him alone in the avenue. Lord Eskside's shaggy eyebrows were working, and something strangely like tears welled up somehow from about his heart, and stood in two pools, unsheddable, under these penthouses. Not for all he had in the world would he have let that moisture drop in sight of living man.

Val was somewhat startled by this abrupt

withdrawal, and tried hard, without being quite able, to make it out, what it meant ; for the notion that he himself was supremely loved by his old grandfather was one that did not immediately enter into the boy's mind, far from all sentimental consciousness as boys' minds generally are. He went up thoughtfully to the house, but I am afraid it was not the wisdom of his grandfather's advice or the contagion of his emotion which moved him. He was wondering what it meant—why *he*, Valentine, should have more than ordinary reason to take care ; and what was the wild blood he had in his veins ? The wonder was vague ; I cannot say that the boy was possessed by any eager longing to penetrate the mystery ; but still he wondered, having arrived at a kind of crisis in his life, a thing which makes even a child think. He went in to his grandmother serious, and, as she thought, sad ; and Lady Eskside was pleased by the cloud over his face, and set it down to his sorrow at leaving home, putting her own sentiments into Valentine's mind, as we all do.

“ You must not be down-hearted, Val,” she said, drawing him close to her, and speaking with a quiver in her lip. “ When once the shock

is over, you will find plenty of new friends, and be very happy. It is natural at your age. It is us that will miss you—oh my bonnie boy! far, far more than you will miss my old lord and me.”

Val did not say anything; he felt his breast swell with a certain soft sympathy, but he was not deeply dismayed at the thought of leaving home, as she supposed. Lady Eskside put her arm round him, and drew her boy close. She was not ashamed of the tears that came heavily to her eyes.

“My bonnie boy!” she said, “my darling! Ye cannot think what you have been to us, Val—like light to them in darkness; you’ve made God’s providence clear to me, though you’re too young to understand why. When you are away, Val, you’ll think of that. If anything ill were to happen to you in body or soul, it would break my heart—you’ll remember that? Oh, my own boy, be good! There are all kinds at a great school, some not innocent lads like you. You’ll shut your ears to bad words and wicked things for my sake? Don’t listen to them—but say your prayers night and morning, and read your chapter, and God will protect my boy. Nobody can make you do wrong, Val, except yourself.”

"But I don't mean to do wrong, grandma," said Valentine, with a little self-assertion. "Why should you think I would? Is there anything particular about me?"

"There is a great deal particular about you," said the old lady; "you are the hope and the joy of two old folk that would never hold up their heads again in this world if any harm came to you. Is not that enough? But I am not afraid of my boy," she added, seeing that the admonition had gone far enough, and smiling a wintry, watery smile, the best she could muster. "Mind all that Mr Grinder says, and don't be too rough in your play. You're a very stirring boy, Val; but I want my boy to be always a gentleman, and not too rough. Your manners are not so nice as they once were——"

"I'm not a baby any longer," said the boy. "I don't know how to speak to ladies and grand people; but I don't mean to be rough."

"Well, dear, perhaps that is true," said Lady Eskside, with a sigh; "but you'll mind, Val, to be very particular about your manners as well as other things. It's more important than you think."

"I wish you would tell me something, grand-

ma," said Val ; " why is it more important than I think ? and what do grandpapa and you mean by saying that I need to be on my guard more than others ? There must be something particular about me."

" Then your grandpapa has been speaking to you !" said the old lady, with a little vexation, feeling herself forestalled. " I suppose, being old, we are more particular than most people, and more anxious. Your father, you see, makes no such fuss."

" I don't know anything about my father, grandma."

" Oh, Val, hush ! he is at a distance, where duty keeps him ; he has never been at home but that once since you came, and he is not a good correspondent ; but now that you are at school you must write to him direct, and be sure he will answer. He knows you are safe in our hands."

" That may be," said Val, seriously ; " but still, you see, grandma, it's a fact that I don't know much about my father—nor my mother either," he added, suddenly dropping his voice. Since he had been a small child, he had not mentioned her before. Lady Eskside could not

restrain a startled movement, which he felt, standing so close to her. The boy lifted his eyes and fixed them on her face.

"Was that her, grandma," he said in a low voice, "that brought me here ? and why is she never here now ? I know there is something strange about me, for all you say."

"Do you remember her, Val ?"

"No," said the boy, somewhat impatiently ; "that is, I remember *her*, but not to know her now if I saw her. Why do you never speak of her ? why is she never here ? I think I ought to know."

"Oh, my dear, it's a long story—a long and a sad story," said the old lady. "I wish—I wish I could find her, Val. I have sought for her everywhere, both now and when you were born ; but I cannot find her. It is not our fault."

"Where is she ?" said the boy. His face was flushed and agitated, his utterance hurried and breathless as if with shame.

"I tell you we cannot find her, Val."

"But she is alive, in the world, *like that ?*" said the boy ; and drew a long painful breath. Lady Eskside could not tell, and dared not ask,

how much Val understood or remembered of his mother and her life when he said these words ; and indeed, I think the boy himself would have found it very difficult to tell. He had lost all clear recollection of her in those seven years past, which were just the years in which a child forgets most easily—or remembers most tenaciously, when its recollections are encouraged and cultivated. He recollected dimly his coming to Esk-side, and more dimly a life beyond, which was not as his present life,—a curious dull chaos of wanderings and change, with a woman in it, and a playfellow, for whom he used to cry of nights. The chief impression on his mind, however, was of the strange difference between that life and his present one. He had escaped out of that into this ; and the thought of being made to go back again gave him a sensation of vague alarm. If this woman was his mother, might she not meet him somewhere, claim him, take him back again ? This thought filled him with a confused and indescribable horror. He had experienced this strange feeling before now ; when he saw caravans passing—when he met a wandering party of tramps on the road—it had occurred to him more than once, what if some one should

claim him? though he scarcely knew the ground of his own fears. This had given a curious inarticulate duality to his life. There were two of him. One Valentine Ross, whom he could identify boldly, who was happy and free and beloved—the other, something he did not know. But after his conversation with his grandmother, this vague terror suddenly took shape and form. His mother, his *real* mother, who had a right to him, might claim him, might seize upon him and carry him away. The idea filled him for the moment with mortal terror. He lost the security of childhood, and for the time felt himself involved in that insecurity, that panic, which is more terrible to a child than it ever can be in more mature life. A spasm came into his throat—a pang of shame and outraged feeling—which added to the terror, and made it very hard to bear. His eyes grew wet with a hot-springing moisture, salt and bitter, which seemed to scorch his eyelids. Lady Eskside, partially discovering the agitation in the boy's mind, pressed him closer to her in sympathy and tenderness; but he set his elbows square, and repulsed the fond consoling movement. He was angry with her and with all the world, because he himself was

thus separated from all the world, though he was no more than a child.

"I am going out," he said, abruptly, with a slight struggle to be free, "to say good-bye to Hunter and the rest. I promised to say good-bye to them. Let me go, grandma; I shall not be long away."

"Come back before dinner, dear. You are to have your dinner with us to-night," said the old lady, kissing his hot forehead as she let him go. He ran from her, and out into the woods, and never drew breath till he reached Hunter the gamekeeper's cottage, which was two miles off. The hot tears dried in the boy's eyes as he ran, swift as an arrow from the bow. It was a half-savage way of relieving the pain in him; yet it did relieve it, probably because of the half-savage blood which was boiling in his veins. He did not feel quite sure that he was safe even in the woods, and flew as if some one were pursuing him. In this panic there mingled no curiosity about his mother—no longing wish to see her—no stirring of filial love, such as one would imagine natural in such a case. Strangely enough, children show little curiosity in most cases about the parents they have lost. It seems so natural

to them to accept what is, as absolutely unchangeable, the one only state of affairs they have ever known, as the state which must be, and to which there is no alternative. The very idea of an alternative disturbs the young mind, and wounds it. And Valentine had more than ordinary cause to be disturbed. He was afraid and he was ashamed of that duality in his existence. It mortified him as only a child can be mortified. If he could only forget it, shut it out of his mind for ever ! He did not want to hear any more upon the subject, which was hateful to him ; he could not bear even to think that any one was aware how much of it he knew. The sight of the little colony of children and dogs at the gamekeeper's was a wholesome distraction to his burdened mind ; and fortunately there were many people to be shaken hands with, and to be told of his start to-morrow. " To Edinburgh first, and then to London ! My word, Mr Valentine, but you'll be far afore us all, country folk. And I wouldna wonder but you would see the Queen and the House of Parliament, and a' thing that's splendid," said the gamekeeper's wife. The boy was pleased ; the thought of all the novelty to come moved him

for a moment; but even the delight of novelty could not banish from his mind his new horror and fear.

He dined with his grand-parents that night as they had promised; and the old people watched him with an anxious scrutiny, of which the child was vaguely conscious. They had no insight into the tempest that was surging in his childish bosom, but watched him as wistfully as if they had been the children and he the man, wondering whether "his mother's blood" was working in him, and any wild desire of adventure and vagrancy like hers arising in his mind, or whether he was thinking of and longing for her, which seemed the most natural supposition. I think had they known the selfish shame and fear which had taken possession of him, both of them would have been disappointed and shocked, even though satisfied. They would have blamed the boy as without natural feeling, and they would have been wrong. The feeling in Valentine's heart was all chaotic, undeveloped. He had found out what was the meaning of the contradiction of two natures in him, the jar of which he had been dimly conscious, without knowing what it was. The struggle itself had been going

on within him for years, since the time when, a mere child, he had suffered and conquered that natural thirst for the out-of-door life to which he had been born. He had stood by his nursery window many a day and gazed out, and beaten his head and his hands against the panes, longing to escape, with a longing which was only recognised as naughtiness, and which by force of circumstances and some innate force of nature had been restrained. His ductile infantine nature had been forced into the new channel, and now he thought of the old one with a thrill and shiver of imaginative terror : but no distinct enlightenment as to his own position pierced the childish imbroglio of his thoughts. He felt rather than thought that he was in danger ; he had lost his happy sense of security ; but his mind had not gone further. All this, however, was as invisible, as unrevealable, to the two old people, who watched him so anxiously, as their eager watch was to him. He had not left their charge for a day for seven long years, and yet they knew as little of him as you and I, dear reader, know of the child who has never left our side, and has, as it seems, no thought, no object in life apart from ours. How can we tell what

that unknown familiar creature will do when set out upon independent life for itself? and how could they tell what was passing in Val's bosom, which had no window to it, any more than the rest of us have?

They watched him, however, very closely, consulting each other now and then with their eyes, and said things to him which meant more than the words, but which Val received without thinking at all what they meant. That last night at home was meant to be a solemn one, and would have been so, had Val's mind not been absorbed in its own excitement. Lord Eskside gave him a watch, which made his heart jump for the moment—a gold hunting watch, such as Val had long admired and longed for, with his initials and crest on the back; but even this affected him much less than it would have done, had he received it a week—a day before. He was to start early the next morning, and his portmanteaus were packed, and everything ready that night. He went and looked at them before he went to bed, and the higher pulsation of novelty and adventure began to swell in his young veins. The shadow slid still a little further off his heart when Lady Eskside came into

his room on her way to her own, as she had done every night for years. Val was not asleep, but only pretended to be so, to avoid any self-betrayal. The boy, peering curiously through his eyelashes, which showed him this little scene as through a veil of tinted gauze, saw the old lady put down her candle, look at him closely, and when she saw him, as she thought, fast asleep, kneel down by his bedside. She said no audible words, but she put her hands together and lifted her face, with tears standing full in her eyes. It was all Val could do not to cry too, and betray himself; the water came welling up, feeling warm within his eyelids, and blurring out the sight before him. After a little while my lady rose, and put her hand softly on his forehead and kissed him; then took up her candle and walked away, closing the door carefully after her not to wake her boy. Val felt strangely desolate for the first moment after the door closed, and the soft light and the watchful presence went away. He did not say anything tender within himself, for he was (or had become) a Scotch boy, totally unused to the employment of endearing words. But his small heart swelled, and a sense of soft security, of watchers round

him, and ever-wakeful all-powerful love, came to him unawares.

Thus Val dropped asleep on his last night at home ; and he woke in the morning cured of his first trouble, with as light a heart as any school-boy need have—the shock having gone off with all its consequences, and his mind being too full of his new start, of his new watch, of his long journey—the first he had ever taken—and of Eton at the end most wonderful of all,—far too full of these things to be sad. He gave his grandmother a hug when the moment came to go away. “I’ll be back at Christmas, grandma,” he said, between laughing and crying. The old lord was going with his heir, and this “broke the parting very much, so that he bore up like a man,” Lady Eskside said afterwards, wishing, I fear, that Val had been a little more “overcome.” She shed tears enough for both of them after the carriage had driven away, with a large box of game—to conciliate Mr Grinder—fastened on behind. From the window of one of the turrets she could see it driving across the bridge at Lasswade ; and there she went, though the stairs tired her, and waved her handkerchief out of the narrow window, and wept at thought of the

dreariness he left behind him. It seemed to my lady that there was not one creature left in the great house, or on Eskside, up the water and down the water, save herself ; and thus Val made his first start in life.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE boy was very tired when he arrived in London, and not capable of the hot interest he expected to feel in the great muddy capital, which was one muddle of mean houses, noisy roads, carts and carriages, and crowding people, to his tired perceptions. The day after, he and his grandfather went to Windsor through the mild soft country, half veiled in the "mists and mellow fruitfulness" that distinguish autumn, and warm with the all-pervading and diffused sunshine of the season. How different was the calm slow river, lingering between its placid banks, seeking no coy concealment under cliff or tree, but facing the daylight with gentle indifference, from the wild shy Esk, which played at hide-and-seek with the sunshine, like a flying nymph among the woods! The old lord seemed half inspired by this return to scenes which he

remembered so well, though he had not been himself brought up at Eton. "I brought your father here, as I'm bringing you," he said, as they rolled along, round the curves of the railway, looking out upon the distant castle and the river. "You will see plenty of boats on the river in another day, my boy ; and if your grandma and I come here next summer, I daresay we shall see you strutting along in all your finery, with flowers in your hat, and a blue shirt." Innocent old lord ! he thought his little rustic, just out of the nest, might reach the celestial heights of Eton in a few months, and perhaps—for what limits are there to the presumption of ignorance ?—find a place in the Eight in his first summer. But, indeed, I don't really think Lord Esk-side's ignorance went so far as this. He said it, not knowing what else to say, to please the boy. They went down together to the great dame's house, full already of small boys settling into their familiar quarters, upon whom Val looked with all the wondering envy and respect natural to a freshman. He had himself assumed the tall hat for the first time in his life, and the sight of so many tall hats moving about everywhere confused yet excited him. His tutor, who was not

his "dame," lived in a tiny house attached to a big pupil-room, and had no accommodation for boys or for much else, except the blue-and-white china in which his soul delighted. Mr Gerald Grinder, like his brother Mr Cyril Grinder, who had been Val's tutor at Eskside, had one of the finest minds of his time; but the chief way in which this made itself evident to the outer world was in his furniture, and the fittings-up of his little house, every "detail" in which he flattered himself was a study. It was a very commonplace little house, but the thought that had been expended on its decoration might have built pyramids—if anything so rude and senseless as building pyramids could have occurred to the refined intelligence of a man of Mr Gerald Grinder's day. Val gazed at all the velvet brackets, and all the antique cabinets (which had been "picked up" in holiday travels all over the world, and were each the subject of a tale), and all the china, with a sense of failing breath and space too small for him; while his grandfather engaged Mr Grinder in conversation, and pointed out the boy's peculiarities, as if these characteristics could be of any particular interest to any one out of Val's own family—and the young

tutor listened with a smile. "I don't doubt we shall soon know each other," he said suavely, and shook hands with Val, and dismissed him : to receive just such a description of another boy next moment from another anxious parent. "Whether is it Ross or Smith now, that is the self-willed one, and which is the boy that catches cold?" the young tutor asked himself, when the audience was over. He concluded, finally, that the latter case must be Smith's since he was brought by his mother—a generalisation which perhaps was justifiable. Poor Mr Grinder! he knew all the marks of his china as well as these tiresome people knew, so to speak, the manufacturer's marks on their boys; but how much more interesting was one than the other! He took a walk up to Windsor to an old furniture shop, where bargains of precious ware were now and then to be had, with a delicious sense of relief when it was too late to expect more pupils—and fell upon a bit of real Nankin there which refreshed his very soul.

Meanwhile the old lord and his boy strayed about the narrow streets. They went to the bookseller's and bought pictures for Val's room—which, I need not say, were chiefly Landseers,

though, granting the subject, Val was not particular as to the artist; and then they walked to the castle, the grandfather making a conscientious but painful attempt to remember who built the Round Tower, and who was responsible for St George's Chapel. As to these points, however, Val was not at all exacting, and had no thirst for information. He liked to walk on the terrace better, where the great sunny misty plain before him made his young heart expand with a delightful sense of space and distance, but did not care for the splendid alleys of the Long Walk, which were too formal to please his ill-regulated fancy. And then they went to the river, along the green bank of the Brocas, which touched Lord Eskside's heart with many recollections. "I have walked with your father here fifty times, I should think," said the old lord. "He was not much of a boating man himself, but he was fond of the river. Your father had always what is called a fine mind, Val."

"What is a fine mind?" said the boy, who did not know very much about his father, or care a great deal, if the truth must be told.

"It's rather hard to define," said the old lord, "when you don't possess the article; and you

must not learn to generalise too much, my boy ; it's a dangerous custom. It is, so far as I've been able to remark, an intellect which pays more attention to the small things than the great in this life ; it cares for what it calls the details, and lets the bigger matters shift for themselves."

" Was my father—very good at anything ? " asked Val, whom this definition interested but moderately. He had some difficulty in shaping his question ; for indeed, having just heard that his father was not a boating man, his curiosity was partially satisfied before expressed.

" Your father has very good abilities," said Lord Eskside—" very good abilities. I wish he would put them to more use. I've been told he was an elegant scholar, Val."

" What is an elegant scholar, grandpa ? "

The old lord laughed. " Not me nor you," he said ; " and I doubt if either you or me are the stuff to make one of ; but your father was. I'll show you an old school-list at home with his name in it. I've heard his Latin verses were something very fine indeed ; Val, Latin verses are grand things. Poetry in English is a thriftless sort of occupation ; but a dead language

makes all the difference. If you ever can make Latin verses like your father, you'll be a great man, Val."

Val never knew whether his grandfather was laughing at him when he adopted this tone. "Is my father a great man?" he asked, with a serious face. "I should like to know a little more about him. I have only seen him once. Once is not much for a fellow to have seen his father; and I was so small then, and never thought of anything."

"Most of us are just as well without thinking," said Lord Eskside, with a suppressed sigh, "except about your work, my boy. You may be sure you will want all your thoughts for your work."

"That is just how you always turn me off," said Val. "I ask you about my father, grandpa, and you tell me about my work. I will do my work," said the boy, with a dogged air, which he sometimes put on; "but why does my father never come home?—why doesn't he care for me? All these fellows there are with their fathers. I like you a great deal better—but *why* doesn't he come?"

"Because he likes his own way," said the old

lord, "better than he likes you or me—better than he likes his own country or our homely life. Observe, my boy, this is nothing for you to judge, or make your remarks upon," he added, bending his brows at Val, who was not used to be looked on frowningly. "Your father is no boy like you, but a man, and able to judge for himself. His profession takes him abroad. He will be an ambassador one of these days, I suppose, and represent his sovereign—which is more honour than often falls to the lot of a poor Scots lord."

Val did not make any reply, and the pair continued their walk along the river-side. His father a representative of his sovereign; his mother——. For the last time before he was engulfed by the practical school-boy life which was more congenial to his years, Val felt the whirl of wonder, the strange chaos of his double life which was made up of such different elements, and lay as it were between two worlds. His panic was gone, having worn itself out, and no real interest in his unknown mother kept her image before him; but he felt the jar in him of these two existences, so strangely, widely separated. His head felt giddy, as if the world were turning round with him. But every mo-

ment the river was becoming more gay and bright, and the moving panorama before him after a while overcame his individual reflections. The "fellows" newly arrived were already crowding down to the river—little new boys standing about with their hands in their pockets looking wistfully on; but the old *habitués* of the Thames asserted their superiority, and got afloat in swarms—some in the strange outriggers which Val had heard of, but had never seen before. Lord Eskside was as eager about the sight as if it had been he who was the new boy. "Look how light they are, Val!" he cried—"how cleverly they manage them! If those long oars get out of balance the thing upsets. Look at that small creature there no bigger than yourself——"

"Bigger! he's not up to my elbow," cried Val, indignant.

"Well, smaller than yourself: but you could not do that, you lout, to save your life."

Val's face grew crimson. "Come back next week, grandpa," he said, "and see if I can't; or come along, I'll try now; it would only be a ducking—and what do I care for a ducking? I'll try this very day."

"Come back, come back, my boy; they won't

let you try to-day," cried the old lord, laughing at the boy's impetuosity. Val had turned back, and was rushing down to the "rafts" where boats were to be had ; and it was all that his grandfather could do to restrain him. "You are not, Val Ross, your own master—not to speak of other people's—here," he said, holding the boy by the arm, "but a member of a corporation, and you must obey the laws of it. They'll not give you a boat, or if they do, it will be because they think you don't belong to Eton ; and if you were to go out without fulfilling all the regulations, they'd punish you, Val."

"Punish me!" cried Val, with nostrils dilating, and a wild fire in his eyes.

"Ay, punish *you*, though you are such a great man. This will never do," said Lord Eskside ; "do you mean to struggle with me, sir, in the sight of all these lads ? Master yourself ! and that at once."

The boy came to himself with a gasp, as if he had been drowning. I don't think he had ever in his life been spoken to in so severe a voice. He ceased to resist, and the old lord gave up his hold on his arm, and continued in a lower tone—

“You must learn this lesson, my boy, at once. You are nobody here, and you must master yourself. Do it of your own will, and you show the makings of a man. Do it because you are compelled, and what are you but a slave? The thing is in your own hands, Val,” said Lord Eskside, softened, and putting off his peremptory tone; “you have almost made an exhibition, before all these strange lads, of yourself—and me.”

Val did not say anything; his breast was swelling high, his heart throbbing with the effort he had made; and he was not pleased that he had been obliged to make the effort, nor did he feel that satisfaction in having done his duty which is said always to attend that somewhat difficult operation. He walked along the river-side panting and drawing his breath hard, as if he really had tried the experiment of a ducking. How he longed to do this thing which he had been assured he must not do! He would have liked to jump into the river and swim out to one of the long slim boats, poised like big dragon-flies on the water, and eject its rower, and take the vacant place; in which case, no doubt, Val would have come to signal

grief, as he would have deserved—for he had never been in an outrigger in his life.

Then the pair went and dined at the hotel, where Val recovered his spirits; and then the old lord took the boy to his little room, where they found his things unpacked, and his pictures standing in a little heap against the wall, and his room almost filled up with the bed which had been folded up out of the way when they were there before. It was not like the luxurious large airy room which had been Val's at home, any more than the house with its long passages, with regiments of doors on either side, was like the old-fashioned arrangements of Rossraig. And here at last the parting so often rehearsed had to be done in earnest. "Master yourself," said the old lord, with a voice which was neither so cheery nor so firm as he meant it to be; "and God bless you, Val!" And then he was gone, walking up the dark street with a heavy heart in his old bosom, and his eyebrows working furiously. And Val sat down upon his bed and looked round him wonderingly, and for the first time realised that he was left alone.

However, it is needless to enter upon the details of so very common a scene. Perhaps

the boy shed a few tears silently when the maid took away his candle, and he felt that no soft step, subdued lest he should be sleeping, no rustling silken garments, could come into his room that night. In the morning he faced his new existence vigorously, and hung his pictures, and began his work without any weakness of recollection. The old people felt it a great deal more, and a great deal longer; but Val could not have been known from the most accustomed and habitual schoolboy, and, stranger still, scarcely knew himself for anything else, after that night. At the end of the week he felt as if he had lived there all his life—as if he had been there before in some previous kind of existence. I suppose this readiness of a child to adapt itself to new habits, and make them its own, does but increase the strange unreality of life itself to the half-conscious mind—life which changes in a moment, so that one week seems like years, and years, being past, look as if they had never been.

At the end of the week Val wrote home; and in his first letter there was this paragraph, written in his clearest hand:—

“Tell grandpapa I rowed up to Surly Hall, a

long way above where we walked, above locks, *in an outrigger*, this morning. I rowed another fellow and licked him. I passed swimming on Thursday, and *outriggers is very easy*. You have nothing to do but keep steady, and it flies like a bird."

"What is an outrigger?" said Lady Eskside, as she gave her husband the letter. The old lord gave an internal shiver, and thanked heaven that she did not remember; and Val did not think it necessary to inform his anxious grandparents how often he had swamped his little craft on the Friday, before he succeeded in making that triumphal progress to Surly on Saturday morning. "He's a determined rascal, that boy of yours, my lady," was all the answer Lord Eskside made.

I would not assert, however, that Val found all his difficulties at school to be surmounted so easily as the outrigger. He had to go through the average number of accidents and perils, and overcome various wild stirrings of nature within him, before he learned, as a true Etonian does, to take pride in the penalties and hardships as well as the pleasures which distinguish his school. Val's natural pride in his own person

as Val Ross had to be met and routed by his artificial and conventional pride as a schoolboy, before, for instance, he could reconcile himself to be some one's fag, a fate which overtook him instantly. Little Lord Hightowers, the Duke's son, who was in the same house, took to it naturally, without any stirring of repugnance, and made his master's toast with conscientious zest, and went his master's errands, and accepted his share of the dainties he had fetched when that potentate was in a liberal mood, without any struggle whatever with himself. But Val had a struggle, the wild blood in his veins being unused to obedience and finding subjection hard. I am happy to say, however, that his powers were equal to the necessary sacrifice, and that he never made an exhibition of himself as he had been on the eve of doing on the day of his arrival. Time passed on, and Val grew and "mastered himself;" but sometimes did not master himself, and got into disgrace, and scrambled out again, and had no fair-weather voyage, but all a schoolboy's troubles at their hardest. Hightowers had a very much easier time of it; he was neither proud nor ambitious, but was just as happy at the foot of his division

as anywhere else, quite as happy looking on at a game as playing, and took the floggings which overtook him periodically with the most heavenly calm ; whereas the mere threat of one wrought Val to the point of desperation. Hightowers was better off than Val by right of his temperament and calmer blood. He took everything much more lightly, and used to discourse to his companion on the vanity of "making a fuss" with ponderous and precocious wisdom. "Why don't you take it easy, as I do?" said Hightowers ; "what's the good of verses, for instance ? A fellow never does verses after he leaves school. If you get complained of, it don't hurt you ; and even a swishing, though it stings, it's only for a minute—I don't mind. There's a house match on to-day between Guerre's and Whiting's. Put that rubbish away and come along."

Val was on the point of going, when a recollection of what he had heard of his father's eminence in the way of verse-making returned to his mind ; whereupon he sat down again doggedly to grind the smooth English into rugged schoolboy Latin. He clenched his teeth at the thought of being inferior to his father—not from love—for how should he love the man

who had not spent a kind word on him, or seen him, but once in his life?—but from a violent instinct of opposition which had sprung up in his soul, he could not tell why. He would not be beaten by his father; and this visionary jealousy overcame all Hightowers' philosophisings, and even the attractions of the match between Whiting's and Guerre's.

Thus the boy grew, not perhaps a very amiable boy, though with a side to his character which was as sweet and soft as the other was rugged; and with his grandfather's lesson well learned and bearing fruit. People who do right by a struggle are not so pleasant as those who do right because it comes natural to them—or even sometimes as those who do wrong in an easy and natural way without any effort; and when Val went home he would carry occasional traces of the conflict, and sometimes showed a chaotic condition of mind which disturbed the peace of his elders almost as much as it disturbed his own; and his career at school was of a mixed character, sometimes almost brilliant, sometimes very doubtful. What wild impulses would rise in him, longings for he knew not what, desires almost uncontrollable to rush away out of the

routine in which his life was spent ! Sometimes a fierce inclination to go to sea seized upon him ; sometimes he would be suddenly tempted by the sight of the soldiers, of whom he saw so many, and for the moment the fancy of enlisting and going off unknown to India, China, or the end of the world, in search of adventures—a veritable knight-errant—moved the boy. But only himself knew how sudden and fierce were these temptations. He did not confide them to any one. He could not tell where they came from, not being learned enough or clever enough to refer them to his mother's vagrant blood, which stirred and rose in spring-tides and periodical overflowings with the rising of his youth. But his practical schoolboy life had this excellent effect, that it withdrew him from everything visionary, giving him only practical difficulties and temptations to struggle against. He forgot at Eton all about the other strange and jarring element in his existence which had perplexed him in his childhood. And, indeed, the boy had no leisure, even had he been disposed, to brood over his parentage, or ask himself why his father and mother were unlike those *paters* and *maters* of whom his companions talked. It was so ;

and what more could be said ? He accepted the fact without further questioning, and thought no more about it. He had enough to do with his schoolboy occupations, and with that high art in which he was being trained by all the influences round him — the art of mastering himself.

CHAPTER XV.

VAL had grown to be sixteen, tall and strong, towering far above the old lord, and even above his father, who had made another visit to Esk-side, and had seen his son, and regarded him with more approval than he did when Val was seven years old. The older he grew, however, the less the boy resembled Richard, whose features, settling into middle age, no longer even resembled themselves—a thing which few people took into consideration. Many persons in the county expressed their surprise, indeed, on seeing them together, that they could ever have supposed Valentine to be like his father—without in the least perceiving that the Honourable Richard Ross, who was now Secretary of Legation in Florence, and had every chance of rising to the post of Ambassador the very next time that a wave of promotion came, was almost more

unlike young Dick Ross, Lady Eskside's fair-haired boy. But Richard himself was very civil to his son, and inquired after his studies, and recounted his own Eton experiences, and volunteered advice about Oxford in a way which gratified all the family. The intercourse between the father and son was perfectly polite and civil, though, on Val's side at least, there was little warm feeling in it; but both took from this meeting a sentiment of satisfaction, not to say something like pride in each other. Valentine on his side perceived his father's easy superiority in culture and knowledge of the world to the rural magnates who formed society at Eskside, with a sense of increased consequence which is always agreeable; while Richard looked upon the handsome bold boy, the soft oval of whose boyish face was yet unmarred by any manly growth on lip or cheek, with a curious mingled feeling of pride in this being who belonged to himself, and repugnance to the creature who recalled so strongly another image most unlike his own. Valentine possessed in a high degree that air of distinction which does not always accompany, as it ought, the highest birth. Beside him Lord Hightowers was as a ploughman, clumsy-footed,

heavy-mannered, the very embodiment of the common in opposition to the refined. How did this come about? "Val is very like the picture of your grandfather—the Raeburn, as you call it; though it would be more respectful to say the tenth lord," Lady Eskside said to her son, with a slight faltering. "To be a Raeburn is some distinction, but the tenth lord was nobody in particular," said the *dilettante*, ignoring the subject of the likeness. For, indeed, as he developed, Valentine was the handsomest Ross that had been seen on Eskside for generations, though the dark curls pushed off his bold forehead, and his great liquid eyes full of light, and his form, which was all spring and grace and elasticity, represented another race altogether than the lords of Eskside.

This was his age and this his appearance in the summer after his sixteenth birthday, when there happened to Val an encounter which affected all his future life, little as he thought of any such result. It was the middle of June, the height of the "summer-half," that period of perfect blessedness to young Eton, a delicious evening "after six," when all the nine hundred boys that form the community were out and about in

full enjoyment of their most perfect moment of leisure. The sun was setting up the river in purple and crimson, building a broad pathway as of molten gold, a celestial bridge up to the summer heavens, over the gleaming water; the banks were gorgeous with summer flowers, thickets of the gay willow-herb, and yellow toad-flax, and great plummy feathers of the meadow-queen glowing in the evening light—the soft green of scattered willow-trees drooping above—and long beds of the tenderest blue forget-me-not dipping in and out of the stream. As if these did not supply colour enough, the whole breadth of the river was aglow with reflected tints from the sky, soft yellow, crimson, orange—great rosy clouds deepening into purple, and a soft vague vault of blue above with specks of tinted cloud, like scattered roses. The river was alive with boats. A little farther up, at Athens, the bathing-place, it was alive with something else—with shoals of boys bathing, plunging in and out, and peopling the shining stream with bobbing heads and white shoulders, as plentiful as fishes and as much at their ease in the element, but using their human privilege of laughter to turn the spot into a Babel of

noisy sweetness—noise which the charmed summer air took all roughness out of, and softened into gay music, tumultuous yet magical, in full accord with all the soft breathings of the waning day. ■

Val in his outrigger was lower down the stream, not much above the spot where the railway bridge does all that modern ugliness can to reduce nature to its own level. The boy was not thinking much about the beauty of the scene, yet he felt it, having a mind curiously open to all out-door influences; and this it was which had arrested his course in mid stream, just where he could see the glorious mass of the castle rising from the green foliage of the slopes, and the clustered red roofs of the homely town at its feet. The sunset threw its fullest radiance upon this wonderful termination of the landscape, which seemed, from where Val contemplated it, to stand across the stream, the light whitening here and there a window, and a golden haze of warmth and mellow distance enveloping the grey walls, the pinnacles of St George's, the picturesque broken outline of the Curfew tower. The animated foreground was full of boats—dragon-fly outriggers like his own,

poising their long outstretched wings over the water — “tubs” full of laughing boys — and through the midst of all, the glorious vision of the Eight, with a well-known stalwart figure, as big as the boat in which he stood, steering the slim craft as it flew, and shouting stentorian correction and reproof to No. 4 and No. 7 — for was not Henley in prospect, with all its chances of loss or triumph? Val withdrew towards the bank with a few strokes of his long oars, to get out of the way of that leviathan. As he stayed his boat again, with the sweetness of the evening, the light, the colour, the gay medley of sound floating in happy confusion into his mind — a gig, stumbling down stream in the hands of three or four laughing urchins, totally indifferent to the chances of a ducking, came suddenly foul of Val’s boat, tossing his oar out of his hand, and upsetting him from his precarious vessel in a moment. Let not the gentle reader be dismayed; there was neither fright nor rarity in the accident, nor the slightest occasion for the blue-coated waterman, with the Eton lilies on his silver buttons, who stood in a punt at some distance with uplifted pole, relieved against the sunset sky, to hasten to the rescue.

“ Awfully sorry ! ” said all the small boys, rather envying Val the delight of being swamped ; they were fresh and wet themselves from bathing, and would have liked nothing better than to swamp too. As for Valentine, he swam to the bank, which was close by, pulling his slim bark after him. He had as little clothing upon his handsome person as decency permitted—a white jersey, thin as a spider’s web, and trousers turned up almost to the knee. So he was neither harmed nor alarmed, and might have walked back to the “ rafts ” and left his boat to be carried down by the stream without concerning himself about it, or seeking help to right it, had not his Fate commanded otherwise. But he had arrived at one of those moments in life, when Fate, potent and visible, except to the actors in the drama, does intervene.

It was, as I have said, the middle of June. Ascot races were lately over, and the roads, as careful housekeepers in lonely places knew but too well, were encumbered with “ tramps,” making their way from that great central event of their year, to the lesser incidents of country fairs and provincial races. Many of these wandering parties were about,—so many, that they

had ceased to be much remarked by quiet wayfarers. And, indeed, the poor tramps were quiet enough;—weatherbeaten groups, women with children in their weary arms, men with fur caps and knotted handkerchiefs, and those specimens of the doggish race which have vagrant written in every hair of their shabby coats, as it is inscribed in the hard brown lines, drawn tight by exposure to the weather, of their masters' faces. Two of these tramps were seated on a log of wood, resting, just opposite the spot where Valentine's boat had swamped. These were a woman and a boy, more decent than the majority of their kind, though noway separated from it in appearance. The woman looked over forty, but was not so old. She was seated, with her hands crossed listlessly in her lap, holding a little bundle in a coloured handkerchief; her dress was a dark cotton gown and a shawl, with an old-fashioned bonnet which came quite round the face, enclosing it like a frame—a fashion which no longer finds favour among women. This dark circle round her face identified it, and called the passenger's attention; and a more remarkable face has seldom caught and arrested the careless eye. I saw her about this same

time, seated on a bank in a leafy country road, with the light interlacing of shadow and sunshine over her; and as it was her aspect and looks which moved me to collect all these particulars, and trace out her history, and that of her children, I can speak still more distinctly of how she looked to me, than of her first appearance to Val. Complexion she had none. Her skin was burnt a kind of brick-dust colour, red-brown, and it was roughened by the exposure of years; her black hair was smoothed away on her forehead, leaving only a little rim visible between the brow and the bonnet. Her features were beautiful, but only struck the spectator when he had looked at her more than once, the roughness of her aspect and colouring seeming to throw a veil upon their beauty of form. But it was her eyes and expression which were most remarkable, and fascinated the wondering glance. She looked like Silence personified—her lips shut close, as if they could not open, and an air of strange abstraction from the immediate scene enveloping and removing her from its common occurrences. The circles round her eyes were wide and large, and out of those worn sockets looked two great wistful eyes,

always looking, never seeing anything—eyes unfathomable, which were full of solemn expression, yet told you nothing, except that there was much to tell. In her way the beauty of the night had entered into her inarticulate soul; but I do not think she was aware of any of the details that made it up—and she had not even noticed the incident of the swamping when Valentine's light well-strung figure scrambled up the bank. "Here, you!" cried Val to the boy by her side, with the ready ease of one accustomed to command to one accustomed to obey—"lend us a hand, will you, to empty the boat?"

The boy, who had been seated by the woman's side, rose at the call with ready reply to the demand upon him. He had the corresponding habit to Valentine's—the habit of hearing when he was called to, of doing what he was told to do. He had done everything to which a vagrant lad is bred—held horses, ran errands, executed a hundred odd jobs; and it did not occur to him to withhold the help by which sixpences were earned and bread gained, from any one who demanded it. "Here you are, sir," he answered, cheerily. He was about the same age as Valen-

tine, but not so tall nor so finely made—a fair-haired sunny-faced lad, looking clean and ruddy, despite of dust and weariness, and the rough tramp costume, blue-spotted handkerchief, and nondescript jacket which he wore. He and his mother had been seated there together for some time past, not speaking to each other—for vagrants generally are a silent race. She did not stir even now, when he rose from her side. To have him called casually by whomsoever wanted help, and to see him obey, was habitual to her also. Val and the young tramp worked together in silence at the righting of the boat: they pulled it up on the bank, and turned it over, and set it afloat again. Then, however, Val changed his first intention. “I say,” he began, half meditatively, “have you time to take her down to Goodman’s? no, you musn’t get in, you can tow her down; and if you’ll come to me to-morrow morning I’ll pay you. I’m Ross, at Grinder’s. Do you know Grinder’s? well, anybody will tell you. You can come after ten to-morrow; and tell old Goodman it’s Ross’s boat.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll see to it,” said the boy blithely, touching his cap. He looked up with his fair

frank face to Val's, and the two lads "took a liking" to each other on the spot. Val had made a step or two down the bank, then came back. "What are you?" he said; "do you live here? I never saw you on the river before."

"Mother and I are going to stop the night," said the lad; "we're last from Ascot; I aint got a trade, but just does odd jobs. No, I never was on the river before."

Upon which a sudden warmth of patronage and lordly benevolence came to Valentine's bosom. "If you stay here I'll give you what odd jobs I can. What's your name? I like the looks of you," said lordly Val.

"Dick Brown, sir; thank you, sir," said the lad, with grateful kindness. He had no pride to be wounded by this brusque address, but took it in perfectly good part, and was gratified by the good impression he had made. He had tied a piece of string, which he brought from his own pocket, to the sharp prow of the boat, and was preparing to tow it down stream. But he stopped as Val stopped, still dripping, his wet shirt fitting to his fine well-developed form like a glove. The other had none of Val's physical

advantages of education, any more than the mental. He was as ignorant of how to hold himself as how to make Latin verses ; and had he got into the outrigger, as he at first proposed, would have been by this time at the bottom of the river. He admired his handsome young patron with an innocent open-hearted pleasure in the sight of him, feeling him a hundred miles removed from and above himself.

“ Very well,” said Val ; “ you come to me to-morrow at Grinder’s. If you stay we’ll find you plenty to do.”

Then he turned, bethinking himself of his wet clothes, which began to get chilly, and, with an amicable wave of his hand, stepped out along the road ; but even then he paused again, and turned back to call out, “ Remember Ross, at Grinder’s,” and with another nod disappeared. The woman behind had not been attending to the colloquy. She roused up suddenly at these last words, and looked after the boy, with her eyes lighting up strangely. “ What did he say ? ” she asked, in a half whisper, rising quickly and coming to her son’s side ; “ what was that name he said ? ”

“ His own name, mother,” said the smiling

lad. "I am to go to him at ten to-morrow. He's one of the college gentlemen. He says he likes the looks of me, and I shouldn't wonder if he'd help me to a job."

"What was his name?" repeated the woman, grasping her son's arm impatiently. He took it with perfect calm, being accustomed to her moods.

"Come along, mother, I've to take the boat down to the raft; Ross, at Grinder's. I wonder where's Grinder's? He's Ross, I suppose."

The woman stood with her hand on his arm, looking after the other figure which withdrew into the distance through the soft air, still tinted with all the rosy lights of sunset. The young athlete, all dripping in his scanty clothing, was joined by an admiring train as he went on; he was popular and well known, and his loyal followers worshipped him as much in this momentary eclipse as if he had done something famous. The tramp woman was roused out of all the abstraction with which she had sat, oblivious of Valentine's closer presence, gazing vaguely at the sky and the river. Her eyes followed him with a hungry eagerness, devouring

the space between ; a slight nervous trembling ran through her frame.

“ I wish I had seen him nigh at hand,” she said, with a sigh ; “ it’s my luck, always my luck.”

“ Come along and you’ll see him still if you want to,” said the lad ; “ I know what them swells do. They go down to the rafts and takes off their wet things, and puts on their coats and chimney-pots. He’s a good un to look at, I can tell you ; but you never see nothing that’s under your nose, mother. You get curious-like when anything’s past.”

“ Don’t stand talking,” said the woman, with a tremulous impatience, “ but come on.”

Dick obeyed promptly ; but it is not so easy to walk quickly, towing a troublesome outrigger with its projecting rowlocks, when there is no one in it to guide its course along the inequalities of the bank. The woman bore this delay with nervous self-restraint as long as she could, then telling him she would wait for him, pursued her way rapidly alone to the rafts, which were crowded by boys arriving and departing in every possible stage of undress. She waited wistfully at the gate, not venturing to enter

the railed-off enclosure, which was sacred to the boats and "the gentlemen;" and when Val issued forth in correct Eton dress she did not recognise him. She stood there in tremulous and passionate agitation—suppressed, it is true, but intense—gazing wistfully at the crowds of moving figures, all bearing that resemblance to each other which boys undergoing the same training and wearing the same dress so often do. She could not identify any one, and she was growing sick and faint with weariness, and with the beating of her heart.

"Here I am, mother; did you see him?" said Dick, appearing at last, tired but pleased, with his awkward charge.

"How was I to know him?" she asked, sharply; "I did not see his face. As to who he is, Dick, it's a name I once knew. I wish I had seen him; but it's my luck, always my luck."

"I'll ask all about him, mother," said the cheery boy; but while he was gone to deposit the boat, some other members of their wandering class joined the woman, and distracted, or did their best to distract, her attention. With them she made a long round by the bridge to the Windsor side—(there was a ferry, but pennies

are pennies, and were not to be lightly spent on personal ease)—and then made her way to a lodging she knew in the vagrant quarter—the Rag Fair of the little royal borough. Whatever might be the thoughts that were passing in her mind, or whatever the anxieties within her hidden heart, she had to give her attention to the practical side of her rough life, and stopped on her way to buy some scraps of meat and some bread for her own and her son's meal. There was a common fire in the lower room of the lodging-house, at which the tramp-lodgers were allowed to cook their supper. This woman did so in her turn, like the rest ; and to Dick the scraps which his mother had cooked, as well as she knew how, made a luxurious meal, taken on a corner of the rough table, with all the sounds and all the smells of Coffin Lane coming in at the open door. There was a Babel of sounds going on within in addition, each group talking according to its pleasure, and the outdoor shouting, jesting, quarrelling, coming in as chorus. Dick had not found out very much about his young patron. He told his mother that he had summut to do with a lord, but was not sure what. "But why can't we stay here a bit?"

said Dick. "There ain't nothing going on in the country but poor things, where we don't pick up enough to keep body and soul together ; you'll see I'll make something handsome on the river, with all the odd jobs there is ; and if this here young gentleman is as good as his word——"

"Did he look as if he would be as good as his word ?"

"Lord bless us, how can I tell ?" said Dick. "I don't read faces, nor fortunes neither, like you. He said he liked the looks of me ; and so did I," the lad added, with a laugh. "I hope it'll do him a deal of good. I like the looks of him too."

And Dick went to bed in the room which he shared (under Government regulation and with great regard to the cubic feet of air—such air as is to be had in Coffin Lane) with two other rough fellows not so guiltless in their vagrancy as himself—with a cheery heart, thinking that here, perhaps, he had found foundation enough to build a life upon—a beginning to his career, if he had known such an imposing word. He was a good boy, though his previous existence had been spent among the roughest elements of society. He knelt down boldly at his bedside,

and said the short half-childish prayer which he had been taught as a child, without caring in the least for his companions' jeers. Perhaps even it was more a charm against evil than a prayer ; but, such as it was, the boy held by it bravely. He was exhilarated somehow, and full of hope, he could not have told why. Something good seemed about to happen to him. I do not know what he expected Valentine to do for him, or if he expected anything definite ; but he was somehow inspired and elated, he could not tell why.

His mother, for her part, sat down upon her bed and pondered, her abstract eyes fixing upon the bare whitewashed walls as solemn a gaze as that which she had fixed on the distant glow of the sunset across the river. They were not eyes which could see anything near at hand, but were always far off, watching something visionary, more true than the reality before her. She, too, had companions in her room, where there was nothing beyond the supply of bare necessities—a bed to sleep on, nothing more. She had not Dick's happy temperament, though she was as indifferent as he was to the base surroundings of that poor and low level of life to

which they were accustomed ; but somehow, in her mind too, various new thoughts, or rather old thoughts, which were new by reason of long disuse, were surging up whether she would or not. Perhaps it was the sound of the name which she had not heard for years. Ross. It was not a very uncommon name ; but yet, when this poor creature began to think who the boy whom she had seen might be—and to wonder with quick-beating pulses whether it was so—these thoughts were enough to fill her heart with such wild throbs and bursts of feeling as had not stirred it for many years.

CHAPTER XVI.

DICK BROWN got up very early next morning, with the same sense of exhilaration and light-heartedness which had moved him on the previous night. To be sure he had no particular reason for it, but what of that? People are seldom so truly happy as when they are happy without any cause. He was early in his habits, and his heart was too gay to be anything but restless. He got up though it was not much past five o'clock, and took his turn at the pump in the yard, which formed the entire toilet arrangements of the tramps' lodging-house, and then strolled down with his hands in his pockets and his ruddy countenance shining fresh from these ablutions to where the river shone blue in the morning sunshine at the foot of Coffin Lane. Dick had passed through Windsor more than once in the course of his checkered existence.

He had been here with his tribe—those curious unenjoying slaves of pleasure who are to be found wherever there is merrymaking, little as their share may be in the mirth—on the 4th of June, the great *fête* day of Eton, and on the occasion of reviews in the great Park, and royal visits; so the place was moderately familiar to him, as so many places were all over the country. He strolled along the raised path by the water-side, with a friendly feeling for the still river, sparkling in the still sunshine, without boat or voice to break its quiet, which he thought to himself had “brought him luck,” a new friend, and perhaps a long succession of odd jobs. Dick and his mother did very fairly on the whole in their wandering life. The shillings and sixpences which they picked up in one way or another kept them going, and it was very rare when they felt want. But the boy’s mind was different from his fate; he was no adventurer—and though habit had made the road and his nomadic outdoor life familiar to him, yet he had never taken to them quite kindly. The thing of all others that filled him with envy was one of those little tidy houses or pretty cottages which abound in every English village, or even on the skirts of

a small town, with a little flower-garden full of flowers, and pictures on the walls inside. The lad had said to himself times without number, that there indeed was something to make life sweet—a settled home, a certain place where he should rest every night and wake every morning. There was no way in his power by which he could attain to such a glorious conclusion ; but he thus secured what is the next best thing to success in this world, a distinct conception of what he wanted, an ideal which was possible and might be carried out.

Dick sat down upon the bank, swinging his feet over the mass of gravel which the workmen, beginning their morning work, were fishing up out of the river, and contemplated the scene before him, which, but for them, would have been noiseless as midnight. The irregular wooden buildings which flanked the rafts opposite looked picturesque in the morning light, and the soft water rippled up to the edge of the planks, reflecting everything,—pointed roof and lattice window, and the wonderful assembly of boats. It was not hot so early in the morning ; and even had it been hot the very sight of that placid river, sweeping in subdued silvery tints, cooled

down from all the pictorial warmth and purple glory of the evening, must have cooled and refreshed the landscape. The clump of elm-trees on the Brocas extended all their twinkling leaflets to the light; lower down, a line of white houses, with knots of shrubs and stunted trees before each attracted Dick's attention. Already lines of white clothes put up to dry betrayed at once the occupation and the industry of the inhabitants. If only his mother was of that profession, or could adopt it, Dick thought to himself,—how sweet it would be to live there, with the river at hand and the green meadow-grass between—to live there for ever and ever, instead of wandering and tramping about the dusty roads!

There was no dust anywhere on that clear fresh morning. The boy made no comment to himself upon the still beauty of the scene. He knew nothing of the charm of reflection and shadow, the soft tones of the morning brightness, the cool green of the grass; he could not have told why they were beautiful, but he felt it somehow, and all the sweetness of the early calm. The great cart-horse standing meditative on the water's edge, with its head and limbs

relieved against the light sky ; the rustling of the gravel as it was shovelled up, all wet and shining upon the bank ; the sound of the workmen's operations in the heavy boat from which they were working,—gave a welcome sense of “company” and fellowship to the friendly boy ; and for the rest, his soul was bathed in the sweetness of the morning. After a while he went higher up the stream and bathed more than his soul—his body too, which was much the better for the bath ; and then came back again along the Brocas, having crossed in the punt by which some early workmen went to their occupation, pondering many things in his mind. If a fellow could get settled work now here—a fellow who was not so fortunate as to have a mother who could take in washing ! Dick extended his arms as he walked, and stretched himself, and felt able for a man's work, though he was only sixteen—hard work, not light—a good long day, from six in the morning till six at night ; what did he care how hard the work was, so long as he was off the road, and had some little nook or corner of his own—he did not even mind how tiny—to creep into, and identify as his, absolutely his, and not another's ?

The cottages facing to the Brocas were too fine and too grand for his aspirations. Short of the ambitious way of taking in washing, he saw no royal road to such comfort and splendour; but homelier places no doubt might be had. What schemes were buzzing in his young head as he walked back towards Coffin Lane! He had brought out a hunch of bread with him, which his mother had put aside last night, and which served for breakfast, and satisfied him fully. He wanted no delicacies of a spread table, and dreams of hot coffee did not enter his mind. On winter mornings, doubtless, it was tempting when it was to be had in the street, and pennies were forthcoming; but it would have been sheer extravagance on such a day. The bread was quite enough for all Dick's need; but his mind was busy with projects ambitious and fanciful. He went back to the lodging-house to find his mother taking the cup of weak tea without milk which was her breakfast; and, as it was still too early to go to his appointment with Val, begged her to come out with him that he might talk to her; there was no accommodation for private talk in the tramps' lodging-house, although most of the inmates by this time were gone upon their

vagrant course. Dick took his mother out by the river-side again, and led her to a grassy bank above the gravel-heap and the workmen, where the white houses on the Brocas, and the waving lines of clean linen put out to dry, were full in sight. He began the conversation cunningly with this practical illustration of his discourse before his eyes.

"Mother," said Dick, "did you never think as you'd like to try staying still in one place and getting a little bit of a home?"

"No, Dick," said the woman, hastily; "don't ask me—I couldn't do it. It would kill me if I were made to try."

"No one aint agoing to make you," said Dick, soothingly; "but look here, mother—now tell me, didn't you ever try?"

"Oh yes, I've tried—tried hard enough—till I was nigh dead of it——"

"I can't remember, mother."

"It was before your time," she said, with a sigh and uneasy movement—"before you were born."

Dick did not put any further questions. He had never asked anything about his father. A tramp's life has its lessons as well as a lord's,

and Dick was aware that it was not always expedient to inquire into the life, either public or private, of your predecessors. He had not the least notion that there had been anything particular about his father, but took it for granted that he must have been such a one as Joe or Jack, in rough coat and knotted handkerchief, a wanderer like the rest. He accepted the facts of existence as they stood without making any difficulties, and therefore he did not attempt to "worrit" his mother by further reference to the past, which evidently did "worrit" her. "Well, never mind that," he said; "you shan't never be forced to anything if I can help it. But if so be as I got work, and it was for my good to stay in a place—supposing it might be here?"

"Here's different," said his mother, dreamily.

"That's just what I think," cried Dick, too wise to ask why; "it's a kind of a place where a body feels free like, where you can be gone to-morrow if you please—the forest handy and Ascot handy, and barges as will give you a lift the moment as you feel it the right thing to go. That's just what I wanted to ask you, mother. If I got a spell of work along of that young swell as I'm going to see, or anything steady,

mightn't we try ? If you felt on the go any day, you might just take the road again and no harm done ; or if you felt as you could sit still and make yourself comfortable in the house——”

“ I could never sit still and make myself comfortable,” she said ; “ I can't be happy out of the air, Dick—I can't breathe ; and sitting still was never my way—nor you couldn't do it neither,” she added, looking in his face.

“ Oh, couldn't I though ? ” said Dick, with a laugh. “ Mother, you don't know much about me. I am not one to grumble, I hope—but if you'll believe me, the thing I'd be proudest of would be to be bound 'prentis and learn a trade.”

“ Dick ! ”

“ I thought you'd be surprised. I know I'm too old now, and I know it's no good wishing,” said the boy. “ Many and many's the time I've lain awake of nights thinking of it ; but I saw as it wasn't to be done nohow, and never spoke. I've give up that free and full, mother, and never bothered you about what couldn't be ; so you won't mind if I bother a bit now. If I could get a long spell of work, mother dear ! There's them men at the gravel, and there's a deal of lads like me employed about the rafts ;

and down at Eton they're wanted in every corner, for the fives-courts and the rackets, and all them things. Now supposing as this young swell has took a fancy to me, like I have to him—and supposing as I get work—let's say supposing, for it may never come to nothing,—wouldn't you stay with me a bit, mother, and try and make a home?"

"I'd like to see the gentleman, Dick," said his mother, ignoring his appeal.

"The gentleman!" said the boy, a little disappointed. And then he added, cheerily—"Well, mother dear, you shall see the gentleman, partickler if you'll stay here a bit, and I have regular work, and we get a bit of an 'ome."

"He would never come to your home, lad—not the likes of him."

"You think a deal of him, mother. He mightn't come to Coffin Lane; I daresay as the gentlemen in college don't let young swells go a-visiting there. But you take my word, you'll see him; for he's taken a fancy to me, I tell you. There's the quarter afore ten chiming. I must be off now, mother; and if anything comes in the way you'll not go against me? not when I've set my heart on it, like this?"

“I’ll stay—a bit—to please you, Dick,” said the woman. And the lad sprang up and hastened away with a light heart. This was so much gained. He went quickly down, walking on through the narrow High Street of Eton to the great red house in which his new friend was. Grinder’s was an institution in the place, the most important of all the Eton boarding-houses, though only a dame’s, not a master’s house. The elegant young Grinder, who was Val’s tutor, was but a younger branch of this exalted family, and had no immediate share in the grandeurs of the establishment, which was managed by a dominie or dame, a lay member of the Eton community, who taught nothing, but only superintended the meals and morals of his great houseful of boys. Such personages have no place in Eton proper—the Eton of the Reformation period, so to speak—but they were very important in Val’s time. Young Brown went to a side door, and asked for Mr Ross with a little timidity. He was deeply conscious of the fact that he was nothing but “a cad”—not a kind of visitor whom either dame or tutor would permit “one of the gentlemen” to receive; and, indeed, I think Dick would have

been sent ignominiously away but for his frank and open countenance, and the careful washing, both in the river and out of it, which he had that morning given himself. He was told to wait ; and he waited, noting, with curious eyes, the work of the great house which went on under his eyes, and asking himself how he would like to be in the place of the young curly-headed footman who was flying about through the passages, up-stairs and down, on a hundred errands ; or the other aproned functionary who was visible in a dark closet at a distance, cleaning knives with serious persistence, as if life depended on it. Dick decided that he would not like this mode of making his livelihood. He shrank even from the thought—I cannot tell why, for he had no sense of pride, and knew no reason why he should not have taken service in Grinder's, where the servants, as well as the other inmates, lived on the fat of the land, and wanted for nothing ; but somehow his fancy was not attracted by such a prospect. He watched the cleaner of knives, and the curly-headed footman in his livery, with interest ; but not as he watched the lads on the river, whose life was spent in launching

boats and withdrawing them from the water in continual succession. He had no pride; and the livery and the living were infinitely more comfortable than anything he had ever known. "His mind did not go with it," he said to himself; and that was all it was necessary to say.

While he was thus meditating, Valentine Ross, in correct Eton costume—black coat, high hat, and white necktie—fresh from his tutor, with books under his arm, came in, and spied him where he stood waiting. Val's face lightened up into pleased recognition,—more readily than Dick's did, who was slow to recognise in this solemn garb the figure which he had seen in undress dripping from the water. "Hollo, Brown!" said Val; "I am glad you have kept your time. Come up-stairs and I'll give you what I promised you." Dick followed his patron up-stairs, and through a long passage to Val's room. "Come in," said Val, rummaging in a drawer of his bureau for the half-crown with which he meant to present his assistant of last night. Dick entered timidly, withdrawing his cap from his head. The room was quite small, the bed folded up, as is usual at Eton. The bureau, or writing-desk with drawers adorned

by a red-velvet shelf on the top, stood in one corner, and a set of book-shelves similarly decorated in another; a heterogeneous collection of pictures, hung as closely as possible, the accumulation of two years, covered the wall; some little carved brackets of stained wood held little plaster figures, not badly modelled, in which an Italian image-seller drove a brisk trade among the boys. A blue and black coat, in bright stripes (need I add that Val—august distinction—was in the Twenty-Two), topped by a cap of utterly different but equally bright hues—the colours of the house—hung on the door; a fine piece of colour, if perhaps somewhat violent in contrast. The window was full of bright geraniums, which grew in a box outside, and garlanded with the yellow *canariensis* and wreaths of sweet-peas. Dick looked round upon all these treasures, his heart throbbing with admiration, and something that would have been envy had it been possible to hope or wish for anything so beautiful and delightful for himself; but as this was not possible, the boy's heart swelled with pleasure that his young patron should possess it, which was next best.

“Wait a moment,” cried Val, finding, as he

pursued his search, a note laid upon his bureau, which had been brought in in his absence ; and Dick stood breathless, gazing round him, glad of the delay which gave him time to take in every detail of this school-boy palace into his mind. The note was about some momentous piece of business,—the domestic economy of that one of “the boats” in which Val rowed number seven, with hopes of being stroke when Jones left next Election. He bent his brows over it, and seizing paper and pen, wrote a hasty answer, for such important business cannot wait. Dick, watching his movements, felt with genuine gratification that here was another commission for him. But his patron’s next step made his countenance fall, and filled his soul with wonder. Val opened his door, and with stentorian voice shouted “Lower boy!” into the long passage. There was a momentary pause, and then steps were heard in all directions up and down, rattling over the bare boards, and about half-a-dozen young gentlemen in a lump came tumbling into the room. Val inspected them with lofty calm, and held out his note to the last comer, over the heads of the others. “Take this to Benton at Guerre’s,” he said, with admirable brevity ; and

immediately the messenger departed, the little crowd melted away, and the two boys were again alone.

"I say, I mustn't keep you here," said Val; "my dame mightn't like it. Here's your half-crown. Have you got anything to do yet? I think you're a handy fellow, and I shouldn't mind saying a word for you if I had the chance. What kind of place do you want?"

"I don't mind what it is," said Dick. "I'd like a place at the rafts awful, if I was good enough; or anything, sir. I don't mind, as long as I can make enough to keep me—and mother; that's all I care."

"Was that your mother?" said Val. "Do you work for her too?"

"Well, sir, you see she can make a deal in our old way. She is a great one with the cards when she likes, but she won't never do it except when we're hard up, and she's forced; for she says she has to tell the things she sees, and they always comes true: but what I want is to stay in one place, and get a bit of an 'ome together—and she aint good for gentlemen's washing or that sort, worse luck," said Dick, regretfully, "So you see, sir, if she stays still to please me,

I'll have to work for her, and good reason. She's been a good mother to me, never going on the loose, nor that, like other women do. I don't grudge my work."

Val did not understand the curious tingling that ran through his veins. He was not consciously thinking of his own mother, but yet it was something like sympathy that penetrated his sensitive mind. "I wish I could help you," he said, doubtfully. "I'd speak to the people at the rafts, but I don't know if they'd mind me. I'll tell you what, though," he added, with sudden excitement. "I can do better than that—I'll get Lichen to speak to them! They might not care for me—but they'll mind what Lichen says."

Dick received reverentially and gratefully, but without understanding the full grandeur of the idea, this splendid promise—for how should the young tramp have known, what I am sure the reader must divine, that Lichen was that Olympian demigod and king among men, the Captain of the Boats? If Lichen had asked the Queen for anything, I wonder if her Majesty would have had the courage to refuse him? but

at all events nobody about the river dared to say him nay. To be spoken to by Lichen was, to an ordinary mortal, distinction enough to last him half his (Eton) days. Dick did not see the magnificence of the prospect thus opened to him, but Val knew all that was implied in it, and his countenance brightened all over. "I don't think they can refuse Lichen anything," he said. "Look here, Brown; meet us at the rafts after six, and I'll tell you what is done. I wish your mother would tell me my fortune. Lots of fellows would go to her if they knew; but then the masters wouldn't like it, and there might be a row."

"Bless you, sir, mother wouldn't—not for the Bank of England," cried Dick. "She might tell *you* yours, if I was to ask her. Thank you kindly, sir; I'll be there as sure as life. It's what I should like most."

"If Lichen speaks for you, you'll get it," said Val; "and I know Harry wants boys. You're a good boy, aint you?" he added, looking at him closely—"you look it. And mind, if we recommend you, and you're found out to be rowdy or bad after, and disgrace us, Lichen will give you

such a licking? Or for that matter, I'll do it myself."

"I'm not afraid," said Dick. "I aint rowdy; and if I get a fixed place and a chance of making a home, you just try me, and see if I'll lose my work for the sake of pleasure. I aint that sort."

"I don't believe you are," said Val; "only it's right I should warn you; for Lichen aint a fellow to stand any nonsense, and no more am I. Do you think that's pretty? I'm doing it, but I haven't the time."

This was said in respect to a piece of wood-carving, which Valentine had begun in the beginning of the year, and which lay there, like many another enterprise commenced, gathering dust but approaching no nearer to completion. Dick surveyed it with glowing eyes.

"I saw some like it in a shop as I came down. Oh, how I should like to try! I've cut things myself out of a bit of wood with an old knife, and sold them at the fair."

"And you think you could do this without any lessons?" said Val, laughing; "just take and try it. I wonder what old Fullady would

say ? there are the saws and things. But look here, you'll have to go, for it's time for eleven o'clock school. Take the whole concern with you, quick, and I'll give you five bob if you can finish it. Remember after six, at the rafts to-night."

Thus saying, the young patron pushed his *protégé* before him out of the room, laden with the wood-carving, and rushed off himself with a pile of books under his arm. All the boys in the house seemed flooding out, and all the boys in Eton to be pouring in different directions, one stream intersecting another, as Dick issued forth filled with delight and hope. He had not a corner to which he could take the precious bit of work he had been intrusted with—nothing but the common room of the tramps' lodging-house. Oh for a "home," not so grand as Val's little palace, but anything that would afford protection and quiet—a place to decorate and pet like a child ! This feeling grew tenfold stronger in Dick's heart as he sat wistfully on the river's bank, and looked across at the rafts, in which were sublime possibilities of work and wages. How he longed for the evening ! How he

counted the moments as the day glowed through its mid hours, and the sun descended the western sky, and the hour known in these regions as "after six" began to come down softly on Eton and the world !

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.



